Teaching Expressive Writing as a Narrative Fiction

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My friend Joyce tutors in the Learning Center at Penn State Ogontz. A few weeks ago, one of her “regular” tutees brought her a paper to read. The student’s assignment was to write an essay using personal experience to illustrate or oppose a well-worn quotation, and she had chosen to counter the notion that “It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” Her essay told of her becoming pregnant while she was still in high school. Both she and her boyfriend were pleased, she said, but they decided to marry after she graduated. He gave her an engagement ring; she had her baby and planned her wedding. A few days before the actual ceremony, however, she discovered that her boyfriend was also romantically involved with her neighbor, and she broke off the entire relationship. Her final argument, then, was that sometimes it is better not to have loved at all, as the effects of a failed relationship might be long-lasting. As her tutor, Joyce was impressed with the paper, which was clearly articulated and full of illuminating detail. “How sad for you,” she said compassionately. “How old is your child now?” The student laughed. “I don’t have a child,” she said. “I’ve never even had a boyfriend! I made it all up.”

Students, it seems, have their own ways of handling the “honest” and “personal” aspects of the expressive essay. Indeed, the long history of debate between the theorists of expressive pedagogy and those favoring an academic discourse approach persists without reference to the ingenuity of student writers. My research shows that students use a number of creative strategies to thwart traditional expectations about expressive writing assignments in order to serve their own discursive purposes. I believe this subversion has much to teach us about uses for expressive writing in the classroom.

Often called the “personal experience essay” or “writing-close-to-the-self,” the expressive essay is a familiar staple in many English composition classrooms. It is, indeed, a form of writing that is easier to recognize than to classify. In her book *Expressive Discourse*, Jeannette Harris argues, for example, that while the term “expressive” has been applied over the centuries to a variety of textual forms, including poetry, plays, and novels, as well as to instructional methods, like free writing or writing journals, it does not, in fact, represent a specific discourse category. Harris prefers to label the kind of writing that draws from
the writer's personal observations of daily life "experienced-based discourse." On the other hand, in her study of gender bias in writing assignments, Linda H. Peterson expressly identifies what she terms the "autobiographical essay" as a subgroup of the personal expressive essay, "to indicate that specific form of personal writing which focuses on the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of an important event in the writer's life" (182, n. 4). As guest editor of the 1990 issue of PRE/TEXT, an issue devoted entirely to the topic of expressive writing, Peter Elbow uses the terms "personal and expressive writing" and "personal expressive writing" interchangeably, although he does not single out a distinct expressive essay genre. Despite the difficulties of categorization, I want to sustain the terms "expressive essay" and "personal expressive writing" to indicate the personal, often autobiographical, approach many students take in response to various essay assignments. Such writing frequently takes the form of a narrative in which the writer attempts to describe a moment of deep personal insight or reflect on a significant event or relationship. On the other hand, in composition classes where essay instruction continues to focus on modes of discourse, it is not unusual to find students using topics based on their personal experience to produce texts with an expository structure: the standard essay-by-illustration (My Mother's Generosity) or the comparison/contrast essay (The Differences In My Brothers' Attitudes Toward Authority). Regardless of its configuration or definition, most composition instructors could readily identify writing that draws from personal experience as "expressive."

The controversy surrounding the use of the expressive essay for composition instruction is well into its second decade, and in the following discussion, I will touch on some of its central arguments. I will suggest however, that while there are good reasons to question the use of expressive essay assignments, the primary assumption about them—that the writing produced by students in response to such assignments is essentially honest and truthful—remains unchallenged by those on both sides of the issue. I believe that our students can teach us how to resolve, at least partially, the concerns of those who oppose the expressive essay on social constructionist grounds while simultaneously allowing for what advocates for such writing see as valuable in the expressive approach.

The Rise of Expressive Writing Pedagogy:
A Brief Overview of the Debate
Not much more than a hundred years ago, an appeal to personal experience or observation would have had little place in the college writing class. According to Robert J. Connors, until the end of the Civil War, writing instruction in colleges and in most secondary schools continued to rely on classical methods of invention and composition, using public topics developed from "gleaned knowledge mixed with commonly held beliefs" (170). Students called upon their own store of cultural knowledge, a repertoire of readings, quotations, and commonplace books, to provide content for their arguments and assertions. As education opened its doors to those who were not classically educated, however,
the familiar complaint of writing teachers began: If the best writing is writing on topics that are familiar, what shall we do about students who don’t know much about any topic? The answer then, as now, was the expressive essay. Students do know about their own experiences and insights; they can draw from what they think and believe.

In truth, of course, this overview is far too brief and simple. In her study of mid-nineteenth-century first books of composition, Lucille M. Schultz presents a series of composition texts that featured personal and familiar topics for writing assignments and invited students to write in their own voices, rather than imitating adult, classical models. But first books were used for elementary writing instruction and for students who were not college-bound. As such, according to Schultz, they did not directly influence college writing instruction. Personally-oriented writing on the college level appears to have gained a foothold later in the nineteenth century and to have become a popular practice by the early twentieth century, in response to a series of historical and social changes: a change in literary taste, influenced by the Romantic movement, to a preference for a depiction of everyday experience expressed in everyday language; a change in the center of knowledge, from divine or external truth to the individual’s inner consciousness; and in education, a shift to a Dewyan emphasis on the individual student (Connors; Berlin Rhetoric and Reality).

In contemporary composition, expressive writing pedagogy resulted from the good faith efforts of many writing teachers to encourage students to find and express their individual “voices,” or, as Donald Stewart notes of the revival of expressive writing pedagogy in the 1960s and 1970s, “to escape from the pasteurized and pedestrian prose...[students] had been conditioned to produce in traditional, [that is, current-traditional] writing classrooms” (66), particularly the hollow and formulaic five paragraph theme. Stewart and James Berlin emphasize that expressivist rhetoric as it was taught in the sixties and seventies was “unsparingly critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 485). The goal of this kind of teaching was to empower students to speak their own minds and to find their own individual, unique voices in order to express their own opinions and to dissent.

In recent years, supporters of expressive writing pedagogy have argued for personal expressive writing as an addition to, but not a substitute for, instruction in academic writing. Peter Elbow asserts that personal expressive writing encourages students to want to write, to want to use writing for their own pleasure, and as a way of solving problems or gaining new insights rather than to see writing as a chore or punishment. For Elbow, “discourse that tries to render experience,” that is, “language that conveys to others a sense of their experience—or indeed, that mirrors back to themselves a sense of their own experience from a little distance,” is part of the “great human accomplishment of written language...equally one of the preeminent gifts of human kind” (“Reflections” 137). Furthermore, because for Elbow academic writing is noticeably formal in tone and style, writing in a personal expressive voice helps students to under-
stand and clarify their academic material. Ultimately, Elbow, along with Mara Holt and Wendy Bishop among others, does not want students to have to choose between what they see as the goals of writers (personal, expressive, invested, assertive) and the goals of academics (historical, analytical, critical, tentative). These theorists argue that personal expressive writing is of value to students and instructors, that it is intrinsically social, and that it too can be used to do important academic work. But in the end, Elbow asserts that if he is forced to choose, he will "choose the goal of writer over that of academic" ("Being a Writer" 73).

On the other side of the coin are the theorists who object to the teaching of personal expressive writing in composition classes. Some feel that it short changes students. By failing to provide instruction in the production of the kinds of writing that comprise academic discourse, they say, teachers of personal expressive writing deprive students of a means of successful negotiation within the academy (Bartholomae; Bizzell). Others worry that personal expressive writing suggests that language is a transparent vehicle for exposing the thought processes of a unified and consistent mind at work, a mind that, if adequately investigated, will reveal the truths about itself and about life. This conception leads, critics believe, to an inaccurate assessment of the power of personal insight, and thus discounts both the reality of the social construction of knowledge and the ways in which power is externally imposed (Faigley; Bartholomae; Knoblauch; Clifford). Still others argue that an expressive approach to writing valorizes an asocial, non-collective individual and that it divisively pits the individual against the group (Trimbur; Berlin; LeFevre). When students are "asked to imagine that they can clear out a space to write on their own, to express their own thoughts and ideas, not to reproduce those of others," David Bartholomae argues in "Writing With Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow," "... it is an expression of a desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside history, an academic setting free from academic writing" (64). The dream of a free space, Bartholomae contends, blinds both students and teachers to the ways that authority and power are reproduced in language and culture ("A Reply" 129).

**Truth and Integrity: The Lie of Expressive Writing Pedagogy**

Despite these objections, personal expressive writing remains a popular mode of instruction among many composition teachers. Like Joel Haefner, I confess that as a writing teacher I too, "enjoy personal essays too much, and find them too useful in teaching, to banish them" (132). Furthermore, I believe that when students discuss their expressive essays in class and especially in writing groups, they discover opportunities to announce and interrogate differences on a self-consciously personal level. But along with Haefner, Holt, and others, in my classrooms I try for a pedagogy that can balance the individualism of the expressive essay with the social orientation of contemporary writing theory.\(^5\)
This means that I do not teach the expressive essay per se, but rather that I ask students to write essays based on topics from our readings and class discussion. Some of those topics do indeed lend themselves to a personal response; in other cases students modify the topics in order to produce an expressive essay. Like Holt, in my teaching, I try to emphasize that an essay must have a purpose other than pure self-expression, that voice cannot exist "in a vacuum, voice without doing anything with it," that "voice and conversation... [must be seen] in a dialogical relationship with one another" (Holt and Trimbur 50). I try for this balance in my composition classes, although I recognize my own desire for what John Trimbur describes as the "aspiration to make ourselves and the world cohere, to hold somehow a fractured totality" (Holt and Trimbur 55). Sometimes I (almost) feel that I have been successful.

Thus, although I like expressive essays, I admit that teaching this form of discourse raises complicated philosophical and social questions. Central to the debate is the notion that such writing is, by definition, honest and truthful writing. In their 1985 study of writing teachers' choices of "excellent student writing," William Coles and James Vopat found that of the 48 samples of the best student papers contributed by teachers representing all points on the political spectrum, at least 30 were essays whose main source was the writer's personal experience. Invariably, these essays were valued for their "authenticity" and "truthfulness." One commentator, for example, stated that "good writing is inevitably honest writing," another that the best writing samples possessed "integrity" (Faigley, "Judging Writing" 403-05). As a result of this belief, objections to personal expressive writing as well as arguments in favor of personal expressive writing often focus on the propriety of asking students to tell their private stories.

Truthful writing, of course, may mean either an account of actual lived experience—how I really reacted when I saw my dog get run over by a truck—or some attempt to get in touch with a generalization about human action and emotional response, at least from the vantage point of a single writer's perspective. Unfortunately, it is the former kind of truthfulness that we seem to insist on, at least to the extent that our students believe they must tell the truth about what they saw, did, or said and that, in some way we value their recounting of these observations, behaviors, or dialogues. Ultimately, we end up grading our students' lives, and some lives, we must admit, are more interesting than others. It is for this reason, some compositionists argue, that the expressive essay may present a particular advantage for certain non-traditional students, whose life experiences may seem more colorful, or more desperate, to their middle class teachers. On the other hand, expressive self-disclosures may be a liability when the behaviors or beliefs recounted in the student's narrative are inconsistent with the teacher's value system, or if, by the instructor's standards, the student fails to achieve "appropriate" insight regarding the significance of his or her experience (see Faigley, "Judging Writers" 408-11; Bizzell, "College Composition" 194-95). In Fragments of Rationality, Lester Faigley reminds us that instructors
who value expressive writing often fail to recognize how the "[institutional] setting is implicated in the production of ‘honest’ and ‘truthful’ writing." Teachers, Faigley points out, are "representatives of institutional authority." The teacher "takes the position of bearer of authority who can certify truth ... [without recognizing] the relations of power that come into play ... [through] writing assignments that encourage students to make revealing personal disclosures" (130-31).

Furthermore, because the content of the expressive essay emerges from the writer's experience in relation to his or her private thoughts, expressive writing pedagogy locates meaning (understood as individual truths) inside the mind of the student. Ideas thus become intellectual property, accumulated in one's mental storehouse, rather than constructed in discourse with others. And one's own private truths, many would argue, are off limits to serious appraisal and critique. As a result of this kind of thinking, writing comes to represent individual opinion, a sacred and unchallengeable "object."

**Student “Takes” on Expressive Writing: Sabotaging the Assignment**

There may thus be serious problems with how the notions of *honesty* and *truthfulness* get translated to our students when we teach expressive writing in its various formulations. I think we would be surprised to find that many of our students recognize these problems and deal with them on their own terms. As we will see by examining the essays that follow, student writers may attempt to thwart traditional expectations about expressive writing in order to serve their own discursive needs.

In "Being Pushed," Carla, a student in my freshman composition class, wrote her best paper of the semester, an essay rich in detail and development in response to an assignment in the course text *Coming From Home:* "Discuss some of your own experiences as a child being pushed to grow up too quickly. Who or what pushed you, and what impact did this ‘pushing’ have on your personality and development?" (Ford, Ford, and Watters 336). Carla begins her essay in this way:

> Being the oldest of four children was bad enough, but after the death of my mother, it became worse. I was no longer permitted to be the young teenager I once loved to be. I was pushed to be the new grown up of the family. Suddenly I had gained five extra years that I had no interest in. The seventeen year old senior in high school had disappeared, and a 22 year old college graduate had emerged, one who was not prepared for the responsibilities of the "real" world.

The essay describes Carla's difficulties with the day-to-day logistics of keeping her family intact after her mother's death:

> My friends slowly stopped calling me because I always seemed to be busy with my siblings. I had acquired the role of "mom." My days were no longer filled with gossip, boyfriends, sports, or teenage fun. My days began with getting everyone up for school, driving them there, and then putting in my day at school. Afternoons were filled with
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doing laundry, cooking dinner, helping the kids with their homework, cleaning the house and picking kids up from extra-curricular activities. I was lucky if I found time to do my homework or relax.

In addition, Carla examines the ways she came to understand and appreciate what she had formally taken for granted:

No one ever told me I had to grow up. I think it was just expected. My senior year in high school wasn’t as great as it could have been. Friends kept in touch, but we no longer had the same relationship. They were busy doing things with friends and getting ready for the prom while I was busy with the other mothers getting ready for bake sales and having meetings with my siblings’ teachers. A whole new world had opened up to me, and not by choice. I learned to take each day one at a time and be thankful for what I had.

I changed a lot from my mother’s death. As a teenager, I was very materialistic. All I had cared about was clothes, cars, and looking good. But looking back, I discovered that those things didn’t make me unique; it was what was inside that mattered. I went from being a very self-centered person to one who will do anything for anybody at the drop of a hat. I learned that responsibility wasn’t a bad thing and could be very rewarding.

“No one told me I had to grow up. I think it was just expected,” Carla says. “As a teenager I was very materialistic. All I had cared about was clothes, cars, and looking good. But looking back, I discovered that those things didn’t make me unique; it was what was inside that mattered.” All semester I had been trying to get Carla to supply the missing pieces of her discussions and to attempt a bit of analysis, and I believe she finally accomplished these tasks. But what is significant about this essay is the fact that she is actually an affluent eighteen year old from a totally intact suburban home, whose central concerns are clothes, cars, and “looking good.” Carla was not trying to fool her teacher; she was trying on a narrative voice and recounting a “personal experience” that she felt would “work” for the assignment as she understood it. Perhaps she learned more than she realized in doing this essay; perhaps as she wrote, she felt what it was like actually to be the female head of household, a surrogate mother, at age seventeen. As a result, in her development as a writer, Carla was finally able to produce vivid and believable prose.

Critics of expressive writing pedagogy argue that this type of instruction fails to confront social differences, or in Bartholomae’s terms, that it “authorizes a form of attention to the field and to the work of others that is also a blindness. . . It says that everything is common, like what I do. It resists or erases difference” (“A Reply” 126; cf. Clifford). It seems to me that Carla’s efforts move in the direction of some recognition of class differences, albeit a direction colored by her comfortable, middle class perspective. Because her narrative personae was convincing, her readers (both peers and I as Carla’s teacher) initially mistook her essay for a narrative of personal experience. As such, we asked questions that obliged Carla to grapple further with differences between her own life and the life of the character she has created. Peer readers asked questions like these:
Were you depressed all the time? Did your father get violent or abusive? What did you tell your friends? And from me, there were, among other things, some questions about the implications of the last paragraph, where Carla writes:

I may have been pushed to grow up too quickly, but I have finally caught up to all those extra years that were given to me long ago. I know that I will have time to do all those things I didn’t get to do in my senior year with my own daughter. I hope I will be able to live my life to the fullest, so my children won’t have to grow up as quickly as I did.

How, I asked, had she “caught up” to those lost years? What has she had to do to ensure that her children will have an easier childhood? These questions forced Carla to reflect on issues of class and gender as she revised her essay. If, on the other hand, her readers had recognized Carla’s essay as a narrative fiction, we might have tried to make her more conscious of her own investment in telling the story in this particular way. For instance, Carla’s narrative replays a traditional tale of a woman’s role in keeping home and hearth intact. We might have asked Carla why she had chosen to represent this particular fiction as opposed to others. Given an assignment that was framed as a request for a traditional expressive essay, with its expectation of genuine disclosure, Carla chose a different route. In Carla’s efforts to experiment with an alternative narrative personae and to produce a detailed and meaningful essay consistent with this narrative voice, I read real progress as a writer.

Robert’s essay, on the other hand, is actually an attempt to recount a true experience, but the narrator is an older, more sophisticated version of the student writer. In response to the same assignment, Robert writes:

My advanced maturity arose from the events that shaped my early life. Although my desires were always stifled, the moments that compromised my childhood created a knowledgeable and understanding being.

Money was the main impasse. I had been taught the concept so many years ago, I always believed the knowledge of its purpose was genetic. At five years of age, I knew when the mortgage was due, the first of the month. I knew when tuition payments were to be made, and when the utilities were due. No one ever had to explain to me that I could not have this or that right now. At five, I already felt it best to keep my mouth shut and not ask for a multitude of commercial products that blazed through the television set. I could not even imagine asking for another pair of shoes. I knew the answer would be an embarrassing and shameful "No, not yet!"

Robert is an avid reader, and I suspect he was trying on the voice of the narrator in, say, James Joyce’s “Araby,” or perhaps some version of David Copperfield. This helps to explain the deliberate literary cast of his word choice and syntax in, for example, his description of his early childhood:

I remember wanting to run out and join my friends in whatever jovial event they participated in. However, I then had a wardrobe that consisted of a private school uniform, a dress suit, matching shoes, a rag tag, faded, blue overall outfit, and a pair of sneakers. There was a sense of taboo woven into my play clothes. If I ruined them, as I was inclined to do at age five, I knew there would not be another playtime outfit
soon to follow. So the spontaneous bursts of inexhaustible energy that characterize youth, I always had to suppress.

The narrator of this story did not have friends who played ball or tag; they "participated" in "jovial events." His childhood "wardrobe" is represented by the obligatory private school uniform and dress clothes juxtaposed with a "rag tag" costume for play. From the perspective of advanced maturity, the narrator identifies his youthful self as suppressing those "spontaneous bursts of inexhaustible energy that characterize youth," and he dramatically heightens the contrast between his desires and actions by reversing the syntax of the last sentence.

Of course, such effort may be easily read as a misguided attempt to reproduce the inflated language some students inaccurately characterize as academic discourse, but for Robert, this was not the case. His purpose, when I asked him later, was, he said, to make his account more interesting by creating "an interesting character" to tell it. His narrator, a mature version of himself, recalls his unconventional and often stifling childhood with some fondness and pride. The child, seen through a lens of great distance, "crossed the Atlantic several times" (despite his apparent poverty), and traveling alone, he writes, "I always managed to surprise the stewardesses who took charge of me during the full day international flights. They could not believe how well-behaved I was. I never saw it as a matter of behavior; I was just accustomed to traveling." The narrator, with years of self-discipline behind him, offers a composed analysis of his early demonstrations of personal restraint. At the same time, Robert's personae can brag a bit about his accomplishments:

On these long flights, I developed my fondness for books. When I returned to my parents' home for good, in the summers, I was sent back to Europe to visit relatives. And every summer I would bring a formidable stack of literature with me. I would read on those boringly long flights. I would read in Madrid, partly to impress my neighbors, who would remark, "He can read English!" That comment would raise a sinful pride in me. I could read in English, and I wanted blatantly to advertise it. I believe books aided me in growing up. It was through books that I educated myself. I wanted to learn immediately. I was on a quest to engulf myself with the secrets of books.

As a literary fiction, Robert's essay allows for some critical distance: he can boast about his precociousness and his bilingualism while at the same time he is not forced to resolve the discontinuities raised by his analysis. In the end, Robert's narrator tells us

I believe my lack of money, frequent journeys, and intense desire to learn pushed me to mature. Lack of money showed me how hard the world could be. Travel opened the beauty of the globe to me. And books taught me how the world was, what it had been, what it holds, and what it could be.

The narrator—mature, restrained, intellectual—describes himself as the product of a variety of social and cultural forces and personal experiences.

Because I knew that Robert was creating a narrative fiction, my comments for his revision focused on the writer's technique, which I hoped would
encourage him to continue to experiment. I asked questions about the narrator: What did he think as he recounted his childhood in Spain and in America? What was he implying about the loneliness of childhood and the man he had become? Because the narrator was not Robert, or perhaps a different version of Robert, we worked on the writer’s stylistic project of fulfilling the narrator’s purposes. I believe this approach was far more complicated and far more useful to Robert’s development as a writer than any approach that would have demanded further elucidation of his “real” experiences.

The third sample is of a slightly different nature. In this case, the student deliberately attempted to sabotage the assignment by telling a “true story” that was entirely false. The assignment, for a religious studies class, had asked for a personal narrative on the topic of faith. Because, as she later explained to me, Betsy found the request for self-disclosure unsettling, she created a narrator and an experience that would be believable to her teacher and would enable her to keep her own personal life and experiences private.

In “I Believe in Mike Schmidt,” the narrator is a young girl on the eve of her Bat Mitzvah, and throughout her essay, Betsy attempts to capture the narrator’s pre-adolescent contempt for adult custom and tradition.

My parents never preached to me about a Greater Force, as did my Sunday school teachers, who babbled endlessly about God. I had to put up with this nonsense until I reached the age of 13, when I would become a Bat Mitzvah. Then I could finally escape the boredom of religious education.

... I went through the motions of Hebrew school in sixth and then in seventh grade, although privately I was laughing at our instructor when he spoke of “our Creator” and the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” I knew better than to believe a bunch of stories written by a group of senile old men. They were too old to remember their own lives, let alone Abraham’s and Isaac’s.

Betsy self-consciously exploits the fictional potential of her essay. Using a traditional “once upon a time” formula, she dramatically sets the scene: the rabbi’s study where the plot will unfold. Striving for a kind of magic realism, rather than true-to-life accuracy, she develops a series of scenic contrasts:

One day I was called into his office for a tutorial on the Torah portion I would read on the Big Day. It was a chilly Wednesday in the middle of December. The synagogue was cold, but the office was heated. Rabbi Goldstein sat behind a large wooden desk. He was smaller than the previous rabbi, and the room seemed to gather him up.

“Sit down,” he said with a deep voice. As I did so, he removed his small, round glasses from his face while he continued to smile. Then he extended his hand across the desk. “I’m Rabbi Alan Goldstein.” I accepted his hand and introduced myself. This seemed pointless, because we both knew each other’s names. Nevertheless, it was a nice gesture.

In this passage, the narrator’s conviction that religion is cold and impersonal contrasts sharply with the warmth of the rabbi’s study and his equally warm welcome. At the same time, the young girl makes it clear that she is not easily taken in by these signs of religious community, sardonically characterizing the rabbi’s attempt at introduction as “a nice gesture.”
As the “story” progresses, the narrator finds herself repeatedly trying to figure out the enigmatic Rabbi’s “puzzle,” pieced together by odd directives and silences. Here, as throughout the essay, Betsy relies heavily on dialogue:

When he didn’t say anything further, I reached into my book bag and pulled out the white booklet that contained my Torah portion—the Ten Commandments. Still, he said nothing, so I began to rattle off the words. I looked up periodically and noticed he hadn’t moved. But he was no longer smiling, just listening. It was a short piece which took me no more than ten minutes to read. When I finished, I looked up at the rabbi. He showed not sign of approval, nor did he say I had done something wrong. We sat there in silence for a couple of minutes, until I finally couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well, what?” the rabbi asked.

“Well, was it okay? Did I do it right?”

“No,” he responded.

His reply left me flustered. I asked him what was wrong with it but received no answer. I was about to pack up my stuff when the rabbi finally spoke. “Do it again, from the top,” he instructed. “This time with feeling!” I didn’t understand. This was not a Broadway show. What did this nut mean “with feeling”?

The tension builds as the Rabbi asks the narrator to reveal the “truth” about her commitment to Judaism, and in perfect thirteen-year-old fashion, the young girl argues for her “philosophy of life.”

Rabbi Goldstein realized I was puzzled, and he smiled again. “Do you believe in what you’re doing?” he asked me. Here it was at last. I had to decide what to do. I knew the last thing a kid should tell a rabbi is that she doesn’t believe in the religion in which she is about to be a Bat Mitzvah. I felt daring, so I took a chance.

“No,” I replied, “I don’t believe in what these words say. I’m not even sure what they mean because they’re not in English. I don’t believe in God. I’ve never seen Him. I’ve never seen His powers that everyone talks about.”

There was an awkward silence. “But I do know Mike Schmidt,” I blurted out, “and I’ve seen his power!”

The predicament is (naturally) resolved by the wise words of the Rabbi who reassures the narrator that she is on the right path. His initial comments suggest the time-worn story within a story:

“You know,” he said,” I wasn’t born a rabbi. When I was a kid, I felt the same way you do. And I’m not going to tell you to believe in God. But it’s good to believe in something. And Mike Schmidt is not such a bad place to start.” I really liked this rabbi.

The essay ends with the narrator’s recognition that the notion of faith is naturally conflict-ridden. Undoubtedly, this is what Betsy herself believes: the thirteen year old confesses, “I don’t have faith or a God,” while the college freshman asserts, “I’m only 17. I know it is still too early to decide whether I have faith in God, especially at this age when things are changing so quickly.” Nevertheless, the fictional elements of her essay provide an enabling distance which keeps this writer safe from personal disclosure.

This resistance to disclosure marks the central difference between Carla’s fictional narrative and Betsy’s. Carla’s essay was an attempt to “try on” a new
role, to occupy through writing a place quite different from her own. Carla's efforts can be understood as advancing toward, rather than away from, a new kind of writing experience. Betsy's essay, on the other hand, is an act of opposition. Echoing the concerns expressed by many compositionists, Betsy explained that the expressive essay, with its request for truth, was both an intrusion and a trap. She believed that her religious faith should be beyond the purview of her teacher's gaze. Furthermore, reflecting Faigley's concern that a teacher may bring to the evaluation a preconceived, culturally-derived version of the writer's "self," she believed that her religious studies teacher had already decided what the "right" kind of essay would say, and she was unwilling to provide that response regardless of the consequences to her grade.

"Truth" in Expressive Writing:
Other Voices, Visions, and Vehicles
What we see in all three papers is the writer's decision to create a fictional account by means of the personal expressive essay, a genre in which readers' expectations of writerly honesty and authenticity figure prominently. What is equally significant is that none of these students were instructed to write in an alternative voice or to tell an alternative story. Neither their previous classroom instruction nor the assignments themselves gave any suggestion that students might take creative liberties with their essays. This move on the part of the student writers can thus be understood as strategic, paralleling in its purposes the use of creative nonfiction, or autoethnography, by academic writers. Creative non-fiction, as it is done in the academy, is personal, (apparently) autobiographical writing which, by overturning readers' expectations about traditional forms of argument, often serves critical or political purposes. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* and Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias" are examples of creative non-fiction. Indeed, Robert's essay, "Growing Up," with its depiction of his actual childhood experiences, may be seen as an untutored attempt at the same kind of intellectual project engaged by these academic writers. Carla's and Betsy's essays, on the other hand, while representing themselves as "real," are, in fact, fictional accounts, and as such, while their purposes might be similar to Rose or Brodkey, their work would not be in quite the same discourse category (if, in fact, Rose and Brodkey are themselves telling "authentic" stories, and there is, of course, no reason to expect that they are). However, this does not mean that Carla's and Betsy's essays are not being used to do, what is for them, significant intellectual work, nor does it mean that their efforts are any less subversive. In fact, I read Betsy's essay as a political statement of protest against the conventional expressive essay and its attendant expectations of confession and exposure.

The goal of expressive writing instruction was originally to free students from the shallow "performance" that was current-traditional exposition, to require, instead of performance, *true and honest* narratives. But if we are honest
with ourselves, we will recognize that all writing (except perhaps the most private journal writing) is a performance or preparation for a performance. E. B. White’s “Once More to the Lake” and Annie Dillard’s fragment on “Adolescence” are as fresh and honest as personal narratives can be, but are they true in terms of the actual lived experiences of their authors? And do we, even for a minute, expect them to be? Indeed, contemporary literary criticism in autobiography suggests that in the act of writing, even the most apparently confessional and authorized writing is always colored by memory and affected by the act of language. As G. Thomas Couser points out in *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, there is never a one-to-one correspondence between the author, the narrator, and the “actual” events being narrated: “Memory is not a stable, static record that could ground a reliable written narrative; rather, it is a text under continuous unconscious revision” (17). Further, in his investigation of twentieth-century autobiographers, *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin argues that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). To prove his point, Eakin turns first to Mary McCarthy’s collection of autobiographical essays, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. In the running commentary that accompanies the essays, McCarthy admits to re-arranging the events of her life to “make ‘a good story’ out of them” and to creating certain dialogues and scenes that are “mostly fictional” (qtd. in Eakin 10-11; see also Gillmore 120-24). While at first glance McCarthy’s case may appear to be unique, problematizing as it does the very definition of autobiographic honesty, recent analyses of the autobiographies ranging from the writings of Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain to Jean-Paul Sartre and Jamaica Kincaid reveal that the so-called “autobiographical pact,” the author/narrator’s guarantee of verifiable, referential truth is (and probably always has been) itself a fiction. The work of Couser, Eakin and Leigh Gillmore, respectively, reveals the various ways in which lives and selves are constructed by and through autobiography. Ironically, expressive writing pedagogy sustains the notion of the autobiographical pact, leaving students no choice but to sabotage or resist expectations for verisimilitude in their essays in order to move beyond confession or solipsism.

Although many argue that the expressive essay should not be taught at all, the samples produced by Carla, Robert, and Betsy demonstrate that the value of expressive writing lies in the recognition of its fictional potential. In *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin tells us that all language is heteroglossic; that is, as our language, and thus our way of thinking, strives toward a single, unitary expression, it is simultaneously stratified by competing social and historical discourses which fill each word with a multitude of prior associated meanings. The individual consciousness evolves in a struggle among the words of authority (externally authoritative discourse, which is held fairly stable), the words of others (internally persuasive discourse), and our own words. “The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s
coming to ideological consciousness is enormous,” Bakhtin says. “One’s own discourses and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (348). When we are honest with our students about the potential for the fictional in expressive writing, we free them to try on the persuasive and authoritative voices they hear around them. Such experimenting has advantages both personally, as students like Betsy are more able to get in touch with their own perceptions through the freedom of distance, and socially, as students like Carla can use writing to try on different kinds of narrative viewpoints. Such exploration leads to an understanding of the real implications of a celebration of diversity—a recognition that while you can never really see through someone else’s eyes, through writing and reading you may be able to get close enough to appreciate the richness of another’s vision. In addition, when students explore the fictive in personal expressive writing, they see first hand the rhetorical and social in the construction of all “selves” and come to recognize that notions of the autonomous and unified mind who perceives truth through a transparent language is, likewise, a fiction. Finally, the fictional element in expressive writing enables us to address our students as writers, to respond to their texts and to evaluate their writerly needs, rather than evaluating their lives.

I find it significant that Carla waited until her paper was graded to let me know that her essay wasn’t a true account of her life and that Betsy never told her religious studies teacher that she had fictionalized both the narrator and the experience she was describing. I find it equally striking that when I conference with students about their papers, when I suggest a change that might “work” at a particular moment in the essay’s development, they frequently resist, saying “that’s not how it really happened.” Such responses alert me to the fact that many students are simply unaware of the range of voices and stances available to them when they write an essay, and are thus closing off opportunities to develop essays that could do some important work for them.

There are any number of pedagogical strategies that might be used to enable students to appreciate the fictional potential of personal expressive writing. But my concern, finally, is not with how to teach the expressive essay as a narrative fiction, but that we do teach it this way. Carla, Robert, and Betsy figured this out on their own, as I am sure other strong student writers have. But we need to let all our students in on the secret. That is, when we ask our students to be truthful in their essays, we must clarify this expectation. We must understand that it is both unfair and unrealistic to expect honesty from our students, if honesty means that they must expose the naked truths of their lives. Truthful writing should be understood as an honest exploration of the roles and voices that students can construct for themselves through the fictional potential of expressive writing.

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Appendix: Student Essays
Assignment: Discuss some of your own experiences as a child being pushed to grow up too quickly. Who or what pushed you, and what impact did this “pushing” have on your personality and development?

Carla’s Essay: “Being Pushed”
Being the oldest of four children was bad enough, but after the death of my mother, it became worse. I was no longer permitted to be the young teenager I once loved to be. I was pushed to be the new grown up of the family. Suddenly I had gained five extra years that I had no interest in. The seventeen year old senior in high school had disappeared, and a 22 year old college graduate had emerged, one who was not prepared for the responsibilities of the “real” world.

My dad began dumping all different kinds of responsibilities on me while he took so-called “business” trips. He was really trying to tune his children out of his life and learn to deal with the death of his wife. He left me to answer the many questions my siblings had about their mother’s death. They were also having difficulty dealing, but my father failed to realize this. But slowly the questions were answered for my siblings, and they were able to return to the norm of school and friends.

I, on the other hand, no longer seemed to have much of a social life. My friends slowly stopped calling me because I always seemed to be busy with my siblings. I had acquired the role of “mom.” My days were no longer filled with gossip, boyfriends, sports, or teenage fun. My days began with getting everyone up for school, driving them there, and then putting in my day at school. Afternoons were filled with doing laundry, cooking dinner, helping the kids with their homework, cleaning the house and picking kids up from extra-curricular activities. I was lucky if I found time to do my homework or relax.

Dad never seemed to be at home. He didn’t like being around us because we reminded him too much of Mom. When he was there, he never said anything, and we were lucky to hear his voice if we did something wrong. He had become a very mean, rude, unloving and sad person. Luckily, his attitude didn’t rub off on any of us. We went through that time of unhappiness, but we dealt with it together, while Dad dealt with it alone or with a bottle of alcohol.

No one ever told me I had to grow up. I think it was just expected. My senior year in high school wasn’t as great as it could have been. Friends kept in touch, but we no longer had the same relationship. They were busy doing things with friends and getting ready for the prom while I was busy with the other mothers getting ready for bake sales and having meetings with my siblings’ teachers. A whole new world had opened up to me, and not by choice. I learned to take each day one at a time and be thankful for what I had.

I changed a lot from my mother’s death. As a teenager, I was very materialistic. All I had cared about was clothes, cars, and looking good. But
looking back, I discovered that those things didn’t make me unique; it was what was inside that mattered. I went from being a very self-centered person to one who will do anything for anybody at the drop of a hat. I learned that responsibility wasn’t a bad thing and could be very rewarding.

My siblings also grew from my mother’s death. We formed a bond which we will always treasure. Together we learned the true meaning of family and sticking together. Even my father eventually came around from his deep depression. And when he did, we were all there to welcome him back into the family.

As an adult looking back, it wasn’t all that bad. I wouldn’t consider it your “normal” childhood or family, but I lived it and came to enjoy it. I may have been pushed to grow up too quickly, but I have finally caught up to all those extra years that were given to me long ago. I know that I will have time to do all those things I didn’t get to do in my senior year with my own daughter. I hope I will be able to live my life to the fullest, so my children won’t have to grow up as quickly as I did.

Robert’s Essay: “Growing Up”

My advanced maturity arose from the events that shaped my early life. Although my desires were always stifled, the moments that compromised my childhood created a knowledgeable and understanding being.

Money was the main impasse. I had been taught the concept so many years ago, I always believed the knowledge of its purpose was genetic. At five years of age, I knew when the mortgage was due, the first of the month. I knew when tuition payments were to be made, and when the utilities were due. No one ever had to explain to me that I could not have this or that right now. At five, I already felt it best to keep my mouth shut and not ask for a multitude of commercial products that blazed through the television set. I could not even imagine asking for another pair of shoes. I knew the answer would be an embarrassing and shameful “No, not yet!”

I remember wanting to run out and join my friends in whatever jovial event they participated in. However, I then had a wardrobe that consisted of a private school uniform, a dress suit, matching shoes, a rag tag, faded, blue overall outfit, and a pair of sneakers. There was a sense of taboo woven into my play clothes. If I ruined them, as I was inclined to do at age five, I knew there would not be another playtime outfit soon to follow. So the spontaneous bursts of inexhaustible energy that characterize youth, I always had to suppress.

Another factor that accelerated my maturation was travel. I was born in the States; however, my parents were not. They are Colombian citizens by birth. Because of immigration laws and fees, my family was not united. My mother lived in the United States. My father spent three years applying for an exit visa in Columbia. In order for my parents to reunite our family, they had to work strenuous hours; so, they felt it best that I stay with my relatives. Thus, I was sent at the age of one to live with my grandmother in Spain.
I lived in Spain until I was five, but during that time, because air fares were very cheap, I crossed the Atlantic several times to see my parents. In addition, I traveled a great deal with my grandmother, so by the time I was five, travel seemed routine. I always managed to surprise the stewardesses who took charge of me during the full day international flights. They could not believe how well-behaved I was. I never saw it as a matter of behavior; I was just accustomed to traveling.

On these long flights, I developed my fondness for books. When I returned to my parents’ home for good, in the summers, I was sent back to Europe to visit relatives. And every summer I would bring a formidable stack of literature with me. I would read on those boringly long flights. I would read in Madrid, partly to impress my neighbors, who would remark, “He can read English!” That comment would raise a sinful pride in me. I could read in English, and I wanted blatantly to advertise it. I believe books aided me in growing up. It was through books that I educated myself. I wanted to learn immediately. I was on a quest to engulf myself with the secrets of books.

I believe my lack of money, frequent journeys, and intense desire to learn pushed me to mature. Lack of money showed me how hard the world could be. Travel opened the beauty of the globe to me. And books taught me how the world was, what it had been, what it holds, and what it could be.

Assignment: Write an essay describing your attitude toward religious faith.

Betsy’s Essay: “I Believe In Mike Schmidt”
My parents never preached to me about a Greater Force, as did my Sunday school teachers, who babbled endlessly about God. I had to put up with this nonsense until I reached the age of 13, when I would become a Bat Mitzvah. Then I could finally escape the boredom of religious education.

In fifth grade, Judaism and the concept of God were the last two things on my mind. I dreamed of being a writer and the world’s first major-league second basewoman. At other times my thoughts turned to boys and spelling tests. God simply didn’t enter the picture. I was just trying to keep my childhood in order. My religious career continued, however, despite my protests for freedom. My mother promised that someday I’d be glad I had studied Judaism and become a Bat Mitzvah. She told me it would help guide my future religious life.

“But what if I choose not to continue practicing my religion? After all, I don’t really believe in anything up there,” I said, pointing to the ceiling. She assured me it would be my decision to make.

I went through the motions of Hebrew school in sixth and then in seventh grade, although privately I was laughing at our instructor when he spoke of “our Creator” and the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” I knew better than to believe a bunch of stories written by a group of senile old men. They were too old to remember their own lives, let alone Abraham’s and Isaac’s...
Soon however it would be time for me to get up on stage and lie about my devotion to God and His powers—in other words, about a whole lot of things that I thought were totally bogus. But shortly before my Bat Mitzvah, I learned that it was okay to be uncertain of my faith. It was the new rabbi who brought this to my attention.

One day I was called into his office for a tutorial on the Torah portion I would read on the Big Day. It was a chilly Wednesday in the middle of December. The synagogue was cold, but the office was heated. Rabbi Goldstein sat behind a large wooden desk. He was smaller than the previous rabbi, and the room seemed to gather him up.

“Sit down,” he said with a deep voice. As I did so, he removed his small, round glasses from his face while he continued to smile. Then he extended his hand across the desk. “I’m Rabbi Alan Goldstein.” I accepted his hand and introduced myself. This seemed pointless, because we both knew each other’s names. Nevertheless, it was a nice gesture.

When he didn’t say anything further, I reached into my book bag and pulled out the white booklet that contained my Torah portion—the Ten Commandments. Still, he said nothing, so I began to rattle off the words. I looked up periodically and noticed he hadn’t moved. But he was no longer smiling, just listening. It was a short piece which took me no more than ten minutes to read. When I finished, I looked up at the rabbi. He showed no sign of approval, nor did he say I had done something wrong. We sat there in silence for a couple of minutes, until I finally couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well, what?” the rabbi asked.

“Well, was it okay? Did I do it right?”

“No,” he responded.

His reply left me flustered. I asked him what was wrong with it but received no answer. I was about to pack up my stuff when the rabbi finally spoke.

“Do it again, from the top,” he instructed. “This time with feeling!” I didn’t understand. This was not a Broadway show. What did this nut mean “with feeling”?

Rabbi Goldstein realized I was puzzled, and he smiled again. “Do you believe in what you’re doing?” he asked me. Here it was at last. I had to decide what to do. I knew the last thing a kid should tell a rabbi is that she doesn’t believe in the religion in which she is about to be a Bat Mitzvah. I felt daring, so I took a chance.

“No,” I replied, “I don’t believe in what these words say. I’m not even sure what they mean because they’re not in English. I don’t believe in God. I’ve never seen Him. I’ve never seen His powers that everyone talks about.”

There was an awkward silence. “But I do know Mike Schmidt,” I blurted out, “and I’ve seen his power!” Then I shut my mouth, a little embarrassed to have told the rabbi these things. Still, his ever-present smile remained. Then he told me he knew how I felt, and it was good for me to get it out.
“You know,” he said, “I wasn’t born a rabbi. When I was a kid, I felt the same way you do. And I’m not going to tell you to believe in God. But it’s good to believe in something. And Mike Schmidt is not such a bad place to start.” I really liked this rabbi.

“Do you know what believing in something is called?” he asked. “It’s a feeling called faith. Faith is a big thing. It’s the feeling that one thing or person will not let you down, no matter what. And what that person or thing or emotion becomes to you, whatever you have faith in, that is your God. My faith is in a Being that we read about in the Torah and whom I love. I’ve never seen Him, but I am sure He’s there for me. That is my faith.”

I stared at the floor. “I don’t have faith or a God,” I admitted. But the rabbi told me that was also okay. “Besides,” he said, “things like that take years of thinking to figure out and discover.”

“Now, let’s read that Torah portion again—this time with feeling.” And I did just that.

Since then, many experiences, including being a Bat Mitzvah, have helped change my views from how I saw things in fifth grade. For example, I know I’ll never play baseball in the major leagues; I didn’t even make my high school softball team! School and writing, however, are still two of my priorities.

But also in the front of my mind are my questions and feeling about God. I’m only 17. I know it is still too early to decide whether I have faith in God, especially at this age when things are changing so quickly. I do have faith in one thing, however. Eventually, I will discover for myself the same joy Rabbi Goldstein has found in God. Then, I will be complete.

Notes

1 In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley speaks of the “personal experience essay” as the generic category and the “autobiographical narrative” as one form of presentation this essay might take. But many theorists who want to talk about this type of writing, particularly in its formulation in writing classrooms, attest to the difficulty of labeling it. Linda H. Peterson stresses that “terminology for forms of the personal essay remain vexed” (182). Likewise, Jeannette Harris states that this particular type of essay “in all its various forms presents a problem for those who would categorize it. Variously referred to in the past as nonfiction literary prose, the personal essay, or the familiar essay, it is now frequently classified as a type of expressive writing” (161). James Kinneavy makes the point that “in educationist circles, the informal or personal essay nearly always becomes an expressive essay” (79).

2 In her essay, “The Bad Marriage: A Revisionist View of James Britton’s Expressive-Writing Hypothesis in American Practice,” Mary Minock describes this essay as “a curious hybrid text, a text with expository structure and personal or expressive content.” In “personal exposition”, Minock observes, students “arranged content in hierarchical order . . . at the same time [that] they were being asked to reveal their consciousness” (164-65). I believe that Minock’s use of the past tense is misleading here, as a quick review of composition texts published in 1995 proves this approach to be alive and well.

3 In talks at CCCC in 1989 and 1991, Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae formalized their positions regarding personal expressive and academic writing. But as early as December 1977, Mina Shaughnessy had argued in “Some Needed Research on Writing,” an article that appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, that instruction in the personal (expressive) essay did not effectively prepare students to do more rigorous academic writing.
In the early to mid-eighties, a number of compositionists expressed or implied their objections to expressive writing pedagogy in articles that advocated instruction in academic discourse.

Eventually, for some writing teachers, expressive writing came to be understood as writing-as-self-expression or writing-for-self-discovery, although this was clearly not the goal of early expressivist texts, like Peter Elbow’s *Writing With Power*. The evolution of the personal expressive essay to emotive or confessional writing seems to have arisen from a confusion between methods (free writing, journals, workshop conversation) and emphasis (on individual voice and colloquial discourse) on the one hand, and a change in expectations about content, in which personal feelings and insights now gave the essay its own reason for being. But as I pointed out earlier, there are as many kinds of expressive essays as there are expressive writing pedagogies.


In *Autobiographies*, Leigh Gillmore raises similar questions about the politics of confession as it relates to women’s autobiographical narratives.

Mike Schmidt was for many years a leading third baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team. He has recently been inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Linda Brodkey used the term “autoethnography” at the Annual Conference on Discourse Analysis at Temple University. Autoethnography, she explained, "locates one culturally," providing "a space for resistance that does not foreclose the self." Such writing, Brodkey stressed, "deals with representations" of self rather than "truths."

In “Writing With Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” David Bartholomae explains his objections to teaching students to write creative non-fiction, arguing that such writing "reproduces the ideology of sentimental realism—where a world is made in the image of a single, authorizing point of view... a narrative that celebrates a world made up of details whose hero is sincere" (“Writing With” 69). According to Bartholomae, such writing is a lie, which should not be taught to students unless they are likewise taught its critique. However, few of the students that I see in my first year writing classes know that the strategic move of creating a fictional narrative—a fiction of voice or content—can actually be made. To me, the greater lie is representing the expressive essay as inherently authentic, so that students who understand its fictional potential must hide their strategies from the instructor and students who don’t lose out on a valuable writing alternative.

The notion of the autobiographical pact as it was developed by Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pacte Autobiographique* asserts the willingness and ability of the autobiographer to recount events as they "actually" happened and to convey these to the reader.

Works Cited


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**Kinneavy Award Winners Announced**

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 14 of *JAC* was awarded to George L. Pullman for "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics: Composition, Invention, and Literature."

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Gary A. Olson at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Washington, D.C.