PORTFOLIOS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE: BEYOND THE ACADEMIC/ PERSONAL WRITING POLARITY

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In a recent advertisement for a freshman composition textbook, the marketing manager assured me from California that "the text includes abundant writing activities in both personal and academic discourse." While the book actually seems to feature kinds of writing that don't fit neatly in either category, I want to focus on those terms "personal" and "academic." Obviously they were chosen as the most telling and concise ones for representing the text, and the advertising blurb reinforced my sense that options for the "content" of writing courses have been reductively cast, of late, to two. "What the writing course should be" has been an issue long before John Crowe Ranson observed in his *1935 Topics for Freshman Writing* that "The whole problem of Freshman Composition lies in improvising a subject matter" (iv), long before the twentieth century, as Robert Connors, among others has noted. In the last 30 years or so,

the compass needle has variously pointed to academic writing, current issues, personal development, aims, modes, and forms, and of course literature. But for reasons I'll explore, the north and south poles have lately been labeled "academic" or "personal." These terms won't do, either as rigorous concepts or as appropriate aspirations for freshman composition.

This whole issue is heightened by the advent of portfolio assessment. If we use portfolios to make claims about some general level of writing ability, then the kinds of works we request from students are crucial. The customary solution, of course, is to mandate a "variety" of works. But variety can be achieved along any number of dimensions. Do we use the knife of aims, of genres, of forms, of rhetorical situations, of subject matters? Any one or combination of these might do, depending on what we value most in students' learning about writing. My concern in this brief article is that we not let current ways of describing options for freshman writing occlude what should be at least an element in any freshman writing portfolio, something I'll broadly label "public discourse."

Peter Elbow's article "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues" perhaps best represents the dangers for cleaving writing as "personal" or "academic." I mean best in two senses; first, in the sense of being right about many issues, energetically and eloquently so, especially in the questions it raises about the status of "academic discourse." But like others of its kind, the article offers a too narrow alternative to the academic focus. In this sense, his article is "best" because it conveniently and dramatically misses a category of options.

Let me summarize Elbow's arguments. He points out that "academic discourse" has a fairly limited currency and value; while mastering it does benefit students in college, few graduates need ever again to produce academic discourse—certainly not the kind portrayed in textbooks on writing in the disciplines: the analysis of symbolism in "The Wasteland," the term paper on causes of the French Revolution. Perhaps worse, those textbooks portray academic discourse conventions as far more monolithic than they really are; teaching students certain conventions may not only be inaccurate, it may unhealthily reify and stabilize discourse. Elbow's further argument thus resembles the claim Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schor made 30 years ago against

teaching grammar; the activity is harmful because it takes time that could be put to better use. In Elbow's view, "one kind of nonacademic discourse that is particularly important to teach. . . . [is] discourse that tries to render experience rather than explain it. To render experience is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down—to tell what it's like to be me or to live my life" (136). The interesting opposition here is between "explaining experience" (which is the province of academic writing) and "rendering experience" (which belongs to personal writing).

In response to this situation, Elbow finally argues for neither a purely academic course nor a purely personal but rather one in which writing tasks are manipulated and varied to have students understand the situatedness of writing. For example, teachers might have students write about a single topic for various audiences and aims, trying different positions on the scale from explaining to rendering.

Other writers have argued against the ultimate tyranny of academic discourse, and in this respect Elbow has some odd bedfellows. Radical theorists Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, for example, call for a "pedagogy of voice" that takes seriously the language and experiences with which students define the world (104). Other voices are closer to Elbow's own. Recent interest in the personal or exploratory essay has come at least partly because of the belief that freshmen cannot and should not be expected to approximate discourse conventions wielded by professors with graduate degrees. See, for example, Kurt Spellmeyer's apology for the essay as an intermediating discourse between experts and nonexperts.

Earlier arguments for personal discourse might have been those of individual development and growth and against, say, bourgeois vocationalism. Interest in personal writing in the 1970's, for example, was fueled at least partially by a Thoreauvian rejection of a corporate America that was seen as suppressing individual autonomy and growth. The bad guys were in the marketplace. In the 1990's, however, personal writing is embraced less as a discourse of resistance against "rampant capitalism" than as one against "dehumanizing theory." The bad guys—and gals—are now in English department offices, at least for many professionals in composition studies. Maxine Hairston worries, for example, about what she perceives as ideological

proselytizing from irresponsible writing teachers who "read the authors that are chic—Foucault, Bahktin, Giroux, Eagleton, and Cixous" and use them to fashion coercive pedagogies that have little to do with writing (184). And while she avows that in her ideal writing classroom "not all writing should be personal, expressive writing," the extended examples she uses in fact foreground personal writing (191). Spellmeyer makes a related, although more sophisticated, argument against social constructivist-inspired pedagogies that have students analyze and imitate specialized academic discourse conventions. He sees this practice not only as doing violence to individuals but also sterilizing any discursive common ground that might form through publicly sharing differences rooted in personal experience. Spellmeyer's vision might be critiqued as one that conserves, albeit unintentionally, an individualistic consumer economy.

I'd like to make a more modest observation, though, one that connects Spellmeyer's and Elbow's concerns about academic discourse. Empirical and theoretical research in the 1980's laid bare what had been largely implicit "rules" governing writing in various disciplines. Terms like "the rhetoric of biology" or the "rhetoric of economics" become not only popular but possible. Having specific conventions anatomized and named made it possible then to transmit them. But what looked like the keys to the kingdom to some teachers smacked of tracking to others. The specter of academic vocationalism and slavish imitation arose. With it came the desire for a discourse that resisted specialization and that valued individual writers as something other than intertextual telephones, as mouthpieces of discourse conventions they did not originate. (Postmodernists will rightly critique this sketch as a grand narrative that reduces twenty years of complex composition theory and practice to a neat trajectory from Romanticism to constructivism to neo-Romanticism, overstating neoRomanticism as a dominant current composition theory, among other problems.)

I mostly agree with Elbow's case against a freshman writing class pedagogy that concentrates on producing academic discourse. I'm increasingly convinced that teaching specific disciplinary conventions must be the responsibility of the disciplines who actually call for such writing. Now, I have no delusions about the institutional barriers against writing across the curriculum ideals; if David Russell's history teaches us anything, it is

about the stubbornness of disciplinary boundaries once formed and the attitude that writing instruction doesn't really belong in the university at all. And I am sympathetic to ECON 101 students who are handed a ten-page term paper assignment with no advice on how to proceed (although the focus of instruction in such cases should be the professor, not the student).

My argument is just that freshman composition should aspire to goals other than getting students ready for some imagined future classes. The argument is one of opportunity. Freshman composition should have students practice a type of writing they cannot practice elsewhere in the academy, a type furthermore synonymous with democratic education and venerable in its lineage, *public discourse*, more specifically, *political discourse*—though if that term is too scary in the 1990's, then "deliberative discourse."

But before I take up that point, let me observe that rejecting academic discourse as inappropriately the sole content for freshman writing does not, then, necessitate embracing "personal writing," at least as the concept is loosely defined. Jeannette Harris has written a much-needed critique of the term "expressive discourse." The term "personal writing" is at least as vexed, because it confuses three concepts: the "topic" of the writing, the "audience" of the writing, and the "genres" of the writing. Factoring personal writing in this way offers advantages to both students and teachers. It's a horrifying reflection of our times that probably all of us regularly have students who write about having been raped, assaulted, or otherwise abused. By standards of personal writing as existing for the writer herself as audience, how can we judge a rape narrative as C+? Approaching the writing as a public task may help the student decide whether she wants to introduce this experience into the public sphere at all. If she does, the evaluative standards are located not in the experience but in the textual world in which it will be read.

In the same way we might factor academic writing. We might label one set of texts "professional academic discourse," a kind of technical writing whose forums are the various disciplinary journals. We might label a second "school writing," literally the writing done in schools whose forum, frankly, is the pile of papers in the instructor's folder. Of course, no teacher would care to admit such things. Whether the course textbook

is a modes-oriented reader or a current issues-oriented anthology of cases on global warming, free speech, or racism, the assumption is that the students are really producing public discourse. But if we learn anything from research like Richard Braddock's challenge of the lore about topic sentences in published writing, it should be that school writing doesn't necessarily correspond to public writing, in function, form, readerly expectations and so on.

The best function of school writing taken most seriously, as in Bartholomae and Petroskey's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* pedagogy, is largely epistemic, the student producing knowledge, with the act of production serving the larger goal of critical thinking. And I can hardly quarrel with the virtues of writing as mental aerobics. I'm willing to concede the value of school writing, the genre, for example, of "microthemes" in writing across the curriculum courses, writing as a mode of learning and all of that.

But I keep returning to the question of the content of freshman writing, the economics of time and opportunity and the type of discourse that can best happen only there, not in another class or on the job. And as I return, I return to the need for public discourse, for writing in a public sphere.

The term "public discourse" is hugely complicated. In its broadest sense, it is an umbrella for any writing that is published for an audience not constrained to read it by professional or classroom circumstance. Of course, there is an implication that "public" texts have a more open, unspecific audience than other ones. Think of the difference between "internal memos" and "press releases," or consider disputes reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* over access to political documents that scholars contend are "public" but that certain politicians claim are not. A concrete way of understanding the complications of "public" discourse is to consider one "classic" textbook that at least addresses the distinction, *The Four Worlds of Writing*. Janice Lauer and her co-authors distinguish between four locations of writing: the working world, the academic world, the private world, and the public world. Their characterizations of the first two are reasonable; they define the context in which each writing occurs, its readers, and its characteristic forms and genres. But the description of "the private world" is problematic; on the one hand this is "the world of meaningful places and

environments, people with families, friends, and others we care about" (5). However, on the other, the exemplary forms of private writing include autobiographies, memoirs, personal essays, and stories (7). But all of these are certainly public writings—or have the capacity to be so. Isn't Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in the public world? Isn't John McPhee's *Looking for a Ship*?

The problem with this discourse taxonomy, one signaled by the examples *Four Worlds* provides, is that it conflates "private" writing with "belletristic" writing. But belletristic writing, when published, in fact does inhabit the public world. Truly "private" discourse would be that which only its author reads. "Private writing" in *Four Worlds* is cast primarily as a privileged aesthetic discourse, since the reader is supposed to behave differently toward it, to "behave like a listener in an intimate conversation," "not to judge" (7). One problem this definition creates is that of evaluation, for to take Lauer and her colleagues at their word, teachers who grade private writing change the rules midgame, asking students to read and write with one set of assumptions and then trumping those expectations with evaluation. If one wants to define private writing as writing not to be judged, then one perforce oughtn't grade it. Lester Faigley insightfully analyzes some of the assumptions regarding this view of personal writing. Some textbooks and teachers champion what he calls "technologies of confession" in which "the freedom students are given . . . to choose and adapt autobiographical assignments hides the fact that these same students will be judged by the teachers' unstated assumptions about subjectivity" in which, for example, "the adjectives 'honest' and 'truthful' are reserved for personal narratives that are potentially embarrassing and even damaging to the writer" (128-29). Students are free to be personal only in narrow ways that teachers recognize as personal.

If we reserve the term "private" or "personal writing" for writing whose audience is the writer him or herself (thus equating it with James Britton's definition of expressive discourse, writing by the self for the self, and not with James Kinneavy's), the grading issue disappears. These texts are not text to be published or evaluated. But as personal writing is revised into or offered as public writing, it can be judged against that discourse to which it is most reasonably compared. After all, "private" aesthetic

discourse is regularly evaluated; editors choose whether to publish autobiographies or essays, which, finally, are public discourses. Reviewers, critics, and common readers judge the quality of works that do come to print. Teachers who view "personal writing" as private in terms of subject matter or even aim but as public in terms of who reads it and with what expectations have, at least, a position of comparison and evaluation.

What Lauer, Montague, Emig, and Lunsford define as public discourse is what Aristotle would have labeled deliberative or forensic discourse, whose aim is to influence an audience to take an action or position, as in a court case or a matter of policy. Recall Elbow's call for writing that "renders" experiences as well as writing that "explains" it. Missing in his dichotomy is discourse that argues for certain consequences and actions *as a result of* certain explanations and renderings. *Four Worlds of Writing* subdivides public writing into "consumer writing" (for example, letters of complaint, brochures and handbills) and "citizen writing" (whose forms, curiously, are also letters, brochures, and so on). This is the discourse of deliberation and persuasion, in which the achievements of critical thinking are put to public rhetorical ends. As much as I favor aesthetic writing, writing as personal development, and writing as learning, I argue that it is just as important that students learn how writing actually functions—or could function—in a public sphere. I argue that this is probably the most important goal of a freshman writing class. Consider how writing is mapped in English departments, in domains of technical writing, creative writing, and perhaps journalism, each course defined by a genre, a class of related objects in the print world. Consider the way that other disciplines assign "academic" or "professional" writing. Then consider what isn't assigned. We easily assume that students will make the leap from school writing to public writing in some imagined public life after college.

I'd argue, then, for a freshman writing pedagogy in which "school writing" and "personal writing" were places where projects began and returned and occasionally even ended, in school genres, but a pedagogy in which students frequently revised such writing toward more public audiences. Note that I'm not calling for the re-ascendancy of rhetoric over poetic; aesthetic prose is public prose, too. More important is that students understand the relationship between school writing and extra-

school writing, especially the discourse of public deliberation.

What I'm calling for is something very much like what Michael Halloran calls "a rhetoric of citizenship," a pedagogical emphasis that Halloran characterizes as dominating American colleges until the 19th century (263). Following the trajectory of classical rhetoric, college rhetoric courses before that time focused on "problems that arise from our life in political communities" (246). Halloran notes that

> The many other sorts of problems that might be addressed through an art of communication—problems of business and commerce, of self-understanding and personal relationships, of scientific and philosophical investigation, of aesthetic experience, for example—are in the tradition of classical rhetoric subordinate. (246)

However, in the 19th century these "other sorts of problems" became superordinate, displacing political discourse as the focus of rhetorical education. Halloran cites three main reasons for this change: the rise of belletristic concerns, the formation of specialized academic disciplines, and the shift in college function from developing civic leaders to providing individual advancement (262). Kenneth Cmiel suggests that these changes in institutional emphasis are tellingly signaled by "rhetoric" being displaced by "composition" as the name of the writing course (240). We continue to live under this legacy. Halloran notes that writing courses currently tend to "address students under three aspects of their identity: personal, intellectual-academic, and professional." However, he mourns that they do "not address students as political beings, as members of a body politic in which they have a responsibility to form judgments and influence the judgments of others on public issues" (263).

But what or where, finally, is this "body politic," this sphere of citizen writing? Can we even speak sensibly of "public discourse" outside the academy, let alone within? Postmodern theory fairly convincingly debunks the notion of some unified reading public, some general audience, the "general educated reader." And, more plainly, circulation figures for newspaper, magazine, and book readership offer little empirical evidence of some universal readership, some modern equivalent of the overly romanticized Greek forum. Occasionally, some pressing

concern like Dan Quayle's spelling ability or Bill Clinton's haircut will achieve a universal public stature. But mostly instead there are countless available sites and subsites, each public in some lesser sense, letters, local papers, handbills and posters, newsletters and, certainly, oral forums.

Teachers who focus on Halloran's "rhetoric of citizenship" trade the relative security of known academic and personal forms and forums for something a good deal more diffuse. What are the real publishing opportunities for college freshmen doing citizen writing? *Newsweek's* "My Turn" column offers but 52 opportunities a year, after all. Such questions may force writing teachers to assign forms and genres other than the school essay. Perhaps the letter is the most reasonable public genre or perhaps the computer bulletin board. Enthusiasts for computer networks imagine everyone on line, participating in some vast democratic interaction; Faigley's "Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom" offers one such vision, albeit one in which the realities and problems of any public site—racisim and sexism, for example—persist (163). The unsettled forums of true public discourse have other implications for teaching. Dealing with issues through anthologies of "timeless articles" on unresolved issues like abortion rights may, ironically, hinder "citizen writing" in the classroom by pushing it into distanced academic discourse. The exigencies for true public writing are those of a current situation, debate, or series of events, the Supreme Court's Pennsylvania abortion law decision, not abortion generally, the letter to the editor on school prayer that simply must be answered.

The desirability of writing to public exigencies creates implications for teaching and for the instrumental use of portfolios. For students to develop their awareness and ability for writing in public spheres, they need to do more than march through a series of hot themes preserved in even cutting edge anthologies: gays in the military, handgun control, Wise Use "environmental" policies. They certainly need more than discussions of the "what" of these issues, for writing courses should concentrate on producing discourse. Extending and complementing the anthology pedagogy might be something like a commonplace book in which students regularly record and explore the streams of public issues that affect them, local and national, from increased student fees to proposed federal summer job programs. Such commonplace books, kept individually or collaboratively, offer topics and

situations for more extended "real" public writing. But most crucially they provide lenses for students to see themselves in the role not only of learner, employee, professional, and private individual but also of citizen, with something at stake and a voice in public discourses.

It is through the aspect of self-fashioning that portfolios can directly facilitate teaching the rhetoric of citizenship. When we ask students to create a portfolio, we ask them to create a portrait of themselves as writers. We assume that this vision is fuller than one provided even by multiple individual papers considered discreetly. While we have paid attention to what these portraits show teachers, we have thought less about what they tell the students who write them, especially about their roles as writers and about the functions of writing. A portfolio of academic writing alone, for example, invites students to see themselves only *as* students and writing as something done in schools. A portfolio of personal writing alone invites students to see themselves only as private individuals and writing as purely an epistemic or aesthetic act. Now, a design feature of most portfolios is that they must contain a variety of writings, distributed by aims or genres, for example. My examples of the purely academic or personal portfolios, I admit, are something of straw men. But freshman writing teachers who are thinking about what should constitute variety in portfolios should recognize that their choices construct students' perceptions of writers and writing. A freshman writing portfolio that does not include at least some student writing in the role of citizen, about matters of public dispute, large or small, not only neglects the historical core of rhetorical education but also limits ways that students may imagine their writing selves—and diminishes the role of writing as a mode for influencing actions and positions.

In my more despondent days I worry that there is no meaningful public sphere at all, no democracy in which decisions are be made as a result of sustained argument and debate. Postmodernism chides me for desiring a sort of Enlightenment rationalism that it claims was never possible or desirable in the first place. Perhaps the classroom is as intact and full a public sphere as we can now expect, so that we should stop fretting about students writing for outside audiences. But if so, the classroom can better be imagined as foreshadowing what might be than as a mirroring what is. The writing portfolio can figure

the student as rhetorical citizen. Peter Elbow wishes that writing classes might "help students use writing by choice in their lives" (135). It's crucial that students recognize at least one of these choices as public deliberative discourse and that teachers not limit their vision of freshman writing to a false choice between the academic and the personal.

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