

Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy, eds. *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. Refiguring English Studies. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000. 476 pages. \$29.95.

What's Personal

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Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis. *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College*. Refiguring English Studies. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000. 434 pages. \$34.95.

Except for what's personal, there
is really so little to tell. . . .

—Eudora Welty¹

It is a commonplace of composition studies: expressivism vs. social constructionism, with Peter Elbow serving as expressivist guru and David Bartholomae as social constructivist priest. The debate started at least as early as the 1970s. Yet as recently as the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, articles entitled "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow," and "Being a Writer vs. Being An Academic: A Conflict in Goals," found Bartholomae and Elbow still articulating the two sides of this debate. Some grow weary of it—for example, the respondent to the Bartholomae/Elbow *CCC* articles who bluntly states in the same issue, "this debate is getting old" (Bialostosky 92).

Is it? Or could there be something new to add? The editors and authors of the two books under review here think so. One book attempts to provide an enhanced theoretical underpinning for the expressivist view and then to show examples of "informed practices" that are

expressivist in nature. The other book collapses the two sides of the debate, showing the personal in what is usually considered academic.

Charles M. Anderson and Marion M. MacCurdy, editors of *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*, as well as Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis, authors of *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College*,—all assume that no matter what our preferred ideological or theoretical stance as writing instructors, we *will* receive personal writing, and that what the writing students do, whether overtly personal or not, *will* affect their personal development. Guaranteed. These authors and editors tell us that we had better be prepared when we receive such writing; we had also better learn to recognize the effect of writing on the personal development of students.

For Anderson and MacCurdy, personal writing is not just an inescapable fact of the writing teacher's work but rather a type of writing with a very positive potential: the potential to heal. These editors have collected essays ranging from theoretical treatises on this idea, to essays that speak of the role of writing in helping writers faced with specific traumas (those associated with AIDS, sexual abuse, suicide, poverty), to essays that describe actual writing classes that emphasize the personal—classes both in the university and in the wider community. Indeed, a major strength of this book is the help it gives us as writing teachers at colleges and universities in viewing our writing classes as sites within a larger field of writing instruction/classes. My favorite section of the book is called "Writing and Healing in the World," which includes a series of essays entitled "Voices from the Line: The Clothesline Project as Healing Text" (Laura Julier), "The More I Tell My Story: Writing as Healing in an HIV/AIDS Community" (Emily Nye), and "Las Madres, Upstairs/Downstairs: From Soul Maps and Story Circles to Intertextual Collaboration" (Sandra Florence), this last one concerning a writing group for at-risk women held as part of a community education program. The titles alone remind us academics that our writing classes on college campuses are not the only places where the hard work of the writing class takes place. The opening page of this section of the book quotes Jay Robinson in *Conversations on the Written Word* as speaking of "voices not yet heard in our academic conversations" (355). These are voices that Anderson and MacCurdy, in giving us the essays in this section, help us to start to hear—voices in a world of writing that we academic types may know little about.

In a section entitled "Writing and Healing in the Classroom" is another particularly memorable essay: Guy Allen's "Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto," in which Allen tells the story of his creating a composition class where

personal writing is stressed. Allen maintains that this emphasis has many benefits, among which is improvement of the students' *academic* writing through their practice of personal writing. Allen's essay is interesting not only for the conclusions he has reached about the benefits of the class he teaches, but also for the way he shows us how he worked to start, and refine, and revise this writing class. This book's real strength is in the particular examples it shows of classroom—and outside-of-classroom—practices, such as those discussed in Allen's essay.

However, the introduction to the book, the part in which the groundwork is laid, is unfortunately somewhat disappointing. In it, Anderson and MacCurdy attempt to show that an emphasis upon writing as healing is needed today in particular. In the past (30-35 years ago, as they would have it), we teachers "assumed students arrived at college ready to engage in the intellectual mission of higher education" and that "our primary concern as teachers of writing was to develop the intellectual capacities, skills, and abilities of our students" (1). True enough; those were common assumptions (though I do believe instructors have complained for eons about underprepared students). What is troubling is that Anderson and MacCurdy seem to accept that this way was the "right" way for its time. Academically prepared middle-class students of yesteryear did not need the healing of personal writing, they seem to say. However, the authors assume that the situation has changed noticeably. Students are much different: perhaps working class, perhaps traumatized (or, as they would have it, most assuredly traumatized by the horrors of contemporary society), perhaps part of a minority group. Again, true enough; the demographics have shifted, as we all know, and with many effects upon higher education. So the authors argue that academically underprepared, poorer students of today do need the healing of personal writing. Somehow the dichotomizing and the tinge of "golden age" thinking bother me, as does the hyperbolic statement that "PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] has become a central, material fact of our time. We are all survivors" (3). Isn't it more the case that in earlier decades, trauma may have gone unnoticed or at least unlabeled? The World War II admiral becomes an alcoholic, but no one considers his problem as related to war trauma; the Vietnam vet behaves similarly, and by this time the connection to his war trauma is recognized. Likewise for students of the past, who may simply have known better how to hide their personal traumas under a social mask vouchsafed them by their middle-class upbringings. And isn't it dangerous to speak of all of us as PTSD sufferers, thus running the risk of trivializing the experience of those who truly are the traumatized survivors of horrific events? Nonetheless, the authors' effort to establish a sophisticated underpinning

for expressivism is to be applauded; they just did not need the hyperbole.

My other disappointment is that the book fails to emphasize the role of the personal in the required freshman composition course. The course described in Guy Allen's essay is an elective course—quite a different situation from a required freshman class. And none of the other essays in the volume describes in any detail at all a required freshman composition course. We the readers are left to compare our own experiences as teachers of such courses with the types of classes that are described in the book. That is certainly a valuable exercise, but how much more valuable it would have been for the book to have had within it materials for such a comparison. Still, in all, there are many intriguing and valuable nuggets in *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*.

Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis's *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College* features, as the title suggests, four case studies of students who, when the authors first encountered them, were freshmen taking required writing courses at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Herrington and Curtis followed them throughout their years (in one case, it was just one year) at the university, noting and then analyzing the ways in which they developed both as writers and as people—as well as the ways these two lines of development intertwined. They write of Nam, a refugee from Vietnam who had become a United States citizen; of Lawrence/Steven, a young gay man; of Rachel, a young bisexual woman from a middle-class family; and of Francois, a minority student of uncertain background. They show how these students “composed themselves” during their time at the university, in part through their experiences with writing.

Each case study is full of intriguing glimpses into the worlds of these students, with analyses of the connections between their writing and their overall development as people. I enjoyed reading about the progress (and regress), about the twists and turns in the paths of development. I appreciated being reminded of the way the personal permeates so much that we do. Nam, a devout Christian, writes about his faith—an obvious instance of the personal impinging upon college writing. Lawrence/Steven's essays are a series of (usually) coded references to his struggle to establish a gay identity. Rachel, even when writing academic papers about psychology, is developing personal confidence through mastering the academic conventions of her field. Francois, ever the riddle to his teachers, seems to write to conceal rather than reveal himself, but in so doing, in his own way, is writing a “self.”

Again, however, as with the other book, I would like to have seen a bit more emphasis upon first-year composition, in addition to the very

welcome emphasis upon the developmental writing student that is in such abundance in this volume. Three of these four students started out in developmental writing; only one, Rachel, started out in the first of the two-sequence freshman composition courses offered at that university. Interestingly, too, the case study of Rachel seems not as rich as those of the other three students; her experience seems not as deeply analyzed. Lawrence/Steven, for instance, has his essays mined for ways in which he codes his struggle with his sexual identity; Rachel, who the authors learn during the course of their study is bisexual, does not similarly have her essays examined for ways in which they may reveal any such struggle on her part. Indeed, unlike with the other three students, her essays are not quoted in this book. It is almost as if, because she is more adept at academic writing, she can more successfully code, or hide, the personal material that might be behind what she is writing; there is, thus, from the authors' point of view, not as much to say about her essays. The others do not manage this feat as successfully, and, thus, there is more "meat" there (so to speak) to analyze for its personal ramifications. This phenomenon has ethical implications: in scrutinizing the writings of certain students who may not be able to choose how much of their "personal" selves to reveal in their writing, are we taking advantage of them in some way? It is a question worth pondering.

Nonetheless, as with the Anderson and MacCurdy volume, there is much to like about Herrington and Curtis's presentation of these four case studies. They indeed collapse that personal-nonpersonal binary, making us think more about its implications.

"Except for what's personal, there is really so little to tell. . . ." Both books bear out Eudora Welty's memorable statement, most definitely indicating how much we as writing instructors need to consider and reconsider the role of the personal in the writing class, and how much we need always to recognize that writing on any topic can have a significant personal dimension. In addition, these points are ones writing program administrators ought to keep in mind as they make curricular decisions and train new tutors and new writing instructors.

Note

¹ Vande Kieft 15. Vande Kieft reports in a footnote that the quotation comes from her interview with Welty, March 14 and 15, 1961.

Works Cited

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