FROM ALIENATION TO A NEW VISION: USING CLASS LETTERS TO TRANSFORM ENGLISH 101

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> Sometimes these letters bother me. I do like them, but it makes one really look at their weak side. I have a very hard time with that task. If people can be so real on paper, why can't they speak it also? This must be a sign of weakness. We are all afraid; therefore, we stay in our shells. I sometimes look at people, listen to them also, and wonder if they know who they are—I mean really know who they are, not just their name and their status. Many people think they do, but ask them; they won't have an answer. I am not any different. I do exactly what people expect me to, nothing more, nothing less. People don't expect me to take risks, so I don't, though I'm dying to. Why do we do all this following? If this is what life is all about why don't we just have a road map at the beginning of our lives and follow it? Seems to me this would be much easier.
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> —Margrett "Midge" Myhre (1995)

When I first encountered Midge's words, the whole point of assigning class letters came home to me. Not satisfied with my freshman writing classroom with its formulaic emphasis on

rhetorical forms (describing, reporting, explaining, persuading) and a resulting sameness in student essays, I began writing letters to my students. They, in turn, wrote letters to me each week, following only the inclination to write about their daily lives, their writing, and responses to their classmates. I hoped this letter exchange would affect my students' attitudes toward writing, especially their engagement in the writing process and their willingness to take risks. In the six freshman classes I have taught using class letters (January 1995–May 1997), I noted a substantive change both in my students' attitudes toward the writing classroom and in my own pedagogy. As I used class letters over this two and one-half year period, I discovered that they had subtly, yet profoundly transformed my teaching practice from a linear, didactic approach to a more interactive, collaborative mode. This transformation, I have since come to believe, was brought about mainly by what my students and I taught each other, through the fluid yet powerful medium of the class letter.

Taking a closer look at Midge's letter, I discovered useful feedback from a student experiencing the writing task in a freshman classroom. I also discovered a fellow writer, facing the same risks, fears, and elusive rewards I have encountered in writing for publication or, for that matter, any audience I have not been sure about. Midge is engaged in negotiating a space between her experience of the classroom and mine. She seems to understand the risks I am asking her to take, yet feels conflicted about taking those risks. At the same time, she is frustrated that her classmates seem to be feeling that same conflict, yet seem unwilling to be leaders in risk-taking. I was especially struck by Midge's words: "I am not any different. I do exactly what people expect me to, nothing more, nothing less. People don't expect me to take risks, so I don't, though I'm dying to." On the brink of a critical insight, Midge confesses that she recognizes she must take risks if she wants to be successful in a demanding writing course,

yet she cannot separate herself from her peers. She will conform to their social expectations—and probably to those expectations she has also perceived in her teachers—even though she is eager to seek out risk. I wonder how many teachers of writing get such valuable information from their students, much less through their students' writing. The implications of such discourse could be far-reaching for our teaching practice.

This essay examines the context in which I began assigning class letters, explaining my dissatisfaction with my classroom experience. Of particular emphasis are the structure of the course, the pedagogical background, and the course syllabus. I describe the changes brought to and from the writing classroom through the intervening medium of the class letter. Looking closely at the "pedagogy of disclosure," I examine, through a detailed passage, how students and teacher alike are brought into membership in the discourse community through mutual disclosure. The connection between class letters and improvement in writing is then explored through a series of student writings. Returning to the subject of risk-taking, I proceed to a discussion of risks and rewards in class letter writing. Taking a larger view, I then endeavor to place the issue of class letters in the context of current writing pedagogy criticism and theory. Finally, I draw conclusions concerning class letters and their relevance to the freshman writing classroom.

Context of the Class Letters

English 101 or Written Communication 1, like many freshman composition courses, built upon standard rhetorical forms—description, narration, explanation, and persuasion—requiring coherent, well-developed essays based upon a student's personal experience. Four such essays were required, each with multiple revisions, adapting Peter Elbow's format of asking the student to attach a cover letter explaining the topic and what he or she wanted me to look for in the essay (CCCC 1995 Winter

Workshop). "Strong" and "weak" passages were labeled by the student in the margins of the most recent draft. In the evaluative grid, I would include items I wanted to emphasize for a particular paper. One item, revising, stressed substantive revision, not mere editing. To encourage risk-taking, I would tell the students to keep making changes even if the paper was not getting any "better." This procedure was designed to get students to evaluate their own writing rather than look to their instructor for approval and then stop working once a grade had been assigned.

Since students were encouraged to revise their written work throughout the semester, the revising process was open-ended. Grades as such were not affixed to individual essays, except that a scale of "weak" to "strong" was provided for each scoring category as well as for the overall paper. At the end of the semester, students turned in a portfolio of their essays, explaining any changes they had made along with a description and evaluation of their writing process. The portfolio, in addition to the formal essays, included a collection of each student's letters written to me over the course of the semester. A forward, explaining their content, and an afterward, assessing their value, were also included. A third section, a self-assessment of the student's overall work in the course, concluded with a justification for a course grade based upon the syllabus contract criteria. In general, if the student did an acceptable job on all four essays, wrote at least ten class letters, and came to class faithfully, then a grade of B was assigned. Any departure from this performance level, positive or negative, was recognized accordingly.

Just before the start of the spring 1995 semester, during the CCCC Winter Workshop in Florida, I heard Toby Fulwiler and Peter Elbow suggest that class letters, a specialized type of journaling or "freewriting with an audience," could change the teaching equation. Students are urged to write whatever is on their minds and to engage in a continuing conversation about writing.

The teacher coordinates the process by editing the weekly letters and choosing those letters or passages that lend themselves to the topic of concern for that particular week. He or she has the discretion not to use passages which are repetitive, inappropriate, or otherwise (in the teacher's judgment) too private for the class letter. At the same time, the teacher must be "authentic," and assume the same risks asked of the other class members. As "classmates," all become members in an evolving community where letters generate and sustain a major portion of that community's life.

Using the Fulwiler-Elbow model, I proceeded to assign class letters in my English 101 classes. In each writing class, class letters were assigned to be turned in every Friday. I would collect and assemble representative samples in a letter back to the class by the following Wednesday. The letters took on an informal yet pedagogical flavor, weaving personal stories and lessons in composition together. Students began to look forward to the weekly installments with genuine anticipation. They wrote honest and revealing pieces, relating to their daily lives and struggles. As the students grew more open and friendly, they began writing coded postscripts, messages addressed to friends, and accounts of private events. As the instructor, I guided the "conversation" through new learning terrain, linking their personal circumstances to the pedagogical scaffolding of the course. Weekly letters covered topics like the fear of writing, connecting to others, times and places for writing, "going public," spring break activities, struggling with an informative essay assignment, writing persuasively, "sub-conversations," and personal reflections. As the mediator, I endeavored to give everyone a chance to speak and address the issues evolving through the thread of the class conversation.

The First Letter: Initial Responses

The first class letter containing student responses, answering my invitation to "write as we are," brought some provocative student writing. In my day-to-day life as a teacher, I was not prepared for such honesty and directness from students—at least not in writing. Their words both individually and collectively seemed to confirm my decision to teach writing in new ways, with the class letters at the center of our classroom. The following responses tell much about where we were going, with the promise of a new semester. I have provided my brief notations for each response in brackets:

> I'm grateful for the format we are doing this class. It helps me to know we are all in this together."—Laura M.
> [Sense of community]
>
> I feel the way you will be teaching the class will be very productive. I think I learn better when it's spontaneous. . . .
> —Jamalie
> ["Real-time" interactive spontaneity]
>
> I was talking with a friend about my fears of taking this class and of writing. And she told me that in class I could write for myself and not have to worry about conforming to your beliefs. I like that idea. It makes me more sure of myself.
> —Vanessa
> [Writing for ourselves and not the teacher]
>
> I feel if we keep writing essays and keep the class structure as it is and everyone tries to overcome their fear, writing will be easier.—Lea Ann
> [Mutual support]
>
> [As for not getting specific grades on papers] I think this will take some pressure off everyone in the class and they will learn to relax and enjoy the privilege of writing.—Jennifer

[Students don't want to be graded; they want to be understood (Elbow). The pressure of grading can be counter-productive; instead of being a "privilege," writing becomes a chore.]

I am getting comfortable with your class because of the personal level that we are on.—Christopher
[Real learning is personal; acceptance means treating each other with respect, as colleagues in a mutual quest for understanding.]

Your understanding of the fear of writing eases my tension. Maybe now I won't be so afraid of a blank piece of paper. Although you are very easy going I too realize that you can be tough and I respect that.—Myra
[Respect and acceptance bring with them truly higher expectations, mostly for ourselves.]

I like that you treat everyone equal and how the work we do shouldn't be out of a reward or punishment. In my opinion this is how a class should be—much like a team rather than a competition.—Nichole
[Cooperation works better than the traditional system of reward and punishment.]

I think if people truly write from the heart it cuts half the effort involved. . . . This system you have structured is getting less difficult as you keep stressing to us that we're in charge of our writing and you're there for our support.
—Diane
[Writers do the writing; teachers consult and provide support.]

To be honest about it, a big part of the "writing problem" is just laziness plain and simple. We live in a society where so much of our communication is oral or video. Reaching out

and touching someone has long since bypassed the pen and stamp.—Mark Norby
[Writing requires active engagement, perhaps a lost art.]

If you see me . . . doing something wrong in my writing, let me know. Just say Jason you could have done this better in this way.—Jason
[I'll respond to Jason's invitation, now that he welcomes my help—otherwise it is an intrusion based on traditional privilege.]

I think that until this semester, I was just taking up space in classrooms . . . and not learning a damn thing. . . . For the first time in three years I feel that I may actually be able to succeed this time.—Neil
[Any teacher would welcome Neil's remark, and hope he can sustain this attitude.]

In the class letter, I responded to my students' remarks with the following:

Writing from the heart—that's it. How come our letters have such power, when we are saying what's on our minds for once without fear of evaluation (this includes me). It kind of reminds me of John Dewey's remark, "There's a difference between having something to say and having to say something." Much of the writing done in classrooms (both by students and teachers) is dull and lifeless. And believe me, it looks and feels like something people felt they had to say. It's like standing in front of an audience and reading from a prepared script that nobody cares about anyway. Why can't everything we say have as much to say as we do here?

> When you feel free to experiment with your writing, without fear of punishment, no matter what you say or how you say it—that's freedom. When you care enough to say what's on your mind and respect others for their ideas—that's democracy. When you try as hard as you can and still have fun—that's learning.

What was happening, even though I did not see it as clearly as I do now reading these words, transformed my own writing and pedagogy. Responding in kind to my students' openness and unapologetic welcoming of a new approach to teaching writing, I was at once urging change in the writing classroom and seeing myself changing. I thought this experience might be the product of a truly collaborative environment, where each member brings to the community his or her life experiences, shares them interactively, and in the process helps build a higher and richer level of knowledge.

The Pedagogy of Disclosure

In the college writing classroom, class letters can be instrumental in bringing students and instructor into significant conversations about writing and the very terms of engagement. Through the pedagogy of disclosure described by David Bleich, class members, student and teacher alike, enter into a new relationship in which the terms of membership are themselves transformed. The process of communication—sharing and developing mutual goals—can become the shaping agent for educational and lifelong change.

One stormy day in January 1995, as the snow was blowing outside my study window, I drafted a letter to my writing students. As the conversation proceeded, I thought it useful to introduce the pedagogy of disclosure:

Now the snow has picked up velocity and has started swirling madly into my window panes, trying to invade my warm cocoon. So let's turn to the private-public conversation. Some of this discussion crosses paths with writing trouble spots. Lisa, in what appears to be her public letter for all of us, feels that I am a good judge as to what the whole class would like to know. She adds: ". . . if the students are able to write something to you, knowing that these letters are really for the whole class, they should be able to share them with the whole class." With one clear exception: Lisa thinks people "who really are just writing for your eyes only" should request that I don't share this with anyone. That's true, Lisa. I use judgment, but my sensitivity may be flawed. I'm that mediating audience that stretches or retracts for you. I'm assuming you can trust me, but I'd rather you trusted yourselves and worked more independently of my nurturing care.

Jason: Sometimes I take a lot of risks and a lot of the risks come back and haunt me. I guess this all happens to everyone. A risk to me could be different than a risk to someone else. Let's try this one: I have been skydiving twice; this to me at the time was risky. But someone else may say this was not only risky but *stupid!* That is my point. When you say *risks* I take that in the context it's in. I had fun but it was risky. I have taken many [which have] been thrown back in my face. If I had to do them all over, I would probably do the same things.

Jennifer: I am not afraid of the public. It doesn't matter to me what other people think as long as I like it. But some people are messy about it and I think no one should be pressured into going public. I think with a little time and support everyone will at least be able to go semi-public.

Kim: The issue of how much to disclose about yourself depends on the person. I learned in one of my classes last semester that girls disclose little bits of information that the other person discloses to them. That is how girls can say who is their best friend because she has more than likely told her almost everything about herself.

Some new information might be helpful at this point. David Bleich, who teaches English at the University of Rochester, believes that mutual self-disclosure on the part of every class member can bring otherwise alienated people toward dignity and understanding, and can forever change the curriculum. Under these conditions of trust, a "pedagogy of disclosure asks each class member to announce, sooner or later, the terms of membership in the class. . . . Such an announcement could include . . . the histories of one's family, school, ethnic, gender, as well as one's vocational and economic reasons for choosing courses, one's clothing, eating habits, and travels, one's aspirations, fantasies, values, and plan. These announcements are understood to be continuous yet paced comfortably for each individual's level of involvement in the class" (Bleich 48). Bleich's idea is that writing in a community can help bring people's lives and their work together, instead of separating personal lives outside class from formal work assignments. Writing, like other academic work, has traditionally been a solitary activity. Instead of motivating people through the hope of future employment, why not motivate them now, through real, extended, and thorough recognition? He adds: "A pedagogy of disclosure can help to teach students to demand nonalienated work, to make their work more a part of their identities, their identities more connected to others, and their vocations more palpably implicated in society and in

other people's needs" (Bleich 49). So we become partners, and in so doing we become part of one another and more whole as individuals.

So instead of running away from the personal, let's embrace it. Let's get to know each other fully and at the same write more knowingly both of our individual and our collective selves.

How does this translate to our next assignment, an informative essay? We can, if we wish, explain something personal—why did I like storytelling as a child then lose it later? What is it about fishing that is so special? Your letters and mine contain gold mines of leads which can be expanded into extended conversations. We are each other's teachers. May we all so learn.

Jason observes quite astutely that risks have a personal reference and that our threshold for risk will vary. But given another chance, he would assume these risks again even if someone called them "stupid." Jennifer, not afraid of disapproval, pleases herself first. Kim finds the quality of disclosure to be gender-based. These classmates all believe in a proactive, personal mode of encounter—yet one based in a social context where risk is encouraged, first to invite thinking about it and second to reward acting on it.

The pedagogy of disclosure, through the intervening and enfolding use of the class letter, can bring students into the community of writers, taking them away from writing as alienating work and into a world of mutual respect and support. As a motivating vehicle, class letters can encourage a climate of incremental risk where the self is revealed both to the reader and the writer. In the ensuing process of validation, students gain authority over their writing, a process that often extends into their more formal assignments.

Class Letters and Writing Improvement

Mutual support and encouragement from writer to writer appeared frequently in our class letters. Student writers referred to one another as they disclosed their own problems and struggles with their writing. It was not until the fifth letter that Sherri, who had resisted commitment to the class (sitting in our circle in what seemed like quiet defiance), began to write:

> I *finally* think I'm okay with this class. I guess I needed some time to get comfortable in the deep end of the pool. I have a better attitude about this class. Thank you for taking the time to help me float, and also thanks to the other swimmers for writing positive gestures in their letters. I would like to praise Merlin for his letter to the class. He had some good points that helped me think about writing. I have found the best time for me to write is around 1:00 A.M. It is when I feel total concentration. I also like to close all "outer" experiences out. I guess I feel very fortunate compared to Lindy. I never have a terrible time writing my feelings. I usually get ideas rather quickly—I just procrastinate writing. It is pretty fun to see what other people are writing in their letters.

Merlin's letter, referred to by Sherri, was the first letter written directly to the class that semester. He had complained about the distracting noise during class writing time:

> The classroom and its whispers seem to distract me more than my home environment. The environments we work in are very diverse and should be sought out and used to our advantage.

Lindy, on the other hand, had described in detail her struggle with writing. She had "a hard time looking at a specific moment so minutely and internally." Having chosen a significant moment in her life, Lindy found difficulty "whittling it down to a small part of that big experience." In her first draft, she wrote from the point of view of the whole group experiencing it rather than from her own perspective. Trying to zero in on her own experience, she "either drew a blank, or figured there was no way I could write more than half a page about something so menial." Sherri's response was triggered in part by Lindy's appeal for advice, and reinforced by other classmates providing suggestions to Lindy. This process was repeated throughout the class letters, as students experimented with voice, audience, and purpose in their ever-changing interactions. with a cumulative effect of sharing, support, and the common goal of improvement directed at the writing process.

This improvement of the constructs in writing has been documented through the literature on student journals (Fulwiler) and through extensive anecdotal testimony from writing students. Class letters go beyond journaling; while they share the advantage of informal discourse, they initiate the give and take of authentic dialogue. As the conversation continues through the letters, students develop a sense of true participation in their learning. Through helping each other, they begin to free themselves from the teacher's authority and replace it with mutual support. At the same time, students engage in reflective dialogue that questions why they are writing in the first place. Here is a sampling from my students' writing in their portfolios:

> These letters have really been a great help in my writing. I normally don't write very many letters, but this class has gotten me started. The letters that you wrote to us have helped me hone my writing skills also.

The letters allowed me to write. That is the key. They also got me looking forward to getting new letters from my classmates. They were all interesting. Your letters were also a big help.

The dear Roger letters were a great idea that served many purposes. First of all, they got us writing. They allowed the class to feel closer to one another. Most important, the letters served as a link, from the student to the teacher.

In all of the letters, including my own, I can see how the class developed a better sense and style of writing. It is very plain that as the class went on, we gained in confidence and skill and, as we came to know one another better, camaraderie. The writing of these letters became very important to me. It was my way of letting you know what I thought and how I felt about the writing assignments and also just my life in general. You got my mind whirling, and who knows where I'll go from here?

I feel that this portion of our class work was very instrumental to making the class so enjoyable. Through these letters we have all grown closer than we would have without them. Most classes are all composed of strangers being led through the course material, but with these letters we all learned enough personal information about everyone else that we all felt comfortable with each other.

Writing letters to an English teacher was at times intimidating for me. When I was writing letters to friends or family, I realized that each letter probably could have been written better if I went back and did some revising. Reflecting on letter writing I now realize that it is a valuable way to keep our minds active by putting our thoughts and ideas down on paper. We may not write essays every week, but we can write letters to family and friends.

These comments, written at the end of the semester after the class letter writing experience, provide useful insights into the reasons and motives from the students' perspective. In many cases the reasons are quite practical: getting started writing, improving skills through practice, getting to know people and their writing approaches, a "valuable way to keep our minds active by putting our thoughts and ideas down on paper." One student liked the way class letters invited writing, and looked forward to the weekly responses from peers as well as the engaging "conversation." Another appreciated the instructor's guidance. Another student, reflecting an attitude shared by many, acknowledged the bonding between students ("strangers" became "pen pals") and the authentic linkage between student and teacher. It seemed, another remarked, that the class "gained in confidence and skill and, as we came to know one another better, camaraderie. The writing of these letters became very important to me."

Risks and Rewards

When I began this experiment in disclosure through class letters, I was aware of certain risks to my authority. After all, disclosure works both ways. If one is to gain the trust of one's students, then the teacher must assume the same risks expected of his or her students. What happened in practice, however, allayed my fears. Through my editing the letters I was able to monitor the comfort level of disclosure. Despite my warning that all letters were "in the clear" and could be published without change, students discovered they could rely upon me to purge inappropriate text and pull the conversation toward topics of common concern. As the mediating audience, I could invite openness yet offer writers the protection of confidential speech. The private texts remained private, with two exceptions: the postscripts and sub-conversations.

The postscripts (PS, PPS, PPPS, etc.) invited often personal, even zany, asides:

> PS. Who called this class Roger 101? Why not call it Lisa, Mark(s), Laura(s), Merlin, etc. 101? We are starting a weight watchers club: first in line is that special someone who has lost 2 inches off her statistics; last in line is me, who according to one astute observer cannot keep his pants from falling off! Can we change the swimming/sailing/etc. metaphors? Fishing, anyone? I did a salutation count (you know me, always the researcher) and discovered that 15 used "Sincerely," 8 used just their name (first or both first and last), 2 used "Thanks," and the remainder (1 each) used "Your student," "Feeling close to you all," "Later," "Completely Stressed!" and "Thanks Again & have a good three day vacation!" By the way, 9 of you gave PS's most of which were on the subject of weight loss. Happy Birthday, Jeremy! Hope you had a great weekend. And Thanks! Thanks! to one and all.
>
> PPS. Mary Jo concludes: "Also while I'm reading the comments I find that I try to envision who the people are. I have no idea on who is who, although I do know *a few* of my fellow classmates. Does anyone else have his problem? I'd like to be able to put a face to the name of the writer." OK, I have a solution; you'll see.

In the maze of postscripts and asides, each student asserts the terms of his or her membership in the group that connected to others (weight loss, names and faces, the course number 101). What is remarkable about these spontaneous writings is that they stretch beyond the customary bounds of audience awareness to project a *persona* relating to fellow writers in a site where they may not even know each other except in the class letters.

The postscripts offer another dimension to the class letters; they operate as a "time out" commentary or reflection on the letters themselves, asking questions we might skip over in the business of learning. They invite inventiveness on the part of students, who start looking for connections missed in more conventional media. They offered me a chance to shift my voice from teacher to classmate:

> PS. Devil's Bathtub is in Spearfish Canyon, according to Alyson. "It's not a mile marker but there are orange sticks in the road. You turn off at #19 (on the left), park your car and hike back to it." Alyson also disclaims her parking meter inventor ancestor on her dad's side of the family—and "thanks" Vanessa for telling everyone. Myra agrees with Laura J. she doesn't feel so alone either. Who's fly fishing in Spearfish Creek? Lisa attended the empowerment and equality of women meeting (bra burning party?). Politician Kim is running for state v-p of SDEA. Jesse thought the "Cop Killer" lyrics "brought up some intense conversations." (More like a firestorm, huh, Jesse?) Christopher is "having serious spring fever." (Pray for snow, Christopher and fellow sufferers Lea Ann, et. al.) Jason is speculating on a $50,000 versus a $100,000 house. Ask him. Our friend MJ's daughter Tessa had the "worsest day." "Her crayons had fallen out of the bottom of her box as she held them, during her SAT tests all her papers fell all over the floor, she slipped on the ice, and her kitty was hurt and had to go to the vet."

One letter was reserved for "sub-conversations," those "private and semi-private sharings [that] have been coming my way." I altered the names and circumstances to protect the writers, and proceeded to quote them:

Sorry I missed class on . . . . I was really having a hard time with personal matters. I swear it was the worst day I've had since our house burnt down six years ago.

After working all night and the following day on a speech, I crashed in my apartment, and was awakened that evening by a beautiful woman, an eight course meal and a steaming pool of bubbles and suds. What a banquet. . . . We took to the sky with wings of love. Before I knew it was time for school once again. But somehow my lack of sleep, this time, didn't seem to bother me. With the biggest smile I've had in weeks, the door closes behind as I head to school.

During spring break I met this wonderful stranger, and now all my plans are changing. I am be transferring to ******** in *******, quitting my job, and selling my car to move in August. I don't believe in love at first sight or maybe love itself, and I wonder if I'm doing the right thing. . . . My friend said life is all about chances and if you don't take chances you don't get anywhere, but would that be the responsible thing to do?

I am extremely behind in school. I really need money right now, so I skipped my Thursday classes to go work so I could earn some money. Now I'm so tired. I feel a major load of stress. Between working, school, *******, and trying to decide what to do with my life, I'm wearing myself down to a big nothing. Please bear with my tiredness and behindness.

Right before class today I fell on my spiked picket fence trying to climb it to get my dog. I fell right on my chest and it hurts so bad. So the last thing I want to be doing right now is sitting in class and writing this letter, but I'm here because I'm so dedicated.

> I'm very tired. I feel like I can't catch up. I am ready for school to be out. A good friend of mine died this last Friday. He had been in a lot of pain, so he was ready to go. My only regret is the fact that I planned on going to see him last weekend, and I didn't get time. Last weekend he was doing fine, but the cancer got the best of him this weekend. I'll really miss him this summer.

Responding to these "rich narratives of pain and joy," I then took my greatest risk as teacher and classmate. I revealed why I write:

> All this struggle—all too easy to talk about and not so easy to endure—can turn into more hardship, mental and physical exhaustion, a feeling of emptiness, never catching up, always behind. . . . I don't know of any other way available to us human beings, except the way of struggle. Without it we don't function. Everyone has her or his own special burden. By refusing to give in to it—maybe out of sheer stubbornness—we work toward goals that become clearer as we struggle. I too have been there, really close to giving up the fight, losing hold of structured reality. . . . I have to will myself to stay with connection, my disciplined past and reliable trusted friends. I can structure meaning with words, creating a world that makes sense, what Robert Frost calls a "momentary stay against confusion." I have a hard time relating to "eternal" truths outside what I can negotiate. Now you know why I write. I write to gain a better sense of self in relation to a changing world. I write to touch others and to sense others through the page. I write to affirm myself and to know I am not alone.

Unlike the postscripts, the sub-conversations brought more personal thinking and commitment to the main conversation. While I spoke of personal confusion, I also referred to writing. The stakes are highest at the moment of greatest risk. To place writing in this context is to make it a part of living. The "class" becomes a common ground for dealing with what matters most. As writers we learn that in the end, everything matters.

From Alienation to a New Vision

Writing is often regarded by college freshmen as an alienating activity, performed outside any community and under the guise of communication for the sake of graduation and subsequent employment (Bleich 49). Classroom writing, under these conditions, can assume the lifeless pretense reportedly described by John Dewey: "There is a difference between having something to say and having to say something" (127). If students write what matters to them, then they could connect to ideas and possibilities beyond themselves. As Steven Shreiner observes: "The students I began teaching were to be treated as writers, entitled to self-expression, capable of inspiring and being inspired, and interested in writing about themselves for an audience larger than their teacher" (86). Writing, like thinking, is a process that operates both in cognitive and artistically creative ways; composing, in effect, is a form of literary authorship (Shreiner 87; Emig 7).

Under the constructivist model, the classroom serves as mediator between the "private" self of the student and the "public" consciousness represented by the teacher. In this "safe zone" teacher and student negotiate the conditions of membership. With this view, class letters can help along the collaborative process, paralleling the essay assignments in a series of progressively challenging engagements that advance the writer's "authority" from the private narrative to the semi-public arenas of exposition

and argument. As modes of social construction, these student writings serve to extend the student's expertise into more knowing and comprehensive zones within the writer's expanding ability.

Social constructivism brings the writer into conversation—with that which precedes, coincides with, and extends into the future from the present discourse. Forming discourse communities, writers enter into conversations both with the self and with their peers (Kinneavy; Bruffee). This paradigm, however, does not resolve the uneasy relationship with authority cited by Peter Elbow: should the teacher be a "gatekeeper" or a "coach"? Sharon Crowley argues that process theory took hold so pervasively from around 1971 onward precisely because it fit within the traditional concept of academic authority (72). The subject matter of composition became the composing process of freshman students (73). Yet to be resolved were the old assumptions about academic authority and the collateral purpose of writing for the academy. But the substance of the matter goes beyond mere power struggle between students (and/or sometimes instructors) and the academy. Writing class letters neither evades nor transcends this conflict.

Referring to Foucault's interpretation of classical tradition, Kurt Spellmeyer points to an alternative vision: "a knowledge to be lived, within whose contours we are empowered to construct both a self with others and a social world large enough to accommodate our individual differences" (Spellmeyer 87). Rather than accept as given a world order in which we are defined both in terms of our social and our linguistic roles, Spellmeyer suggests a more dynamic pedagogy:

> Teachers of writing . . . might do well to consider which version of knowledge we would prefer to advance, and which form of "relationship with the self" we shall choose to

> promote in our classrooms. We might ask, as well, which version of knowledge is most likely to make writing an "art of living" for our students at a time when writing has become, if not less important, then more mechanical, more pointlessly a repetition of the Same, than ever before. (87)

It is this "relationship with the self," this "version of knowledge"—beyond social constructivism, issues of authority, and self-centered expressivism—that finds itself at home in the world of the class letter. Writing becomes an "art of living" that replaces "the Same" with a new and vitally established connection within ourselves and with each other.

Conclusion

Class letters can (1) foster a sense of community vital to student writers; (2) link private, semi-private, and semi-public modes of discourse; (3) encourage students to experiment with voice; (4) relate teacher and student as writers and human beings, transcending traditional classroom roles; (5) model both teacher's and students' writing in a dynamic, interactive process; (6) establish personal lines of communication (personal asides) which can assist or coach the formal writing being assigned; (7) build trust in the classroom, a major prerequisite to learning; (8) reaffirm the human side of teaching and learning, all too often lost in classes whose numbers exceed desirable limits; and (9) emphasize learning as interactive between teacher and student, and student and student. The class letter can invite students to enter a self-contained universe that evolves into the university. "Students in the writing classroom," Halden-Sullivan observes, "bespeak their condition, not so much as mirrors reflecting an external world from which they stand apart, but as voices of their world's being, emitted from within that world" (54). As Sandra

Cisneros so perceptively notes: "My students and I create a universe that is the university."

At the end of my March 6, 1995 class letter I reprinted Emily Dickinson's poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you—Nobody—Too?
> Then there's a pair of us?
> Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!
>
> How dreary—to be—Somebody!
> How public—like a Frog—
> To tell one's name—the lifelong June—
> To an admiring Bog!

After I had mentioned that Dickinson had playfully inverted the meaning of "Somebody" and "Nobody," Debi, superseding my authority and using the universe of the class letters as her reference, had the last word:

> I agree on the topic of everyone being "Nobodies." I think everyone is a nobody until they make themselves "Somebody." By doing this, we need to reach deep down inside and figure out who we are. We then can learn about ourselves and express ourselves to others either by our writing or by talking. When we have figured ourselves out I think we are then ready to look at other people and then learn about them . . . . I think in our class everyone is starting to get out of their "Nobody" shell and starting to get into their "Somebody" shell. Sooner or later we will all be in the "Somebody" boat together.

As Debi pointed out, writing students enter the conversation as "Nobody" until they voice their social and linguistic identities to

become "Somebody." Beginning college students often approach the writing classroom with attitudes of fear and alienation. Letter writing can help these writers extend their private selves, affirm their identities, and connect to a larger audience. Class letters help establish an authentic connection between teacher and student, where the teacher can fulfill the role of a mediating audience through which students can test their authority and negotiate their "otherness." Students also learn to interact with each other in cooperative and noncompetitive ways as *writers* in a writing community. "To be personal," confided Katrina, "is the hardest thing in the world." But it is this act of disclosure that is at once liberating and confirming. We are free to be ourselves with others. We assert our identities and are accepted for what we are. What we take away from this learning community will be that portable sense of a valued self, that confidence which comes through knowing we can succeed.

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