CREATIVE NONFICTION IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: RETHINKING ANTITHETICAL PEDAGOGIES

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The first time I ever taught first-year composition, I was a new master's student with no real idea of what I was doing. I was teaching English 101, the first in a two-course sequence of composition courses. As a first-time teacher, I struggled to know *what* readings to use and *how* to use them. The textbook I was assigned was packed with photographs, advertisements, artwork, and comic strips accompanying short stories, poetry, and nonfiction. It had it all. But I didn't know what to do with it all. As I prepared my syllabus, I looked at most of these texts–poems, stories, comics, etc.–and scratched my head and moved on. I'm sure other teachers could teach with these materials successfully. But I was lost. Fortunately, numerous creative nonfiction essays were also included in the book. I was planning to require my students to write essays, so those were what I decided to require them to read. I decided that creative nonfiction, in all its varieties, would be the lens through which I would teach composition.

The essay I liked the most and continue to use today was "Shooting Dad" by Sarah Vowell, which is popular and found in several composition readers. The essay is a humorous and touching memoir about the author's relationship with her father, a gun-loving conservative always politically at odds with his liberal, anti-gun daughter. The title "Shooting Dad" comes from the father's wish that, after he dies, his cremated remains are to be blasted from the cannon on opening day of hunting season. It's clear that the father loves the daughter's passion, even if he

disagrees with where that passion is directed, and despite the political rivalry between the two, it's clear the daughter has an endearment for her father's idiosyncrasies. Students responded well to the humor and voice of the narrator, as well as the way Vowell uses writing to explain and explore her views of the world around her.

My experience with teaching this essay for the first time, however, was all practical, not the least bit theoretical. I was a first-time teacher, not yet educated in various teaching philosophies, and all I wanted was not to screw up too badly. I've learned much in the years since then–through my MA, PhD, and beyond–and my perspectives on teaching have matured. However, that first experience using creative nonfiction has stuck with me over the years.

Creative nonfiction has been growing in popularity over the last several decades, and some discussions within the field of composition have addressed opportunities for closer study of the relationship between creative nonfiction and composition. Most notably, in 2003, *College English* devoted an entire issue to the subject of creative nonfiction. In one of the articles, "Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition," author Wendy Bishop says,

> Nonfiction has long held promise for improving our thinking about composition–first-year through graduate levels–yet viewing these areas of reading and writing productively *together* has been a hard sell in composition circles. (259)

She adds, "I think there's a real chance right now for letting the possibilities of creative nonfiction infuse, improve, and invigorate the teaching of composition" (259). While this call was made several years ago for composition to begin embracing, discussing, or acknowledging creative nonfiction, the call has not been answered. Or if it has, it's been minimal. I want to continue the conversations started in that 2003 *College English* issue.

In this article, I will discuss two competing theories of composition and how creative nonfiction, such as Sarah Vowell's "Shooting Dad," can be used to satisfy the goals of seemingly antithetical pedagogies. Expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies are two of the leading composition pedagogies of the past several decades and have often been cast in opposition to one another. Both pedagogies sometimes go by other names, such as experiential or expressionistic (for expressivism) or cultural studies (for social). Expressivism focuses on writing for the self, the voice of the author, and writing as a means of self-discovery; on the other hand, the social-epistemic perspective focuses on public writing, writing to communicate, and writing as means of social critique.

The field of composition, of course, contains a more complex, more diverse abundance of theoretical ideas concerning the teaching of writing. But I have chosen these two deliberately–at a simplified view, the spectrum of process-based writing theories can be viewed by the binaries these pedagogies represent: personal versus public, writing for the self versus writing for others, writing as a means of self-discovery versus writing to critique society and the language of others. At one extreme, you have writing for the self: personal writing, writing for pleasure without necessarily even considering audience or purpose–writing for the sake of writing. At the other extreme is writing for social purposes: writing constructed as a part of a social context, writing for and influenced by others–writing for communication.

Expressivism emerged from the process movement of the 1960s, emphasizing writing as a means of thinking and not merely the transcription of thought. Early expressivist pedagogues, such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, encouraged students to write to discover their authentic selves. Born of postmodernism, the social perspective was established in opposition, with scholars such as James Berlin and Lester Faigley claiming that no writer has a true and authentic self, but is rather socially constructed by influences. Still, a revised perspective of expressivism remains strong in the field of composition today, with scholars such as

Thomas Newkirk acknowledging that writers are constructed and mutable, but nevertheless arguing that personal writing is important to the development of students. Despite the changes these two pedagogies have gone through (both in name and in nuances of philosophy), they have nevertheless typically remained in opposition: personal versus public, writing for the self versus writing to communicate, etc.

In this article, however, I will argue for a revised way of looking at both pedagogies, one that bridges the gap between the two seemingly antithetical philosophies. I will do this by infusing creative nonfiction scholarship into composition theory. For scholars and practitioners of creative nonfiction, writing is in many ways expressivist, with an emphasis on writing to discover, writing for the self, and writing as a means of looking inward. However, creative nonfiction has an important social component as well, certainly in writing to communicate but also in writing as a social critique.

I will show how having students read and write creative nonfiction essays, which provide illustrative examples of both the expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies, allows them to benefit from both philosophical viewpoints. During a creative nonfiction-based composition class or classes, students can write memoirs, personal essays, and literary journalism, and thereby practice writing for self-discovery, for finding their voice (whether constructed or authentic), and for social critique and communication. They write with their own authority, they conduct research and incorporate the thoughts of others with their own, and they write not only about themselves but about the world and their place in it.

Background: Competing Theories of Process

After my early foray into teaching, I learned that expressivist theory was born of the process movement–and is often seen as a companion to process and referred to as "process-expressivism"–and emphasizes originality, imagination, and creativity. Expressivism focuses on the idea that each writer has her own

voice. Christopher Burnham describes expressivism thusly: "Expressive pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing" (19). In other words, expressivism emphasizes "voice, the individual identity of the writer" (23).

In describing the social epistemology in the *College English* article "Competing Theories of Process," Lester Faigley explains that human language can only be understood from the perspective of society, not an individual (535). "[The social view] rejects the assumption that writing is the act of a private consciousness and that everything else–readers, subjects, and texts–is 'out there' in the world," he says, adding, "The focus of the social view of writing, therefore, is not on how the social situation influences the individual, but on how the individual is a constituent of a culture" (535). Faigley's view of social epistemology is that writing is based on its writing community. Further, he says that the social view "moves beyond the expressivist contention that the individual discovers the self through language" and that "any effort to write about the self or reality always comes in relation to previous texts" (536).

James Berlin expresses a similar explanation of the social view, which he calls social-epistemic rhetoric, in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. Berlin says that language is a product of social relations, shaping people as much as they shape it (86). He advocates teaching students to present an appropriate image when writing, not write in search of a unique self (82). Berlin says, "It will not do, for example, to say 'Be yourself' in writing or interpreting a particular text. Each of us has available a multiplicity of selves we might call on, not all of which are appropriate for every discourse situation" (82). A social epistemology, Berlin claims, is meant to examine how individuals and language are socially constructed (84). The social-epistemic pedagogy, as I call it, is sometimes referred to as social-constructionist or, as Berlin dubbed it, social-epistemic rhetoric, because of this emphasis on examining the ways culture functions in socially constructing individuals. However, the social

epistemology has another important characteristic: "Public discourse openly and freely pursued also remains a central commitment," Berlin says (80). In other words, critiquing public discourse isn't the only focus; writing to communicate and learning how to be a member of public discourse are parts of social epistemology as well.

Postmodern theory, which helped provide the foundation to social epistemology because of its emphasis on social construction, has also dealt a blow to theories of expressivist writing, perhaps not hurting the pedagogy so much as changing it. Expressivism was based on the Romantic ideas of the self, but it has been criticized by recent scholars influenced by postmodern theory because of this basis. Faigley, for example, in his book *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, criticizes expressivist writing because of its emphasis on the "self" and "truthful" writing (127, 131). "How can one possibly express one's full self, including the unconscious part?" Faigley asks. "And what if one is sincerely expressing one's conscious self but unconsciously repressing something that remains unexpressed? Is the writer sincere or insincere?" (127). Faigley further argues that recognizing and evaluating truth in an essay is impossible, and, if attempted, puts the teacher in a position of power over the student, thus making the teacher the authority of what is and isn't authentic writing (131). Berlin also calls for the elimination of autobiographical writing in first-year composition, claiming finding a true or authentic self is a false promise made by expressivism. He says that while expressivist classrooms emphasize self-expression, the teacher ultimately decides, through her response to the student's writing, "which of the student's various expressions of self is the 'true' one" (179). "The result," Berlin adds, "is that the student's 'true self' is subtly constructed" (179).

Despite attacks like these, expressivism remains a strong part of modern composition pedagogies, even if perspectives toward it have changed. Other scholars have revised the traditional expressivist theories to include a more postmodern view of the

self–and still emphasize personal writing. Candace Spigelman, in *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, argues that personal writing *is* rhetorical. "If we appreciate postmodern theories of subject formation, we recognize that even in their personal accounts, writers do not have recourse to an 'authentic,' independent, or centered self and, thus, that the *I* of a narrative is already a writerly construct," she says. (xvi).

Further, Thomas Newkirk, in his book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, acknowledges that no true or "authentic" self can be rendered on the page (87). Newkirk says expressivist writing is a performance, and the self expressed is a performed self, not a true self in the way writers from the Romantic period might have intended it. Newkirk cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* from 1767, in which Rousseau states, "I have shown myself as I was: mean and contemptible, good, high minded and sublime, according as I was one or the other. I have unveiled my inmost self even as Thou hast seen it, O Eternal Being" (qtd. in Newkirk 4). Newkirk explains that Rousseau claims he has a distinct self, through frankness in writing he can reveal this self, and that his book "is so completely truthful that to read it is to read Rousseau himself" (4). However, Newkirk says, "As we read the opening, almost a quarter millennium after it was written, it seems to undermine its own claims. It is so clearly (and magnificently) a performance of self, with the self-conscious claims to sincerity . . . characteristic of the time" (4). Thus, Newkirk endorses the autobiographical, honest writing privileged in expressivist pedagogy; however, he explains that the "self" presented in writing is a public performance. Therefore, once we get past the argument about the self, Newkirk explains that asking students to write personal, expressive essays still has real cognitive value. "The personal essay," he says, "dramatizes thought by showing the writer as someone open to the potentially transforming effects of a life sensitively encountered" (13). He adds, "Even confessions of inadequacy, insensitivity, and cruelty are redeemed by those reflexive turns that show the writer has–often, it seems, through the act of writing–achieved a measure of self-understanding and

moral growth" (13). In other words, through the act of writing about personal subjects, students can demonstrate discovery, learning, and critical thinking.

However, despite these two pedagogies long being considered antithetical, they can be seen as a spectrum: expressivist epistemology on one side, emphasizing personal writing, writing for self-discovery, writing as a private act; and social epistemology on the other, emphasizing public writing, writing to communicate, writing to critique culture, and writing as a social act. In the remaining parts of this article, I will demonstrate how creative nonfiction accomplishes the goals of both the expressivist and social camps. I will look at how the philosophies underlying these composition pedagogies are also used in creative nonfiction, and therefore how both pedagogies could be taught using creative nonfiction.

Expressivist Pedagogy: Writing for Self-Discovery

What seems to differentiate expressivist or experiential writing from other pedagogies is that it is characterized as writing about the self and for self-discovery, regardless of the debate over what the self is, as well as by the effort to write using one's voice, regardless of the debate over whether our voices are constructed or are authentically ours. I will address how creative nonfiction fulfills both of these philosophical expectations, first considering the idea of writing for self-discovery and then voice.

Such claims that writing be used for self-discovery are ubiquitous among scholars associated with expressivism. For example, Donald Murray, in *Expecting the Unexpected: Teaching Myself–and Others–to Read and Write*, says, "Writers seek what they do not expect to find" (4). Teachers should help students to see this as well, Murray says, adding, "Students should share in this purposeful unknowing, for writing is not the reporting of what was discovered, but the act of exploration itself" (4). "Writing," he adds, "is not thinking reported, it *is* thinking" (110). Creative

nonfiction writers and scholars have a similar perspective. Robert Atwan, in his introduction to the *Best American Essays 2001*, says that "[i]n some of the best memoirs and personal essays, the writers are mysteries to themselves and the work evolves into an enactment of surprise and self-discovery" (xii). "Surprise," he adds, "is what keeps 'life writing' *live* writing" (xii, his italics).

Creative nonfiction writer Patricia Hampl, in her article "Memory and Imagination," says, "It still comes as a shock to realize that I don't write about what I know: I write in order to find out what I know" (262). Writing an essay about one's past, she says, is not an act of transcribing memory, and the mind is not a warehouse of finished stories; rather, it takes invention in writing to put narrative order to memories. Hampl describes the writing process as a mix of "confusion, hunch, and uncertainty" with the resulting text becoming clearer and clearer through drafts (262). Readers might "fall into the lovely illusion" that the text must have been written as it appears, in one draft, with smooth syntax and rhythm in the words (262). In reality, though, she says that the act of writing is what brings sense to a "mess"–"[t]he mess of my mind trying to find out what it wants to say" (262).

Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* demonstrates this idea of bringing sense to the mess of the mind. The memoir chronicles Didion's life in the year following the death of her husband, writer John Dunne. Within the first few pages, she explains that she is writing on "October 4, 2004," nine months and five days after her husband's fatal heart attack. Readers likely understand that she will go back through her final manuscript, making changes, adding to the text or taking passages out, but this admission of the day she is writing establishes a sort of journal-like chronology for the reader, setting up the act of writing as a part of the story. At the end of the first chapter, she explains her intentions for the memoir:

> This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed

> idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (7)

Here Didion is explicitly stating to the reader her intention to use the book as a means "to make sense" of the mess in her mind. This one long sentence lists a variety of abstract nouns, showing that they've flooded her mind in the aftermath of her husband's death, that she is reeling from the loss and has turned to writing as a way to sort through her thoughts and emotions.

Throughout the memoir, Didion provides descriptions of memories, explanations of her life without her husband, and inclusion of research about grief, and she clearly uses writing as a way to piece all of these disparate entities into a text that is meaningful for her, but to readers as well. The memoir itself is a heart-wrenching account of a woman trying to make sense of her life after her husband's death, and attempting to do so without self-pity. However, it illustrates how writing was a part of her attempt to make sense of her life.

Using writing to make sense of one's life or thoughts–in other words, writing for self-discovery–can be seen in other creative nonfiction examples, though rarely so explicitly stated as in Didion's text. Even when a reader can't see it in the text, this meaning-making is often present in creative nonfiction. In the anthology *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, each of the essays is followed by a postscript explaining the author's experience during the writing process. These postscripts are full of authors' admitting that they learned what they wanted to say during the writing process. For example, Phillip Lopate, in his commentary on his essay "Delivering Lily," explains that he had wanted to write an essay on his daughter's first year, with her birth as the prologue, but the subject of the birth "took over" and became the subject for the whole essay (440). "Also," he adds, "I didn't know I

would reach the conclusion I did" (450). Floyd Skloot, in his commentary on his essay "Gray Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain"–an essay about his experiences after suffering from a brain-damaging virus–says,

> I believe that if I can write about living with brain damage well enough to communicate what it's like, to discover what it means and how it plays out in a person's life, then I will also be able to understand it well enough to live with it, to make an honest life that incorporates it, and to make it clear for others. (305)

In other words, not only is he writing for himself, to make sense of the situation for himself, but he is writing for others as well. In Brian Doyle's commentary on his essay "Being Brians"–about people who share his first and last name–the author says that one of the qualities of the experience of writing the essay that pleased him was "that it went off in unexpected directions and twists and turns" (172). He says that good essays "take off through the woods of their own damned selves to go wherever they are going and the author, if he is not a complete dolt, follows after, interested to find out what he has to say" (172).

Likewise, creative nonfiction writer Scott Russell Sanders, in "The Singular First Person," has likened writing essays to chasing "mental rabbits" (331). Each sentence, Sanders says, "as it noses forward into the underbrush of thought, scatters a bunch of rabbits that go bounding off in all directions" (331). This is an odd metaphor, perhaps, but it works for describing writing for self-discovery: writing that leads to ideas, not writing that is merely the transcription of ideas. These mental rabbits are characteristic of creative nonfiction, but this metaphor is also what is encouraged in expressivist first-year composition courses.

Expressivist Pedagogy: Voice

Similarly, both expressivist composition teachers and writers of creative nonfiction emphasize the importance of voice in writing:

the distinct presence of the author in the text. Regardless of whether the text uses the first-person pronoun "I," the voice, or signature, of the author should be present. Writer Dinty W. Moore, in his book *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*, argues that the personality behind the writing is what attracts readers to the genre. He says, "Voice is what distinguishes creative nonfiction from an encyclopedia entry: unlike the latter, in creative nonfiction we want to feel the writer behind the words, to know that a living human being with a distinct personality is shaping what we read" (43). Moore uses the metaphor of film, asking what if all movies were made by setting a single camera on a tripod and recording what is happening always from that one stationary perspective. Instead, films have cinematographers and editors who give films their originality. Moore says, "Successful creative nonfiction has a cinematographer and film editor as well, but in both cases this person is the author. You, as writer, decide not just what goes into a scene, but how it will look, how it will sound, and the various camera angles" (42).

Joyce Carol Oates, in her introduction to *The Best American Essays of the Century*, says that "the mysterious presence we call *voice*" is what attracts readers to the genre of creative nonfiction (xix). Oates adds,

> Reading, we "hear" another's speech replicated in our heads as if by magic. Where in life we sometimes (allegedly infrequently) fall in love at first sight, in reading we may fall in love with the special, singular qualities of another's voice; we may become mesmerized, haunted; we may be provoked, shocked, illuminated; we may be galvanized into action; we may be enraged, revulsed, and yet!–drawn irresistibly to experience this voice again, and again. It's a writer's unique employment to which we, as readers, are drawn. (xix)

Creative nonfiction, therefore, is a genre that highlights "a writer's unique employment"–whether you call that

"employment" voice, style, tone, level of formality, or some combination of these terms–and therefore should adequately provide a library of textual examples for students to learn about voice.

One such example can be found in *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt's memoir about growing up in poverty in Ireland. McCourt's voice as a writer is distinct, responsible for the humorous yet heartbreaking tone of the book. Throughout the book, the diction is fairly simple, using words from a nine-year-old's vocabulary. The sentences often lack punctuation, mirroring a sort of stream-of-consciousness narration of a child who thinks in run-on sentences. This and a lack of quotation marks in dialogue make for stripped-down, bare-bones prose. But McCourt is skillful at breaking the rules so that readers can see the purpose to his style. Also, the point of view–consistently through the eyes of a child, never through an adult's perspective, looking back–is done so well that readers can get a sense of the adult author's opinion on his childhood without an adult narrator ever having to intrude on the story.

In one excerpt, which works as a self-contained short essay I like to use in composition courses, a nine-year-old Frank is sent out looking for his father who is drinking away money sent from Frank's grandfather to help with a new baby. While searching, McCourt describes his experience in one of the pubs:

> I'm hungry but I'm afraid to go home till I find my father. He's not in Naughton's fish and chip shop but there's a drunken man asleep at a table in the corner and his fish and chips are on the floor in their *Limerick Leader* wrapping and if I don't get them the cat will so I shove them under my jersey and I'm out the door and up the street to sit on the steps at the railway station eat my fish and chips watch the drunken soldiers pass by with the girls that giggle thank the drunken man in my mind for drowning the fish and chips in vinegar and smothering them in salt and then remember that if I die tonight I'm in a state of sin for stealing and could

> go straight to hell stuffed with fish and chips but it's Saturday and if the priests are still in the confession boxes I can clear my soul after my feed. (184)

The whole experience in the pub and eating the fish and chips is told through one long run-on sentence. Other writers might have used several sentences, or at least punctuation, but McCourt's voice comes through effectively. Using this excerpt in a composition class can lead to an effective lesson about voice and the effect of authorial choices on a text. And a passage such as this, with so-called "poor grammar," doesn't lead students into bad habits because it's clear that McCourt's diction, syntax, and punctuation are all deliberate, not the result of sloppiness. Examples like this of voice in writing abound within the genre of creative nonfiction. Further, writing creative nonfiction should allow students to experiment with style, tone, and level of formality in their own writing, authorial decisions that help students develop their voices.

Social-Epistemic Pedagogy: Writing to Communicate

While creative nonfiction emphasizes the expressivist ideals of voice and writing for discovery, those characteristics aren't privileged over the social-epistemic ideal of communication. Kathleen Norris, guest editor of the *Best American Essays 2001*, says that "a writer must attempt to breathe life into the words on a page, in the hope that the reader will discover something that resonates with his or her own experience. A genuine essay feels less like a monologue than a dialogue between writer and reader" (xv). Thus, despite the solitary actions of the writer, working alone, Norris likens writing to a conversation with another person. This analogy, when looked at carefully, doesn't really hold up. No back-and-forth exchange happens between the writer and the reader–they're not talking at the dinner table, not exchanging e-mails. However, her point is that essay writing is

meant to be more than an exploration for the writer. It is meant to serve as an exploration for the reader as well.

Science writer Edward O. Wilson provides a clear example of creative nonfiction being used for communication with his essay "Apocalypse Now," originally published in *The New Republic* and later published in *The Best American Essays 2007*. The essay begins with a short introductory italicized sentence: "*The following is a letter from the eminent Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, winner of the National Medal of Science and two Pulitzer Prizes, to an imagined Southern Baptist pastor–and the larger evangelical community*" (288). Because the note refers to Wilson in the third person–and unabashedly calls him "eminent" while bragging about his accomplishments–the text gives the appearance that the editors wrote this, not Wilson himself, although we readers can't be sure. After the sentence, the essay begins with the all-caps greeting "DEAR PASTOR" before Wilson continues writing in second-person, apparently to address the "imagined" preacher (288). Therefore, the conceit of the essay is clear: Wilson is writing to a Southern Baptist pastor (he evokes this audience in the text); however, because he acknowledges that this person is imagined, he is telling readers that his true audience is much larger than that. The use of the letter is a carefully chosen device. By choosing the letter format and creating a fictionally evoked audience, Wilson sends the message that he is trying to communicate with readers, not necessarily–or at least not literally–to the "pastor" to whom the letter is addressed. While a letter is really a monologue–as is an essay–the use of a letter suggests the invitation for a dialogue. Therefore, Wilson leaves the impression that he wants to open a dialogue. And while the evoked fictional pastor cannot literally respond, I can imagine pastors or any readers responding by talking about the essay with other people or writing letters about the essay to members of their congregation, the editorial staff of the *New Republic*, or local newspapers. While a dialogue won't occur between Wilson and his fictional audience, the essay could very well begin dialogues in a variety of ways.

After the greeting, Wilson writes about his similarities with the imagined "you" he is addressing: both growing up in the same faith, having been baptized, both Americans, and both Southerners (288). In the next paragraph, however, Wilson switches to the ways the two differ: the "you" is "a strict interpreter of Christian Holy Scripture" while Wilson is "a secular humanist"; the "you" believes "that each person's soul is immortal" while Wilson believes "heaven and hell are what we create for ourselves"; the "you" has found his "final truth" while Wilson is "still searching" for his (288). In the third paragraph, however, he shifts to explaining why he is writing the "letter":

> You have the power to help solve a great problem about which I care deeply. I hope you have the same concern. I suggest that we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation. The defense of living nature is of universal value. It doesn't rise from, nor does it promote, any religious or ideological dogma. Rather, it serves without discrimination the interests of all humanity. Pastor, we need your help. The Creation–living nature–is in deep trouble. (289)

Wilson is trying to persuade his imagined audience–a pastor and the larger evangelical community–to partner with the scientific community to help reduce "destructive human activities" that threaten what he calls "living nature," or "the Creation" (289). Wilson establishes common ground with his audience and then calls upon him/them for help. As the essay continues, Wilson explains the trouble the Earth faces both in scientific terms and in a way that laypeople can understand. He explains that "religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world" and that great worldwide benefits would result if the two "could be united on the common ground of biological conservation" (290). Wilson's letter (or essay) provides a nice text for rhetorical analysis and for discussing audience awareness.

"Apocalypse Now" is clearly meant to communicate. It's possible that Wilson wrote for self-discovery here–or likely, at the

very least, used writing to learn in some capacity–but his intention is clearly to communicate with an audience. He does want to communicate with the "larger evangelical community" but also to anyone else who might not feel invested in protection of the environment. Further, he likely wants to communicate with those who agree with his stance, providing a model for them about how they too can argue for religious and scientific camaraderie in environmental stewardship. Wilson's essay is persuasive, rhetorical, and meant to communicate a new way of looking at the subject matter he writes about.

Creative nonfiction writer Louis Menand makes clear that creative nonfiction is not only for the self but for an audience. "Writing is a window," he says. "It opens onto vanished feelings and vanished worlds. Often it is the only window there is, the only access we will ever have to those things. It is more than a mere record, like a photograph, because it is also a sensibility, a point of view, a voice" (xviii). In other words, despite its personal nature, creative nonfiction writing is meant to communicate, meant to be a window for others to view into the world of the writer. The texts can be written for self-discovery and with a distinct voice, but the writing is also meant to be shared, meant to be part of a public discourse.

Social-Epistemic Pedagogy: Social Critique

In creative nonfiction scholarship, ample evidence exists describing how such writing is communicative in nature. However, it's less obvious how creative nonfiction can fulfill the needs of the social-constructionist ideals of social epistemology. But while the connection between the two might not be as obvious, evidence of the connection is still prevalent.

James Berlin, in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, defines social-epistemic rhetoric as "the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions" (77). At first, it might be hard to envision how creative nonfiction such as memoirs and personal essays–seemingly very expressivist types of writing–

would successfully be used to study and critique economic, social, and political conditions.

However, the analytical skill demonstrated by creative nonfiction authors is one of the real benefits of using the genre for first-year composition. Numerous examples of literary journalism–as well as other types of creative nonfiction texts–demonstrate thorough cultural analyses and consequently show astute critical thinking. The genre of creative nonfiction contains numerous examples of writers composing deconstructing critiques–some containing the pronoun "I," some not–which would please social pedagogues with their critical thinking and ability to see through societal constructions.

Further, while the genre of creative nonfiction invites a personal presence from the author, that presence can be manifest in many ways–even in a seemingly objective third-person report. For example, in her essay "On AIDS," Susan Sontag writes a cultural critique of AIDS, examining the principal metaphor used to describe the disease: plague (104). She writes,

> It is usually epidemics that are thought of as plagues. And these mass incidences of illness are understood as inflicted, not just endured. Considering illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness, and an idea opposed by all attention to the ill that deserves the noble name of medicine. Hippocrates, who wrote several treatises on epidemics, specifically ruled out "the wrath of God" as a cause of bubonic plague. But the illnesses interpreted in antiquity as punishments, like the plague in Oedipus, were not thought to be shameful, as leprosy and subsequently syphilis were to be. Diseases, insofar as they acquired meaning, were collective calamities, and judgments on a community. Only injuries or disabilities, not diseases, were thought of as individually merited. (104)

In this passage, Sontag begins to explain the historical use of the word "plague" to suggest punishments upon certain communities.

Despite such a view being opposed by doctors for more than 2,000 years, this perception persists in regards to the use of the word "plague." Sontag never uses the first-person "I" in the essay, rather reporting in a seemingly objective third person. She deconstructs the historical definitions of the word *plague*, and she looks at how society views AIDS compared to other diseases, such as leprosy and syphilis, referred to as plagues and others, such as cancer, that don't have the connotation of plague. "On AIDS" is well-researched and demonstrates the clear, critical thinking of its author. The essay is a critique of society and how language constructs society's views. Sontag picks apart her subject with perceptive insight.

Sontag's essay provides a fine example of what social-epistemic proponents would likely hope first-year composition students would study. And it is a fine example of literary journalism, to be specific, and creative nonfiction, in general. As Kristen Iversen, in *Shadow Boxing*, where "On AIDS" appears, says, "The purpose of literary journalism is to respond to public life in a personal and reflective manner, and to examine how the different spheres of the personal and the public intersect or even clash" (85).

In his introduction to the *Best American Essays 2007*, David Foster Wallace discusses how anyone in modern America can be confused and overwhelmed by what he calls "Total Noise": "the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc." (xiv). Wallace is describing the overwhelming existence of language in our society today, inundating us not only from conversations or books but from ubiquitous media elements. Dogmatic perspectives are so abundant that it's difficult for people to even attempt to think for themselves (xxiii). Wallace says that it's tempting "to retreat to narrow arrogance, pre-formed positions, rigid filters" (xxiii). "The alternative," he says, "is dealing with massive, high-entropy amounts of info and ambiguity and conflict and flux; it's continually discovering new areas of personal ignorance and delusion" (xxiii). Wallace lauds essays that sift

through the "Total Noise" to perceive and describe subjects in fresh, original ways, not simply the acceptance and reiteration of existing information (xxiii). Essays that do this, Wallace says, can be "classically argumentative, or editorial, or personal" (xxiii). "[B]ut," he says,

> what renders them most valuable to me is a special kind of integrity in their handling of fact. An absence of dogmatic cant. Not that service essayists don't have opinions or make arguments. But you never sense, from this year's *Best*, that facts are being specially cherry-picked or arranged in order to advance a pre-set agenda. They are utterly different from the party-line pundits and propagandists who now are in such vogue, for whom writing is not thinking or service but more like the silky courtier's manipulation of an enfeebled king. (xxiii)

Therefore, to Wallace, the genre of creative nonfiction contains numerous other examples of writers composing deconstructing critiques that would please social pedagogues with their critical thinking and ability to see through the societal constructions all around us.

Merging Expressivist and Social-Epistemic Pedagogies

I have used several examples to show how creative nonfiction texts exemplify certain aspects of the expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies. If one considers the expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies as different ends of a spectrum, one could place these essays along that continuum. However, I would like to refer to two more writers, whose writing successfully showcases *all* of the characteristics I've described thus far, not just one or two.

Speaking of the late David Foster Wallace, he, for one, is known for his social critiques. Wallace was asked by *Gourmet* magazine to write about the annual Maine Lobster Festival, and

the result, titled "Consider the Lobster," is far from a straightforward journalistic rendering. In the essay, he deconstructs the social norm of eating, and boiling alive, lobster, asking the question, "Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?" (259). The resulting examination is cynical, biting, humorous, and, without a doubt, demonstrates a high level of analytical skill. "Consider the Lobster"–indeed much of the nonfiction by Wallace–seems like it would be a social constructionist teacher's dream. Wallace makes readers think about the world in ways they usually don't. An essay of this sort, absent of the pronoun "I"–except sometimes in footnotes–might not seem to reveal any expressivist values at all, at least on the surface. However, the essay reveals the clever voice and unmistakable style of the author: long winding sentences, a cynical wit, verbose footnotes, and deep, careful analysis revealing a surprising intellect. His voice is as distinct as any memoirist or personal essayist. With or without the "I," the essay is personal, demonstrates clear critical thinking, and, I would argue, serves as a good representation of writing that would certainly please proponents of the social pedagogy and likely expressivists as well.

Wallace, a contemporary example, is not unique in serving as an exemplary writer who can fulfill the expectations of both pedagogies. For another example, I'll refer to the writer considered–in the words of Philip Lopate–the "patron saint of personal essayists": Michel de Montaigne. Written in France in the 1500s, Montaigne's work predates Shakespeare's plays and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Montaigne, in fact, established the term "essay" as we understand it today. He titled his book *Essays* after the French term *essai*, which means "a try" or "an attempt." "To essay," Lopate says, "is to attempt, to test, to take a run at something without knowing whether you are going to succeed" (xlii). During a twenty-year period from his late thirties until his death, Montaigne wrote the voluminous *Essays* to explore his feelings, his philosophies, and his experiences with numerous subjects: pain, sleep, solitude, drunkenness, etc. Donald M. Frame, the translator for *The Complete Works of Montaigne*,

describes Montaigne as an "acute student of himself" (v). Further, Frame says, while Montaigne is known for his extensive, highly personal, self-exploratory *Essays*, he did not necessarily set out to write this. "Montaigne evidently intended to write but was not sure what he had to say or how to say it," Frame says, adding,

> It took him five or six years of thinking and writing to develop fully the concept of the *Essays* as a self-portrait, as the trials or tests of his judgment and his natural faculties. The earliest chapters, written in 1572-74, are mainly short and relatively impersonal compilations of anecdotes with a rather brief commentary. . . . As he continued, the chapters became longer, looser in structure, more personal, more consistently on subjects of direct concern to himself. (x)

Taken in sum, the collection is a self-portrait, in a sense, and Frame says, "The style of the *Essays* is part of the self-portrait. Free, oral, informal, personal, concrete, luxuriant in images, organic and spontaneous in order, ranging from the epigrammatic to the rambling and associative, it communicates the flavor of the man" (vi). Not only did Montaigne use writing to learn and to discover, he also apparently found his own voice through the process.

During the earlier times of creative nonfiction, at its birth or at least during its developing stages, the genre showcased self-reflection, writing as an act of learning, and critical thinking. Through writing, Montaigne learned what he wanted to say. And, further, he didn't mind displaying to readers that he used writing this way. As Robert Atwan, in his introduction to *The Best American Essays 1986*, says, "Montaigne may have been the first writer to invite the reader to catch him in the act: *Watch me thinking. Watch me writing*" (x).

Moreover, Montaigne serves as an example for social-epistemic writing as well. Montaigne's writing was exploratory, taking on subjects that ranged from trivial to complex, and many of these could be viewed as social critiques. As the word *essai* suggests,

Montaigne attempted to critically analyze numerous subjects. So not only did he write what could be seen as cultural critiques–in a social-epistemic sense–he also wrote as a means of discovery and finding his voice in the act of writing. But the *Essays* is no diary, and he was not writing solely for the sake of the pleasure of it. From the start, he intended the work to have an audience, to serve as communication. Frame states of Montaigne, "Self-sufficient though he was, he had an imperious need to communicate. The *Essays* are his means of communication" (v). Montaigne, Frame says, provides a practical and "introspective study of human nature and human conduct" and thereby creates a "friendly communication with the reader" (v). One could make the same observation about Wallace. Therefore, by looking at Wallace and Montaigne, we can see how these celebrated creative nonfiction writers–one from the sixteenth century and one from the twenty-first–show that values of both the expressivist and social pedagogies can be practiced at the same time.

Conclusion: Moving Beyond First-Year Composition

These examples bring me to an important point I would like to leave you with: the usefulness of the argument I'm making when we consider the importance of writing to students as they leave first-year composition. Professors in other disciplines often criticize first-year composition when they merely believe these are courses in creative or personal writing. And they would be right to do so. In disciplines across campuses, what is valued in writing is often different than what the field of composition might value. Writing Across the Curriculum theory tells us that writing in one academic discipline is different than writing in another. The writing a biology major does is different than the writing a history major does. Writing in business classes is different than writing in sociology classes. Writing is different in journalism versus English. And so on. However, if I believe in this cross-disciplinary difference, one might ask, how can I then argue that creative

nonfiction is a viable alternative to be used in first-year composition?

One relatively obvious answer is Montaigne's "friendly communication." While the conversations in a biology lab report or business memo are different than in a creative nonfiction essay, the principles are the same. Berlin claims that "Public discourse, openly and freely pursued," is a "central commitment" (80) of social-epistemic rhetoric. While not public in the broad sense of the term, communication among members of a discipline is open and public among the members of that discourse. Most of these "conversations" are compelled by and situated within the discourse of the discipline. Nevertheless, they are inquiry-driven within those discourse communities–conversations meant to solve problems, make discoveries, and posit new ideas–and are therefore social-epistemic in nature.

At the same time, the expressivist idea of writing for self-discovery transcends disciplinary boundaries as well in the form of writing to learn. At the heart of expressivism is the idea that writing is a form of discovery, a form of thinking, that writing is not simply thought transcribed into printed form. This idea has been coined into the phrase "writing to learn," which is used in WAC circles as well. From the standpoint of compositionists, brainstorming, freewriting, drafting, and revision are all seen as instruments of writing to learn. These are approaches to writing that help students discover that writing can lead to thinking. And whether or not these activities are relevant in all disciplines to all writers, the *idea* of writing to learn is a part of all disciplines.

Lev Vygotsky describes writing as "the most elaborate form of speech" (242). "In written speech," he states,

> lacking situational and expressive supports, communication must be achieved only through words and their combinations; this requires the speech activity to take complicated forms–hence the use of first drafts. The evolution from the draft to the final copy reflects our mental process. Planning has an important part in written

> speech, even when we do not actually write out a draft. Usually we say to ourselves what we are going to write; this is also a draft, though in thought only. (242-243)

In other words, writing and thinking are so inexorably tied that writing is always an act of thinking, discovering, and learning. Writing is not simply the transcription of thought in the sense that you think then write. Scarcely anyone–whether she's a scientist, historian, or creative writer–has a report, an article, or short story fully formed in her brain and then simply writes it out, word for word as it exists in the mind (with the exception of some rare cases perhaps–but then I argue they would be using Vygotsky's "mental drafts" and still writing to learn). Writers might have an idea of what they intend to say, but they do not have it mapped out word for word precisely as it will exist on the page.

The idea of writing to learn–writing as a part of thinking, as a means of discovery, as a way of making knowledge–is not merely a concept that comprises activities such as brainstorming, journaling, and freewriting. Nor is writing to learn an activity exclusive to creative writers who want to stumble across an undiscovered idea. Writing to learn, in my definition, is the idea that writing and thinking are so integrally linked that to write is virtually impossible to do without learning as one writes.

Whether they're quickly typing news articles on deadline, plugging information into sections of a scientific lab report, or writing a memoir, students will–in some form or some way–be using writing to learn in their futures. Therefore, I argue that using creative nonfiction, a genre that explicitly values writing to learn, can provide important educational insight for students taking first-year composition. Creative nonfiction can serve to bridge the gap between conflicting composition pedagogies, but it can also help bridge the gap between composition and the larger disciplinary community students enter after they leave their first-year composition courses.

This brings me to my final point: the role of the teacher. A course using creative nonfiction specifically to bridge the gap

between these conflicting pedagogies cannot be merely a course about reading and writing creative nonfiction. Then it becomes a creative writing workshop. The teacher must play a role in focusing the lens through which the students see the course materials. It's not enough for students to simply be exposed to creative nonfiction reading and writing assignments; a teacher must use these in her teaching to highlight the goals of the teaching pedagogies: self-discovery, voice, communication, social critique, etc.–above all, critical thinking. As with any class that uses a particular textbook, set of readings, or sequence of assignments, the class format I'm encouraging teachers to consider must be ones that teachers themselves construct to bridge the gap between these conflicting pedagogies. Creative nonfiction, I argue, can be the basis for such classes.

I was a novice teacher in the nascent stages of developing my teaching pedagogy when I chose to use Sarah Vowell's "Shooting Dad" all those years ago. However, I recognize now the importance of not only selecting readings that reinforce my pedagogical goals–as well as crafting assignments that do so–but also in the way material is presented to the students. I can't simply put the essay in front of the students and let the text speak for itself, so to speak. As a teacher, I must facilitate the discussion to help students to understand the way the essay–and any writing assignment that is linked to it–helps them grow as writers in the pedagogical directions I've been discussing.

The way creative nonfiction can accomplish the goals of expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies can be seen in the texts of Montaigne and Wallace, but also in Vowell's "Shooting Dad." While I selected it rather arbitrarily years ago, I continue to view it as an essay that illustrates how autobiographical writing can be used to understand and learn about one's self, but also about using autobiographical writing to understand and learn about the world one lives in. The essay clearly demonstrates Vowell's distinct voice in writing, but the essay also shows Vowell critiquing culture and the world she lives in. Further, the writing is not meant as a narcissistic autobiography where Vowell is

writing only for herself–the essay is meant to be shared with readers so that they can learn from her writing and her life. Vowell's essay accomplishes all of the expectations of the expressivist and social-epistemic pedagogies that I've been describing. Such examples of professionally written creative nonfiction that showcase the values of the expressivist and social epistemologies are practically limitless.

Therefore, as composition teachers, we can use creative nonfiction reading and writing assignments to engage our students and help them develop in ways that satisfy both pedagogies. We can erase the myth of antithesis between these pedagogies. Instead of writing for the self *versus* writing for others, think of writing for the self *and* writing for others. Instead of writing as a means of self-discovery *versus* writing to critique society and the language of others, think of writing as a means of self-discovery *and* writing to critique society and the language of others. Instead of personal *versus* public writing, we can think of composition as personal *and* public.

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