Whose “I” am I? : Negotiating Constructed Identity in First Year Writers

I am fortunate to teach at a University whose student body comes from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. From the pueblos, to small mining towns, to ranches, and even the big, bad city of Albuquerque itself. Many of them are first year college students who bring strong cultural ties to their communities with them. In working with the Writing Across Communities initiative, I began to ask my students to consider the discourse communities they come from—sports teams, churches, family, friends, etc—and those they wish to enter, academia and subsequently a professional field. However, I kept running across a problem in giving these assignments. Every time I asked students to write about themselves and about their lives outside of the academy, I found myself trapped in the arguments against expressive student-centered writing, specifically the problem of author subjectivity.

Expressive writing can best be described as personal writing, often taking an autobiographical, narrative form in which the writer attempts to reflect on an event, usually associated with in-class reading about the event. In my classes we read essays about Americans trying to find their way in new communities such as James Baldwin’s “The Discovery of What it Means to Be American” and Enrique Lopez’s “Back to Bachimba.” I would then ask my students to juxtapose these essays against their own personal journeys into academia. I wanted them to tease out any resistance, either internal or external, they were facing and seek ways to empower themselves to overcome it. However, I knew that this type of expressive writing was frowned upon by some in composition studies for the very reason of the problem of author subjectivity. If I, as a
new teaching assistant, was going to continue with this quasi-Romantic pedagogical ideal, I would need to tackle the problem of subjectivity.

Subjectivity has led some composition theorists such as Susan Miller, Lester Faigley, David Bartholomae, and Victor Vitanza to address the “problem of the subject.” Those opposed to expressivism believed that, because knowledge is socially constructed, students should write from a perspective informed by this constructed knowledge, not from some amorphous self unable to construct knowledge in its limited perception. Instead of personal narratives, students should be learning to write in the forms of the academy or the professions, the discourse communities they hoped to join. Many who opposed expressivism seemed to base their objections on the postmodern ideal that since an author’s subjectivity creates such a problem, the solution is to claim the author is dead; there is only the text, and authorial intent is negligible.

Expressive writing privileges the author and is based in many ways on Romantic notions of the individual, to include the notion that individual knowledge is formed within the writer free from any outside influence. One problem plaguing this ideal is the socially-constructed nature of knowledge. This prevents the individual from being a pure, unadulterated source of knowledge, because the author is subjected to the forces that make up her environment. For critics of personal, expressive writing, what the author provides, seemingly, cannot be honest or genuine because the knowledge leading to any rationalization or driving any intention is framed by the author’s subjugation by controlling powers in her environment.

Much of the twentieth century thinking regarding subjectivity was based on the work of Michael Foucault. Foucault’s notion of subjectivity was grounded in Marxist
concerns with power differentials in society, always pointing out the intricate webs in place to keep the elite in control of the masses. Therefore, any authorial attempt at self empowerment was subconsciously informed and guided by adherence to the dominant powers that be. Subjectivity, thus, came to be a clarion call for scholars intent on attaining the truth of the world around them. No longer could serious scholars advocate the Emersonian ideal of the author in the composition classroom without being accused of selling students short by not preparing them to face the machinations of the socially-constructed world. However, Foucault wasn’t the last philosopher to puzzle over subjectivity. An often overlooked contemporary of Foucault’s has provided a revitalization to the subjectivity debate.

Jean Merleau-Ponty does not argue against Foucault’s notion of subjectivity. Indeed, just as Foucault, “Merleau-Ponty argues against a pure subject, whether it be a transcendental ego, or a soul within the body, or the mind” (Van Hooft 33). However, Merleau-Ponty asked the question when is a person subjected by a socially-constructed environment and what, if any, recourse does the person aware of his subjectivity have. Merleau-Ponty believes that “the subject is situated in a world and discovers himself as already so situated as a precondition for the life of consciousness as it is experienced” (Van Hooft 33). Thus, at the moment of consciousness, any individual is aware that she is part of an environment; indeed, awareness of this environment is a requisite for consciousness. What is interesting about Merleau-Ponty’s notion of subjectivity is that it is not an end, a reason to cease seeking individual empowerment. Instead, it is a jumping off point, a first step individuals must take before they can begin interacting with, and thereby influencing, their socially-constructed environment.
Merleau-Ponty’s work on subjectivity holds implications for both theories of epistemology and the rhetorical canon of invention. Instead of the Romantic notion of knowledge being constructed from an individual, rational mind, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Foucault that knowledge is socially constructed. However, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of consciousness is woven across the temporal spaces of the pre-objective and the objective (Van Hooft 36). Whereas Foucault would argue that the best a person could hope for was an awareness of her subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty posits this awareness as a subconscious state, the beginning of knowledge making. Armed with this awareness of subjectivity, the subject then understands experience and gains knowledge within the matrix of power structures—learning within the web of power as opposed to the postmodern ideal of learning in spite of the web of power. Merleau-Ponty’s view of subjectivity is described as “not only presence-to-self, but also ‘outrunning’ of self by the self. What this means is that subjectivity reaches back into its past [the pre-objective consciousness] and anticipates its projected future in the meaning that it gives to its present [the objective consciousness]” (Van Hooft 36). This idea has implications for composition studies because students can begin to not only become aware of subjectivity, but can embrace or deny it, thus gaining empowerment.

None of us exists in a vacuum, nor do we simply have one identity. Every one of us, from the moment of consciousness, is faced with a variety of socially-constructed identities: son, brother, Baptist, Midwesterner, grad student, etc. It is no different when a student enters college; she is adding another identity to her milieu, not abandoning old for new or lesser for better. Thus, the old dichotomies of individual vs. community, academic vs. personal, inner vs. outer do not seem to work any more as a means of
thinking about the teaching of writing. They fail to take into account the socially constituted nature of our world, how each individual acts on and reconstitutes the web of knowledge and meaning. Nor do they allow us to see subjectivity as anything more than a product of these troubling binaries, as opposed to seeing that situated does not mean subjugated.

It no longer seems enough to be able to say “the author is subjected by power influences; therefore, he can’t be trusted.” If we adopt Merleau-Ponty’s theory that, while subjectivity exists, it is not a point of stasis but a foregrounding for understanding our place in a socially-constructed ecology, we can begin to rethink the validity of the personal voice both in literature and in academic writing.

Works Cited
