

THE ROLE OF EXPRESSIVE DISCOURSE IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING: A REVIEW OF CURRENT COMPOSITION TEXTS*

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In recent years the term *expressive discourse* has insinuated itself into the jargon of our discipline. It is one of those terms that we all use but that no one is quite sure how to define. For example, a recent computer search of ERIC reflects a typical assortment of applications for the terms *expressive discourse* and *expressive writing*, both of which were used as descriptors for the search. In the fifty-six entries listed for 1974 to 1984, poetry, journal writing, personal narratives, autobiographies, and freewriting were all referred to as expressive writing. Additionally, I have seen the term used to refer to all types of literary discourse, to creative writing, to mystical and religious writings, and to any writing that is emotional or subjective. In brief, our perception of expressive discourse is, at best, vague and, at worst, distorted.

Although a variety of sources, both historical and modern, has contributed to our perception of expressive discourse, three theories have been major influences. The first of these is the work of Elbow, Macrorie, and Kelly. Primarily pedagogists rather than theorists, these writers were largely responsible for the approach to writing instruction that was adopted by large numbers of composition teachers in the 1960s — an approach that reacted against the traditional assumption that academic writing must be formal, conventional, and above all, correct. Elbow, Macrorie, and Kelly advocated loosely structured, subjective writing with a strong personal voice and suggested freewriting and journals as productive ways of leading students to “express” themselves freely. They did not, however, use the term *expressive* or suggest that the type of writing they advocated for students constituted a category of discourse.

A second major influence on our perception of expressive discourse is the work of Kinneavy, who was the first to identify expressive writing as a category of discourse — one that is distinguishable from other types of writing primarily because it focuses on the encoder, or writer (398). Kinneavy maintains that the writer may be a group rather than an individual; he, therefore, includes in his examples of expressive discourse the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Communist Manifesto* as well as prayers and curses.

The third major influence on our perception of expressive discourse is the work of Britton, who, like Kinneavy, uses the term to identify a type of writing that he distinguishes from other discourse. However, Britton adds another dimension to expressive writing by not only presenting it as a category of discourse but also suggesting that it is the impetus for all discourse. He perceives what he calls the “expressive function” as the matrix from which a writer moves in one of two opposite directions — either toward transactional writing or toward poetic writing. In other words, Britton sees expressive writing as “a mode of learning” — a means of exploring and discovering — as well as a category of discourse (11).

At present, then, our perception of expressive writing — both its definition and its function — is largely informed by these three major influences. We find, accordingly, that the term is

used, rather loosely and imprecisely, to refer to writing that expresses the feelings and experiences of the writer, to exploratory writing such as freewriting and journals, to a stage in the development of writing abilities, and even to the impulse or instinct toward expression that precedes all discourse.

Any attempt to determine the role of expressive discourse in the teaching of writing must be informed by an awareness of the various influences that have shaped it. But, like Galatea and Frankenstein, expressive discourse has assumed a life of its own. In an effort to understand this new identity, I reviewed current composition texts to ascertain how the authors of these texts perceive expressive discourse and how they use it in instructing students. It is the purpose of this article to report on my research.

I reviewed a total of 130 composition texts — both developmental and regular freshman level. Defining composition texts as those books that provide substantive instruction in writing, I excluded those that are primarily readers or workbooks. I also limited my sample to those texts that were published since 1980; however, many of the texts were later editions of books that had first been published prior to 1980. All major publishing companies were represented among the books I reviewed. Although a few major texts may have inadvertently been omitted, the books I reviewed constitute a representative and fairly comprehensive sampling of the composition texts currently available on the market and used in the freshman composition classroom.

My review was guided by the following questions:

- 1) How many texts include assignments or instruction related to expressive writing?
- 2) How many present expressive writing as a category of discourse?
- 3) How do the authors define or describe expressive writing?
- 4) What, if any, theoretical influences can be identified?
- 5) At what point in the sequence of instruction is expressive discourse introduced?
- 6) Is expressive writing included more often in developmental texts than in regular freshman texts?

In general, I discovered that the terms *expressive discourse* and *expressive writing* are not widely used in current writing texts. Of the 130 texts I reviewed, only 37 included a type of writing that could be identified with any certainty as expressive discourse. And only 16 of these 37 used the term *expressive*. Other terms that were used included *personal writing*, *self prose*, *private writing*, *inner-directed writing*, *introspective writing*, *meditative writing*, *personal narrative*, and *reflective/exploratory writing*.

Thus, 93 of the texts that I reviewed did not include a category of discourse that could be identified as expressive. Many of these, however, included writing assignments or instruction that might be subsumed under the vague classification of expressive

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discourse. For example, many of them included prewriting assignments, especially freewriting and journals, that could be considered expressive writing. Many also encouraged personal narratives or descriptions as initial writing assignments. But the authors of these texts not only did not use the term *expressive* but also did not identify these assignments as a distinct category of discourse.

Of the 16 texts that used the term *expressive*, it is interesting to note that only 9 included instruction or assignments in this type of writing; the remaining 7 merely discussed the concept of expressive discourse in order to distinguish it from other types of discourse. Most of these authors identified it as an aim of discourse but not one of the aims with which they were primarily concerned. The discussion of expressive discourse merely served as a point of departure — a way of introducing the other categories, most notably informative and persuasive, which (it was implied) are, if not more important, at least more useful in the real world.

Of interest also is the fact that 44 percent of the 16 books that used the term *expressive* were written by authors who are also noted theorists and researchers (for example, Kinneavy, D'Angelo, Lauer, Irmscher, Maimon, Comprone, Scholes, etc.). In contrast, fewer than 10 percent of the authors of the remaining 114 texts were authors who are recognized for theory and research as well as pedagogy.

These findings lend themselves to several interpretations. First, we might assume that expressive discourse is still not considered academically respectable by many textbook writers. Or we might assume the opposite — that only the most academically respectable, the theorists and researchers, are familiar with the concept of expressive writing as a category of discourse. However, still another interpretation is possible, one that occurs to me because of my own experience. I discovered several years ago when I was writing a developmental text that I was using the term *expressive* to refer to a wide spectrum of discourse — prewriting, writing based upon personal experiences, narration, description, etc. At the time I had not researched the subject and saw no connection between these applications. I was, of course, familiar with Kinneavy's aims of discourse, but I knew that I was not using the term strictly in accordance with his theory. Not wanting to commit an academic indiscretion, I simply decided to avoid the term completely. However, I did not alter the instruction or assignments that I had referred to as expressive. I merely called them something else. I suspect that many textbook authors are, like me, avoiding the term because of the confusion that exists as to its definition and function.

This confusion is further reflected in the various theoretical influences that are identifiable in the texts that I reviewed. When a single influence could be determined, it was most often, not surprisingly, Kinneavy's. For example, eight of the sixteen texts that use the term *expressive* clearly reflect Kinneavy's influence. However, even those authors who are obviously influenced by Kinneavy do not necessarily define expressive writing exactly as he does nor cite the same examples as he gives. Other influences that can be identified include, most notably and predictably, Elbow's, Macrorie's, and Kelly's and Britton's. However, many of the authors seem to have been influenced by several theories and/or to have modified existing theories.

Because the texts reflect this variety of influences, it is not surprising that they include a variety of definitions for expressive discourse. In fact, no two definitions are the same. However, the following four features appear repeatedly in the definitions given:

1) *Focuses on the writer.* This definition, which clearly reflects Kinneavy's influence, is the most prevalent. In fact, each of the sixteen texts that use the term *expressive* emphasizes the writer (or self) in defining or describing this type of discourse. For example, Blackmon and Dewsnap explain the writer's purpose in producing expressive discourse as putting "some of himself or herself into words" (14); Bridges and Lunsford describe expressive discourse as "inherently subjective" (108); and Irmscher defines it as "highly personalized" writing "that concerns an individual's feelings, preoccupations, moods, or opinions" (76-78). If there exists any consensus as to what constitutes expressive discourse, it is that it is writing that focuses on the writer and his feelings and experiences.

To this extent, then, Kinneavy's influence appears significant. However, the authors do not always, or even usually, interpret this feature as Kinneavy does. For example, none of the texts, other than the one Kinneavy co-authored, include his theory that expressive writing can be written by a group as well as by an individual. Moreover, it is difficult in many instances to distinguish between Kinneavy's influence and that of Elbow, Macrorie, and Kelly, who also emphasized the writer and encouraged the revelation of self.

2) *Personal or private.* These terms are used extensively by authors not only to define expressive discourse but also as a synonym for it. In fact, the word *personal* was used far more often than was *expressive* to designate this type of writing. Both *personal* and *private* imply that the emphasis is on the writer and also that the audience for the discourse may be the writer herself or himself. Also implicit in these terms, therefore, is the dual assumption that the writer does not intend that anyone should ever read what has been written (as in a journal or a diary) or that the writer does not intend that anyone should read what has been written because it has not been "finished" (as in a prewriting exercise or a rough draft). Thus, in many ways, the term *personal* seems to reflect more accurately than does the term *expressive* the wide spectrum of discourse that is currently considered expressive.

3) *Based on experience.* A number of the texts also emphasized that expressive writing is based on the writer's own experiences. For example, Lauer, Montague, Lunsford, and Emig in *Four Worlds of Writing* equate expressive discourse with writing that relates personal experiences (8-9). The distinction between writing that is based on personal experience and writing that is merely personal or private is, of course, a fine one. However, a piece of discourse should be based on a person's own experience and still not be considered personal or private. In fact, experience-based writing may appear in any type of discourse. Just as earlier in this article I related my own experience with the term *expressive* when I wrote a composition text, a writer of even the most formal prose may include anecdotes based on personal experience.

4) *Conveys writer's emotions or feelings.* Many of the authors whose books I reviewed included this feature in their description of expressive discourse. For example, D'Angelo defines expressive discourse as "writing that expresses strong feelings and emotions" (13). This idea that expressive discourse is an outpouring of a writer's emotions, especially strong emotions, is not new. It is, in fact, one of the vestiges of the term's long history. Even though the three theories discussed in the introduction to this article are largely responsible for our current perceptions of the term, other, much older, influences are also present. In the past, the term *expressive* was frequently applied to literary discourse, especially to that which expressed strong emotion and most

especially to poetry. It has also been used traditionally by those in disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and linguistics to refer to the expression of emotions or feelings. It is not surprising, therefore, that the term is frequently defined in this way by composition theorists and textbook authors.

Since many of the definitions given for expressive discourse tend to be vague if not circular ("the purpose of expressive writing is expression," Lewis and Forte 7), the examples cited by the authors often prove more useful in determining exactly what they include in the category. The examples given are also instructive in that they reflect even more vividly than do the definitions the variety of discourse subsumed under the category. In the books I examined the following examples of expressive writing were cited: journals, diaries, letters, graffiti, notes, narration, description, poetry, personal essays, autobiographies, newspaper and magazine columns, transcribed conversations, freewriting, slogans, prayers, and imaginative writing. And a few authors either stated or implied that, in one sense of the word, *all* writing is expressive.

It is, obviously, difficult to conceive of such varied examples as belonging to a single category of discourse. A category that encompasses all of the examples listed above seems so broad as to be almost meaningless. Those who have attempted to define expressive discourse, most notably Kinneavy and Britton, have undoubtedly influenced our perception of expressive discourse but have also contributed to our confusion, for neither of them provides us with the distinguishing features that would enable us to delineate precisely its boundaries. One of the most noticeable omissions is their failure to address specifically the role of audience in the production of expressive discourse.

Kinneavy's entire theory of discourse suggests that audience is a significant factor only if the writer's aim is persuasive, in which case the focus is on the reader. In his discussion of expressive discourse, he avoids the issue entirely. We may, however, assume from the examples that he provides that the audience for expressive discourse may be either the writer himself or herself or that it may be a reader. For instance, some of his examples, such as diaries, prayers, and cursing, suggest that the audience is the self. However, most of his examples, such as utopias, manifestos, gripe sessions, conversations, and suicide notes, suggest an audience other than self. In an article published in 1980 in which Kinneavy discusses his earlier work, *A Theory of Discourse*, he states that "the audience differs considerably from function to function" and cites specific page references for his discussions of the scientific, informative, and persuasive audiences (18). He does not, however, make any reference to an audience for expressive discourse.

Britton, on the other hand, considers the issue of audience in the production of expressive writing but includes not only the writer himself or herself but also a "limited" public audience that shares the writer's values and assumptions and an "unlimited" public audience to whom the writer wishes to reveal himself or herself (89-90). Thus, he includes almost any audience as a possibility.

The texts that I reviewed reflect this ambiguity about the role of audience. For example, Bridges and Lunsford (*Writing: Discovering Form and Meaning*) and Lewis and Forte (*Discovering Process: Meaning and Form in Reading and Writing*) assume that expressive writing is intended for a reader. Others, such as Comprone (*From Experience to Expression*) emphasize that expressive discourse is "writing for yourself" (414). Still others, most notably Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate (*Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition*), seem to assume that expressive discourse can be

addressed to the self or to a general audience. An interesting, and I think useful, distinction is made by Scholes and Comley (*The Practice of Writing*). They distinguish between *expression*, which they describe as "writing for ourselves" and *reflection*, which is "writing about ourselves" (9).

I found far greater consensus among the textbooks I reviewed as to the function of expressive discourse than I did its definition. Expressive writing is almost always discussed at the beginning of a text, if not in the first lesson then at least in the first few lessons or the first unit. And it is generally perceived as a means of developing a student's writing skill and confidence so that he or she can then proceed to other types of discourse. Ironically, however, in spite of this fairly pervasive theory that expressive discourse is a type of writing that is appropriate for inexperienced, or developmental, writers, only one (Lorch's *Basic Writing: A Practical Approach*) of the 37 texts that included instruction in expressive discourse is intended primarily for basic writing students.

In addition, although most authors agree that experience in writing expressive discourse is appropriate early in the sequence of instruction, the function that it serves is not always perceived in the same way. The idea that the production of expressive discourse is an essential stage in a writer's development is often confused with the idea that it is a useful stage (prewriting) in the production of any piece of discourse. Although both concepts encourage the use of expressive discourse, two different strategies are involved. A prewriting strategy (such as freewriting or brainstorming) is used by a writer to explore an idea or subject in order to initiate more successfully the writing process. On the other hand, using expressive discourse (such as personal narratives or journals) to develop a writer's skill and experience is a different strategy. A writer may use freewriting to initiate any type of writing task. Although the freewriting itself may be described as expressive, the final product may be something quite different. If, on the other hand, a student is asked to produce a piece of expressive writing such as a personal essay, the final text will itself be expressive.

Our failure to make these types of distinctions has thus far characterized our use of the term *expressive*. As a result, the function of expressive discourse in the teaching of writing is not entirely clear. Because the term has not been satisfactorily defined, it is very difficult to determine its role in teaching. However, my research suggests that the types of writing currently categorized as expressive serve not one but at least three different functions.

First, some types of expressive writing serve a heuristic function, helping students explore a subject or an idea. For example, freewriting and brainstorming serve this function. In Kinneavy's theory, exploratory writing is subsumed under reference discourse (*Theory of Discourse* 96-106), but most theorists and pedagogists would, I believe, consider the writing students produce when they are exploring an idea as expressive discourse.

Second, the writing for self that students are frequently asked to do—usually in the form of journal writing—is for the purpose of giving the student additional writing experience. This type of writing is deemed especially valuable in developing an inexperienced writer's fluency because he or she does not have to be concerned about a reader's reaction. Even though journals are frequently read and even evaluated in some way by an instructor, the students are usually encouraged to think of journals as writing that is not intended for an audience. There is, of course, a very good possibility that writing for self will also serve an exploratory function. But in most instances the primary goal for

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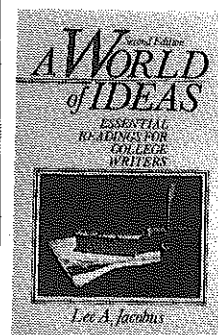
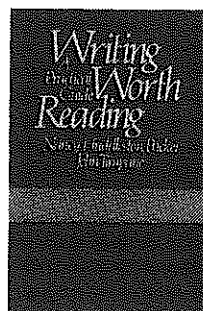
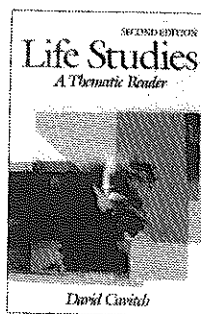
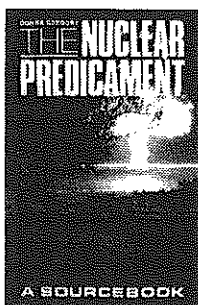
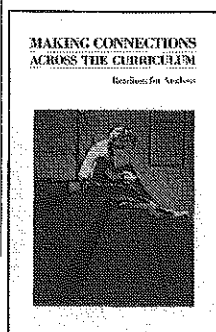
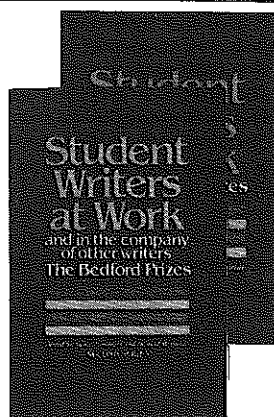
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this type of assignment is to give the student additional writing experiences in the context of an assignment that is non-threatening.

Third, personal or experience-based discourse, which is currently categorized by many theorists and textbook writers as expressive, is frequently used as the first few assignments in a writing course. The theory seems to be that students are more comfortable with this type of writing than they are with informative or persuasive discourse and that it makes fewer demands on them that they may be unprepared to meet without additional experience and instruction in writing. Common sense supports this theory, but it has not been tested adequately. At present, however, the assumption is that essays based upon personal opinion and experiences are easier to write than are those in which the students must use information as well as personal experience to support and develop a thesis.

Clearly, our perception of expressive discourse and its function is vague. The question we must address is whether our perception is vague because we have thus far not adequately defined this category of discourse or whether the category is, in fact, too inclusive to be useful. Do we need a single category to encompass the various types of writing currently classified as expressive? Or would our purposes be better served by classifying them individually or in some other way?

If we cannot satisfactorily define expressive discourse or specifically identify its distinguishing characteristics, then we should perhaps question whether, in fact, such a category of discourse actually exists. My research, including the review of writing texts reported in this article, suggests that the types of writing currently subsumed under the term *expressive* might be viewed more accurately and usefully as several different types of writing rather than as one inclusive category.

I do not think we gain either convenience or academic respectability by slavishly adhering to taxonomies of discourse that do not accurately reflect the types of writing that we are classifying. To be sure, taxonomies are convenient and at times even essential, especially for research purposes. And certainly Kinneavy's aims of discourse and Britton's function categories have provided us with new and useful ways of classifying and, more importantly, perceiving discourse. Furthermore, their emphasis on "expressive writing," like that of Elbow, Macrorie, and Kelly before them, has provided a healthy balance to the academic and literary discourse that once dominated the teaching of writing. But, having only recently freed ourselves of the artificial strictures imposed on us for years by our blind acceptance of the traditional modes of discourse, we do not want to accept unquestioningly categories derived from other systems of classification if such categories are, if not inaccurate, at best vaguely defined and too inclusive to be useful.

The various types of writing that are classified at present as expressive discourse will, I believe, continue to play an important role in the teaching of writing and will be increasingly evident in future textbooks. And the problems that now exist may well be exacerbated as the term becomes even more commonly used. We need to determine, therefore, if the convenience of having an inclusive term such as *expressive* to apply to various types of discourse outweighs the need to define precisely the types of writing to which we are applying the term and, more importantly, their role in the teaching of writing.

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