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Review Essay  

WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA:  
THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS  
OF TEACHING WRITING  

Anderson, Charles M., and Marian M. MacCurdy, eds.  


The books under review here are engaged in a double move to launch a long overdue study of pathos in composition studies and to (re)insert the concept of agency into discussions about student writing. Whereas postmodern and political discourses in the field have frequently de-emphasized agency in order to analyze how power shapes conceptions of identity and culture, Writing and Healing and Bodily Discourses construct agency as a central concept for writing classrooms. In a recent essay, John Trimbur explains that agency is the way people “articulate . . . their desires, needs, and projects, giving voice to their lived experience as they join their productive labors to the institutions and social structures they live within” (287). This dual personal and social function of agency is at the heart of both books as they foreground connections between student writing about trauma and the social contexts in which trauma happens and is understood. Both assume that writing is a form of action that has personal and social consequences: personal because writing enables students to reflect on and revise their own narratives about loss and pain; social because  

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writing about trauma involves a reeducation of emotion, beginning from the personal and then moving outward to critique systems such as family and education, which engender responses to trauma that emphasize one’s powerlessness. Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of these books is their admonition that however pervasive charges against personal writing may be, the fact remains that students have and will continue to write personal narratives about trauma whether we ask them to or not. Thus, teachers need to have a repertoire of skills for responding to such writing and an approach to pedagogical theory that takes this reality into account. In addition, both books suggest very promising possibilities for further studies of how pathos might inflect our understandings of writing, teaching, administration, and professional life.

The journey from pain to healing interests editors Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy. They conceive writing as an instrument of healing, one that can be taught by university writing teachers and community members. Themes that recur throughout the volume circulate around practices of recovery and the dual connotations assigned to this term. First, the term refers to re-surfacing “the personal” in writing studies discourse. I was grateful that the editors did not rehearse the worn out positions occupied by so-called expressivists and constructionists, positions that have been reduced so egregiously that they have long outgrown their capacity to advance our collective thinking about writing instruction. Instead, Anderson and MacCurdy argue convincingly that in the heat of our professional debates about personal writing, we have failed to recognize that, like it or not, “stories about painful, traumatic events in the lives of students do appear in our classrooms, they have always appeared, and they will continue to appear, not because we want or don’t want them to, but because writing is quite simply the medium in which, for many people, the deepest, most effective, and most profound healing can take place” (8-9). Thus, the editors are careful to explain what they are not arguing: that all teachers should solicit traumatic stories from students, that all writing classrooms should focus on trauma. Given the sometimes inevitable and often unsolicited connections between personal and private that fuel student writing, the editors argue that teachers must consider how to respond appropriately to students who write about trauma. That is, rather than rejecting out of hand, “losing sight of the writing as writing,” or appropriating student texts” as our own, Anderson and MacCurdy hope their volume can offer ways of responding to healing narratives “as writing professionals, writers, and human beings” (9).
The second connotation of recovery is more closely aligned with the therapeutic process of working through pain and excavating grief for the purpose of gaining control over a painful past. The editors claim that, by working with students as they compose traumatic life stories, teachers "demonstrate that the academy is not a place of alienation, an 'Other' to 'the real world,' or an ivory tower. We transform it into a locus of connection where the hard, personal, and social work of understanding the lived realities of experience can happen. Out of this transformation, we believe, may come human agents capable of generating real and lasting social action" (8). The goal of personal writing here is to produce both personal and social transformation—a goal that aims to revive our field's relation to personal writing by conceiving it as academically rigorous and socially relevant, a goal that is met unevenly throughout Writing and Healing.

The opening section of the book, "Finding Our Way In," addresses how teachers and theorists have experienced and practiced writing and healing. Anne Ruggles Gere eloquently addresses the complex connections between personal and professional identity in "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" One of the most interesting aspects of this piece for composition scholars is Gere's criticism of personal writing that uses self-disclosure to actually obscure experience by allowing the singular "I" to dominate and overshadow the contexts that compose experience. She is critical of teachers who advocate a brand of personal writing based largely on self-disclosure without a working through of the different voices that shape one's experience. Using writing to "work through" experience is also central to Charles Anderson's essay, which includes two student essays; one deals with the death of an absent, alcoholic father, and the other with family trauma and drug abuse. Anderson uses Lacan's concept of suture, "a term denoting the process by which we, as viewers of a given scene or as participants in a particular discourse, move toward and are fastened into the subject position" (60). This process gives our lives meaning and coherence, but also has the potential to pacify and alienate us. The student essays are examples of how stories present opportunities "to name a self not broken by discourse, but immersed in it, in charge by it, empowered by it" (62). Writing through loss and trauma, as Anderson argues, is for these two authors a symbolic process in which both situate themselves as agents in their own discourse, rather than as objects acted upon by outside forces they cannot control.

Section two, "Traditions and Extensions," establishes a theoretical
and historical context for writing and healing. T. R. Johnson, in “Writing as Healing and the Rhetorical Tradition,” offers a provocative, carefully crafted rereading of connections between pre-classical, expressivist, and postmodern conceptions of self and truth. These connections, he argues, provide a rich source for a view of writing that “helps us to recover the strength to awaken to the flux and flow, the multiplicity of the world” (109). “A Strange Unaccountable Something” by Michelle Payne (the author of Bodily Discourses) works nicely after Johnson’s essay. She also situates writing about trauma within a postmodern framework as she argues that students who are sexually abused “are always already postmodern subjects, always already decentered, their identities constructed from the violence of this trauma” (151). Thus, she challenges smug responses to personal writing that fail to appreciate how it may be used to forge critiques of “the social and institutional contexts within which [students] live their lives” (121).

Unlike Payne, who envisions cultural critique as a tangible goal of personal writing, Marian MacCurdy, in “From Trauma to Writing,” focuses on the therapeutic benefits of personal writing. Specifically, she uses personal essay writing as a way for students to re-experience and then narrate sensory details associated with trauma in order to facilitate recovery. MacCurdy suggests that by resurfacing buried memories of trauma, students can produce “writing which is alive with sensory description” (167). In describing the methods she uses to teach students how to write personal essays, she especially emphasizes techniques that encourage students to tap into the sharp imagery and sensory details that lie inside their memories. This attention to detail, she writes, “can move them beyond the clichés and into the uniqueness of their moments, beyond the comments about an experience to the experience itself” (173). Working out of writing studies as well as trauma theory and studies of brain biology, MacCurdy provides a fascinating description of the sensory nature of traumatic memories and of the connections between brain hemispheres and emotion. The biological nature of emotion is also central to Alice Brand’s “Healing and the Brain” in which she offers a detailed account of how language, cognition, and emotion merge in the brain. Drawing on research in brain biology, Brand presents a lucid and absorbing description of how our brain processes emotion, supplementing cognitivist accounts of biology that largely subordinate emotion to intellect. Both essays implicitly argue for the relevance of cognitive-based studies to understandings of writing and emotion, a position that works at the intersection of rational and emotional.
discourses. The bridging of these discourses is further emphasized by the following essay, “Pathography and Enabling Myths,” by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins. Pathographies, autobiographies, and biographies about illness, “serve a healing function because they interpret experience rather than record it” (229). As she complicates notions of authentic experience and narration, Hawkins focuses on cultural myths that underly pathographies, myths shaped by culture and time period as well as by ideological constructs and social institutions. Taken together, the essays in this section create a rich dialogue between biological and social studies of writing and emotion.

Moving to the classroom, section three of Writing and Healing includes three essays that discuss specific pedagogical approaches to teaching personal narratives about trauma. A fourth essay by Regina Paxton Foehr examines teaching assistants’ fears and finds that, by reframing these fears as values, we can productively address what lies behind them. This essay could provide a provocative basis from which to generate discussions about TA authority, identity, and anxiety. The remaining essays in this section are among the most troubling in the volume. Guy Allen describes how he inherits a very dry writing course from his dean in which the students read and write about selections from the Norton Reader. In an attempt to make the course relevant to students’ lives, Allen assigns personal essay writing, which produces enthusiastic and engaged student writing, some of which he includes here. What is perplexing about Allen’s essay is its total disengagement from composition scholarship, particularly the contentious history of expressivism. This is made strangely visible when Allen describes his unstructured free association writing exercise—“sit down every day and write about anything as fast as you can for twenty minutes” (262)—without any reference to freewriting and its proponents. Like Allen, Jeffrey Berman features student writing prominently in his “Writing About Suicide.” In fact, the essay is co-authored by Berman’s student, Jonathan Schiff, whose writing from Berman’s “Literary Suicide” course forms the basis of the essay. Focused on twentieth-century writers who have committed suicide, the course circulates around the students’ unsigned weekly diary entries. When given permission by his students, Berman reads these entries aloud to the class—never discussed in class, they serve a dialogic purpose as students comment on one another’s entries in their own diaries. Berman explains that when teachers ask their students to write about personal matters, they “need to be sensitive to those who may be at risk” and may have to make referrals (308). This
brief mention of the teacher’s role raises some serious questions about
the ethics of making student disclosure the primary content of a literature
course, blurring distinctions between psychotherapy and teaching.
Berman seems to encourage this blurring when he states that despite the
differences between them, “both the ‘talking cure’ and the ‘writing cure’
courage people to express their problems, find constructive solutions
to them, and thus achieve control over their lives” (308). As the essay
proceeds, it becomes clear that personal disclosure drives the course
rather than the literature they are studying (it seems that committing
suicide is the most notable accomplishment of the selected authors). The
usefulness of his approach for the study of literature gets one very short
paragraph near the end of the essay, suggesting that the readings function
as a vehicle for students “to find the key to unlock their own family
secrets” (311). The troubling lack of sustained discussion about the
teacher’s role in such a classroom is compounded by the next essay,
Jerome Bump’s “Teaching Emotional Literacy.” Bump explains how he
retooled a first-year honors course to focus on writing and emotion,
subsequently earning no less than three prestigious teaching awards for
his achievements. Things go sour when his administrators, who worry
that Bump is assuming the role of psychiatrist in his classrooms, pull one
of his courses from the registration system. The remainder of the essay
provides justifications for his course and refutations of the curriculum
committee’s concerns about its appropriateness. I was disappointed that
Bump did not use the committee’s charges as a jumping-off point for
theorizing relations between personal writing and the academy,
reflexively examining some of what the committee identified as
troubling about his teaching, or challenging the grounds upon which the
committee’s charges are based.

The final section of Writing and Healing takes us from the
classroom to the community. The three essays here consider the relation
between writing and healing in community-based contexts—a public
project focused on violence against women, AIDS writing groups, and a
writing group for low-income Hispanic women. Each essay implicitly
forges connections between academic and community writing projects
while also expanding the connotations of writing as healing; more
specifically, the public dimension of each project convincingly shows us
how healing is both individually and communally experienced. Laura
Julier says as much in “Voices from the Line,” a study of the Clothesline
Project—a public display of anonymously created shirts strung on a
clothesline, all bearing witness to victims and survivors of violence.
against women. Speaking to the personal and social forms of healing solicited by this project, Julié writes, “[A]t each display, women are invited to add shirts to the line, and thus the Clothesline Project is both text and event, a witness to healing and a means of healing, a private act and a work of social activism” (360).

Like Writing and Healing, Bodily Discourses: When Students Write About Abuse and Eating Disorders seeks to invigorate a much-needed discussion about the connections between teaching, learning, and the emotional contexts that shape these activities. It too is preoccupied with pathos, an area of rhetorical theory that remains largely underdeveloped in composition studies. Other similarities between the two texts include a shared commitment to teacher-research, to redirecting our disciplinary conversation about personal writing, to treating student texts as literary texts that may be read and analyzed, and to identifying “trauma” as a key term for the study of writing practices. At the same time, their dissimilarities are noteworthy for the different kinds of contributions they make to the field’s engagement with emotion. Writing and Healing, like many scholarly collections, moves unevenly, sometimes conflictingly, toward its goal; Michelle Payne’s Bodily Discourses, in contrast, offers a sustained theoretical framework through which to comprehend emotion and teaching while also shifting the questions we ask about personal writing.

Payne seeks to examine what she calls teacher “anxiety” about traumatic personal writing. She argues that compositionists have erroneously assumed that such texts are solicited only by teachers who embrace an expressivist pedagogy. Contending that traumatic student writing also appears in classes led by teachers who identify as critical pedagogues or social constructionists, Payne hopes to probe these assumptions further. She writes, “This turn to pedagogy as an explanation for essays that seem inappropriate is both a way to discipline teachers and students and to turn away from the ways these essays challenge our ideological and pedagogical commitments” (10). Such writing is not an issue because of pedagogy, she continues, but “because some students have experienced trauma, something that places them outside the normal functions of a university” (10). For her, debates about personal and emotional content in writing classrooms are really about social control; that is, they reveal our disciplinary anxiety about the place of emotion in our classrooms and our theories and about writing that inserts student bodies, especially abused ones, into “communities of thought where the body is not allowed” (79). Thus, students who write
about sexual abuse are constructed simultaneously as “too close” to their trauma to write effectively and as threatening to the purposes of a writing class. Payne claims that this construction is visible in the work of critics who advocate the integration of politics into the teaching of writing and who embrace theories of social construction; in both cases, she suggests, emotion is implicitly identified as “outside culture, untouched by ideology, not subject to critical reflection” (11).

Using student essays, observations of classrooms, and interviews with teachers, students, and counselors, Payne develops an analysis of student writing focused on emotion, pain, and trauma as ways of knowing. She reads student writing as a form of resistance, drawing on feminist theories that challenge postmodern tendencies to view bodies as little more than discursive constructs. This is not to say that Payne rejects postmodern insights altogether, however. In fact, she argues that when students write about abuse, they enact fragmented, postmodern identities—a way of interpreting personal narratives that promises to deepen our thinking about connections between the seemingly unconnected: personal writing and postmodern theory. Payne treats student texts as literary texts by reading them through theories of language, ideology, and power. By doing so, she politicizes personal writing and emphasizes the important contexts of meaning that students must work through in order to write about bodily violence.

Using excerpts from student papers and “process writes,” Payne begins her analysis in Chapter Two by focusing on student writing about sexual violence. She contextualizes this work in a larger historical tradition by working with historical texts that document sexual violence against women. Her intent is to show how “historical texts illustrate what students may implicitly know about sexual violence, that the so-called truth about the experience is usually determined by those in power and can have dangerous consequences for everyone involved” (34). Payne begins by describing a published court case from 1660 documenting sexual intercourse between a seven-year-old girl and a Native American man. The testimony was given to the child’s caretaker who then relayed it to the court; this second-hand account functioned as evidence to determine whether the child’s father had been violated. Because the child was understood to be the father’s property, a violation of her innocence was considered a crime against her father. Payne couples this historical document with excerpts from Abigail Abbot Bailey’s 1792 memoir about her abusive and incestuous husband. We learn of Asa, her husband, who began “courting” his sixteen-year-old

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daughter after having an affair with one of the couple’s servants and attempting rape of another. Payne observes that “As an illustration of the choices one woman makes about how to write about sexual abuse, her memoir can become an important resource for students as they explore ways of writing about and understanding their own experiences” (37). In the remainder of the chapter, Payne analyzes two student essays about sexual abuse much in the same vein that she does the historical texts. In the end, she argues that, rather than disallowing student disclosures on the grounds that they are too personal, teachers must approach student writing about trauma in all of its complexity. In her student-text examples, we see this complexity as the writers attempt to comprehend, challenge, and finally revise learned familial ways of knowing that normalize abuse.

Chapter Three of Bodily Discourses focuses on students who write about eating disorders. Payne emphasizes the need to treat such writing within historical, cultural, and ideological contexts so as not to pathologize student writers. Included in this chapter is a student narrative about bulimia and, much as in the previous chapter, Payne encourages her student “to use outside texts to critically reflect on her own experience, not stay mired in self-absorption as many might fear” (73). She argues that teachers might practice a response tactic that introduces students to traditions of thought relevant to their topic, to communities of writers who struggle with similar issues. The following chapter turns to essays about physical violence. In her discussion of how to respond to such difficult student writing, Payne comments on the potential for the writing course to “revictimize students” if the teacher is insensitive, ill-informed about the issues, and unaware of countertransference, which may lead teachers to project their own issues onto students. She also briefly mentions the power imbalances between teacher and student that may further abuse students. Given her interest in the “anxiety” that teachers feel about responding to writing about trauma, I was surprised that her discussion about the potential to revictimize students did not warrant more attention. This would have been a good opportunity for Payne to explore the specific content of teacher anxiety in relation to personal and/or confessional writing. Building on her earlier claims, for instance, Payne might have elaborated on the expression of teacher-anxiety surrounding student writing about trauma that foregrounds the body and emotion, both of which have been largely overlooked in and somewhat repelled by composition discourse. If further explored, this claim might have put a sharper point on Payne’s
thesis: We need to shift focus from the problem of students who write about trauma to the problem of teachers who, despite their political and ideological commitments to liberatory teaching, deem student writing about trauma as non-academic, irrelevant, and irrational.

In the final chapter, “Listening,” Payne states that she has been trying to build an argument for listening, “for attending to the words and voices of students as they make and unmake themselves; write and rewrite culture; and consider and reconsider language, power, and truth” (116). By listening to students, she has learned that writing about bodily violence is a way for students to challenge power relations and “emotion rules” in American culture. If compositionists continue to view student texts about abuse as self-absorbed and inappropriate, she contends, then we “elide the rhetorical, social, and sometimes critical strategies they use in an effort to be visible, normal, and heard” (117). And we do so, I think, partly to mask our own feelings of discomfort about the reality of abuse and partly because we do not know how to respond. Payne offers several suggestions for responding to student texts about abuse, beginning with the simple injunction to listen to students, not to judge or diagnose. She has found that many of her students just want to be heard in an environment where they are not revictimized. Second, she states that, when necessary, teachers should tell students that they are not the best audience for the piece of writing; teachers might share their reaction to the piece and “applaud [the student’s] courage” while making clear that the writing will not get the attention it deserves from this particular audience (121). Next, Payne suggests that writing programs bring in counselors to talk about how to deal with transference and countertransference issues, as is done at Boston College. While Payne’s suggestions for how to respond to student writing about abuse do not really move our thinking into new territory, she does an excellent job throughout Bodily Discourses of challenging old binaries between academic and personal writing, between public and private discourse. In the process, she develops a persuasive, theoretically rich discussion of emotion and writing and the anxiety they generate in our discipline.

Both Writing and Healing and Bodily Discourses offer fertile ground upon which to build theories of emotion in composition studies that can help teachers respond to students who may be damaged in ways that inhibit their ability to learn. They also raise fundamental questions about the role of writing teachers: Is it our role to encourage students to work through personal loss in our classrooms? Is it possible, as Payne suggests, to do so while also helping to sharpen students’ analytical
skills? How do we determine when student self-disclosure is more appropriate for a therapy session than a writing classroom? These are the sort of difficult questions that arose again and again as I read *Writing and Healing* and *Bodily Discourses*. I appreciated the significant complexity these questions took on as the writers examined issues central to writing and trauma from many different theoretical traditions. The few criticisms I've expressed should not obscure my belief that both books make a strong case for reexamining some of the theoretical positions that fail to consider the affective dimensions of learning and teaching despite widespread appeals for liberatory education. I recommend *Writing and Healing* and *Bodily Discourses* to educators who wish to explore the emotional contexts that shape the work we do in our classrooms and in our professional lives.

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**Works Cited**