some protocol in the Introduction for immediately making it clear just what it is we are reading. Readers may find themselves wondering whether a place like "Grand Lake University" is real or not, and if not, how to understand the status of the information included. For instance, Phelps creates a composite picture of a fictional "Cicero University," pointing out that it is not Syracuse University, her own school, but that the "two schools share many institutional features" (84). However, the program and history at Cicero have been "heavily fictionalized: simplified, idealized, and reinvented for my purposes from the materials of my own experience and knowledge" (84-5). And it is only after two-thirds of the discussion has been outlined that we discover that the events at Malenczyk's fictionalized "Northfield," "resemble, though not completely, recent events in my life" (159). Though these and other authors eventually identify the relative veracity of their stories, it is difficult as a reader to be on such uncertain ground.

These modest considerations, however, serve only to reflect critically on what is already a compelling documentation of the work of the writing program administrator. It offers prospective, new, and experienced WPAs a virtual community and an exciting body of practices from which they may create new and locally useful knowledge. Your mission as WPA, should you choose to accept it, will require the patience, the finesse, the craft, and the intuition of an artist and a manager; it will not, now, require that you go forward alone.

Portland, Oregon

Works Cited


Reviewed by Bonnie Kyburz, Utah Valley State College

Thomas Newkirk's The Performance of Self in Student Writing presents readers with important reconstructive work for composition studies. At a time when many scholars in the field resist static theoretical notions of our ostensibly collective purpose(s), it seems necessary that we review key
conflicts that have shaped our history, and thus, our present. As we do so, we must work both with increasingly complicated notions of our field and with a keen awareness of the nature of theory as theory. As well, we should work cautiously as we theorize; as Newkirk reminds us, theoretical constructs are often generalized in ways that occlude practical implications of the objects and experiential realities they seek to address. Newkirk’s work asks us to consider the implications of this possibility as he (re)theorizes the problematic role(s) of the “self” and the personal writing associated with it in composition studies.

For those familiar with a generalized history of composition studies, it should come as no surprise that theoretical and practical tensions involving the nature of the “self” should be central among our field’s persistent conflicts. Newkirk disrupts these tensions as they manifest in what are for him largely theoretical discourses that aim to reject personal writing as dangerous, passé, and irrelevant. Newkirk argues for the practical value of personal writing by writing with and against a variety of familiar critiques. Newkirk’s performance is admirable, although his choice of title, frame, and grounding theory (Irving Goffman’s 1959 work, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life) seems a bit of an questionable reach; Goffman’s work could be considered the foundationalist core that diminishes careful and critical attention to the work Newkirk actually does, for even a passing glance at Goffman’s work reveals its overtly elitist, racist, and sexist biases. Nevertheless, Newkirk makes quick, efficient reference to Goffman in order to suggest a relationship between performing a self and evolving an effective ethos (in writing). In this way, Newkirk begins what I consider to be the “real” work of his project, that of (re)situating personal writing within the rhetorical and practical arts that we claim to teach.

For Newkirk, that the nature of our work in teaching rhetorical arts consistently eludes a stable definition is not the problem. Rather, he seems concerned about the ways in which various critiques of personal writing derive largely from theoretical biases rather than clearly or more obviously from practical experience. Such biases shape our pedagogical orientations and disallow important work that might otherwise fulfill many of the goals associated with epistemic rhetorics. Newkirk reminds us of ways in which personal writing in composition studies has and may continue to assist us in encouraging the development of students’ “sense of agency,” which may evolve a “trajectory into the future” (98). He notes that personal writing practices in our field have been historically linked with the “pioneering” creation of “learning communities in the classroom” (90). And Newkirk claims that personal writing pedagogies have been salutary in promoting eco-composition by encouraging students to develop an “environmental imagination,” that “may serve to check human egotism and... create a sense
of stewardship” regarding the “natural world” (98). Newkirk argues in defense of the roles of emotion and of pleasure in personal writing. He problematizes teacher-student relations, and carefully works through a number of critiques associated with the postmodern turn in the spirit of critical negotiation.

For Newkirk, the rejection of personal writing in composition studies rests upon a variety of assumptions; Newkirk argues that many scholars in composition studies consider personal writing in the composition classroom an “institutional exercise of power” (90), a naïve attempt to appropriate authoritative adult discourses (91), and a “debilitating” attempt to promote individualism and thus deny “communitarian values and resist collective social action” (88). Elaborating other normative concepts from the historical past and present of composition studies, Newkirk notes that “the pedagogical alternative, composition as cultural studies,” promotes “social construction [as] the center of the course” (88). He argues that such a pedagogical orientation asks students “to see themselves as products of a culture” who should “resist the ready-made definitions” that might appear “freely chosen” (88). Should students engage meaningfully in such a pedagogy, Newkirk summarizes, they will become aware of the debilitating nature of “false consciousness” (89), and thus somehow emerge critically aware. So, you may wonder, what’s the problem? For Newkirk, many of these argument exist in “an empirical vacuum” and lack pragmatic value. His book in many ways seeks to provide evidence to resist the theoretical claims of the critics of personal writing.

I admire Newkirk’s work for the ways in which it resists the overwhelming attraction to a powerful and influential theoretical vortex, one that has provided a context for so many careful critiques of personal writing. Such resistance is complex, and it is perhaps compounded by the method Newkirk chooses; from experience he reflects upon student writing from his own classes. Newkirk also explores the ways in which particular student “performances” have been taken up by critics of personal writing, responding in ways that read against the conceptualizations of those critics (Bartholomae and Bizzell, to name only two). However, because Newkirk argues from experience, he risks the possibility that his work, like reams of student writing generated from personal experience, will perhaps be dismissed by the very critics to whom he speaks. Yet I believe that there is tremendous theoretical and practical value in his arguments and provocative concepts at the heart of his performance.

Among the most engaging and troubling aspects of Newkirk’s book is his attention to the ways in which composition teachers often reject or dismiss as clichéd the sorts of “selves” that students present in their written “performances.” Indicating his sensitivity to the problematic roles of the
teacher in these performances, Newkirk asks "What kind of 'self' do we invite students to become?" and "What kinds of 'selves' do we subtly dismiss?" (6). He indicates his own struggle with such questions: "Previously, I often felt constrained to dislike elements in student writing that I thoroughly approved of in their lives—their optimism, energy, capacity for enjoyment, idealism. Translated into writing, these qualities often appeared clichéd, trite, naïve; they were everything I had been conditioned to dislike" (107). In many ways, Newkirk’s decision to attempt to view his own responses to student writing as "conditioned" reveal a frankness and a kind of trust necessary for both the composition classroom and composition studies to function as sites of critical negotiation. Regarding a student’s paper on her work at an animal shelter and her evolving sense of agency with regard to the animals’ welfare, Newkirk recalls that he might have in a less reflective mood considered the work trite but that with the effort to “listen more carefully,” he discovered that he was “finally paying attention.” Must we invite students to perform versions of self in writing in order that we might truly hear and honor their writing? Surely not. But perhaps in reading Newkirk’s careful reflective and reconstructive work, we may rethink with diminished cynicism the value of personal writing for the ways in which it accompanies the teaching of rhetorical knowledge and skills, particularly as that teaching involves the concept of ethos—the self-conscious awareness of one’s values, beliefs, and biases that is essential to academic (and other) writing. As well, it can’t hurt to confront our own beliefs and values with regard to the ways in which we construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct students within our classrooms and our scholarly conversations.

Orem, Utah


Reviewed by Marshall Myers, Eastern Kentucky University

For centuries now, scholars have struggled with the problem of how to interpret texts. From as early as the ancient Greeks and Romans who anticipated looking for meaning both through the style of a document and in its content, scholars have labored to find the most satisfactory way of determining the inherent “meaning” of a piece of writing. Whether they looked at an artifact as a product of its times, or whether they saw a text to