
Reviewed by Cassandra M. Phillips, University of Wisconsin-Waukesha

At the beginning of Persons in Process, Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis cite Judith Solsken’s study on childhood literacy development. That choice may seem odd, they say, considering that their own study focuses on four college students representing different cultures, genders, and classes. Yet they premise their study on Solsken because they have found that her basic principles concerning childhood literacy development can be (and are) true for adults of all ages. Students, they say, “actively use writing—including the sorts of public writing often required of them in college—for the ongoing development of their personal identities, including their sense of themselves in relation to others” (1).

The development of the self across academic genres has been addressed in several studies and by several different researchers (see Carol Berkenkotter et al, Paul Kameen, Min-Zahn Lu, Lucille McCarthy and Stephen Fishman, Elspeth Probyn). What this particular study adds to the ongoing discussion/debate of the concept of self is the detail and evidence behind the claim that college is a “time when persons are in process, recomposing themselves toward their futures” (354). In other words, it shows how the idea of self can relate to the “slippery” concept of academic writing through careful exploration of its research subjects.

Persons in Process is thus a detailed, longitudinal study that follows its subjects—Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois—as they struggle to use writing “for the ongoing development of their personal identities, including their sense of themselves in relation to others” (1). Through their subjects, Herrington and Curtis summarize, “we see students striving to bridge the gap between private and public interests, between the personal and the academic, a gap sometimes accentuated by genre conventions and teaching practices” (354). The study prides itself on its length (approximately nine years) and its presentation of the subjects as “expert witnesses” of different aspects of college writing. As a result, it devotes a chapter to each, allowing each one “to speak directly to you” (18). Throughout these chapters the researchers’ close relationships with these subjects is apparent.

The methodology of this study is also quite appealing. While most of the text is written collaboratively, there are also individual narratives by each of the coauthors that detail the different foci of their research. Curtis addresses her interest in “experienced-based knowledge” vs. “text-based
authority" in composition (24) as well as the influence of Heinz Kohut's concept of "selfobjets" on the way we think about students and academic writing (25-28). Herrington, on the other hand, outlines her interest in "studies of writing in contexts" (32) as well as the social and psychological effects of disciplinary expectations placed on students (33-34). The ways that these varying interests play out in this study (and they do) is intriguing. While the strengths of this methodology are apparent, Herrington and Curtis also discuss the limitations and ethical considerations of conducting research the way they do.

Because of its longitudinal nature, Herrington and Curtis's study features elements concerning student writing that have rarely been seen in such detail in previous studies on this subject—and this, I think, is the one of the biggest strengths of this book. When Herrington and Curtis indicate certain findings in the first chapter, we can read about how they came to each of those findings in many instances and experiences as they discuss different students. For example, early on they conclude that each of these writers depended on "a single impulse born of personal experience" to inspire their writing in a wide variety of settings (5). Accordingly, Nam's chapter opens with a sample essay in which he is struggling with being "different" (54-55). Throughout the remainder of the chapter, then, Herrington and Curtis show how he learns to use writing as a tool, or even a metaphor, to understand and explore these differences. We are shown Nam's struggle to understand the role of self in the essay in a variety of ways: through the paraphrase of the researchers, ("While I believe this is an instance of Nam not finding the appropriate word, the double meaning—appropriated, appropriate—still suggests the tension in Nam's relation to language" [56]), through researcher notes, ("He's having trouble again with stopping when he tries to write. Gets hung up over getting the right word and can't get stuff out" [57]), and through direct interviews with Nam:

I don't have much idea what is essay. When people say essay, I was kinda stuck. What should I do because most—in high school, I'd usually do a report paper, like a book report or history report or something like that. But come up with something that
I think that nobody ever think, say what I think is, I do not have much practice so I have no idea what is essay. (59)

Again, the importance of this approach is through the detail and the triangulation of the evidence. We can actually see the ways in which Nam struggles not only with the symbolic idea of an essay, but with the language used to define and represent it. This conclusion is supported in Nam's spoken words, his writings, and his observations.

Persons in Process also indicates early on that while the students seemed to depend on that personal experience to motivate their writing, they
often desired to move that personal writing towards something more public (5). Herrington and Curtis then show this in a variety of ways throughout the remaining chapters, most compellingly with the story of Francois. “What happens,” they ask, “when...a teacher cannot with any confidence read the student or his writing? Cannot gain empathetic access to his subjective world? Cannot find stable enough footing to hold a mirror up to his strengths or offer steady guidance through his apparent weaknesses?” (273). Herrington and Curtis report that while Francois was an avid student and participant in the study, he was also a seemingly endless mix of contradictions; he was eager yet frustrated, thoughtful yet evasive—a “cheerful resister” (274). Most importantly, however, he was frustrated with the lack of clarity in his writing. Years later he states in an interview:

In high school...I did book reports or summarizing, or something completely different such as [giving] my own personal opinion. So there were two different kinds of writing: I either summarized, regurgitated something that I had read, or I talked about something completely different which may or may not have been abstract. So there was never the connection in how I was to write something to present it out to people. In a way, I was missing the third piece to a triangle. I could do that; I could do this. But I couldn’t send them in the direction where they would eventually meet. (285)

Herrington and Curtis wait to relay this quote from Francois until they have shown his struggles through a series of writing samples—most effectively, I think, when they show a promising rough draft deteriorate into something more “outlandish” due to instructor comment on the lack of clarity (283-84). This approach underscores the strength of longitudinal study—being able to interview Francois over a long period of time allowed him to provide important insight into his earlier difficulties that Herrington and Curtis might not have come to on their own.

Persons in Process also concludes that even when students are writing essays that aren’t necessarily personal, their different backgrounds (indeed, different “selves”) helped to determine their engagement with the essays:

[T]hey were all developing new writing skills as they were recomposing themselves as human beings in response to other human beings, and, according to their testimony, and the content of their papers, what they experienced as student writers had much less to do with any particular sequence of writing tasks or teaching methods than with how they felt they were expressing themselves and being responded to as people. Writing was not a purely academic matter for any of the four. (13)

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Despite the multiple differences within these student’s backgrounds, Herrington and Curtis argue that these students came into the study knowledgeable of just how complex writing and the self can be (indeed, this is illustrated through the student writings in the subsequent chapters). In more simple terms, these students want to make themselves “understood” and are in the process of uncovering a variety of ways to do so (5). The stories of each research subject show how institutions, teacher expectations and comments, as well as assignments all factor into these process.

*Persons in Process* ends with an appeal to instructors. When we teach, they say, “the dominant perspective [we come from] is quite naturally our own” (390). Throughout this text, however, they have allowed us to become engaged with the research subjects and extremely knowledgeable about the ways they struggle to create a sense of self through academic writing. And as a result, we can see just how important it is to engage ourselves in as much as possible with our students, “respecting [their] positions . . . as they enter our classrooms, trying to understand those positions, and helping support students as they work to reposition themselves as writers and as people” (390).

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**Works Cited**


Reviewed by Jennifer Clary-Lemon, Arizona State University

In the introduction to *Power, Race, and Gender in Academe*, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and María Herrera-Sobek ask the perfunctory question, “Who is calling whom a stranger?” (2). I open with this question because it plays on