

Writing a Self In/Outside School

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In ninth grade, my son became absorbed in writing a persuasive political essay. To write it, he drew knowledge from his considerable everyday literacy practice—blogs, polls, YouTube, Wikipedia, and a political forum he has managed for years. As Kathryn Flannery astutely observes in her contribution to this symposium, students’ purposes for writing are often “not manufactured by a curriculum or necessarily even anticipated by teachers.” Similarly, in this case, my son created his purpose by relating his everyday practice to the requirements of the assignment.

To use the terms of New Literacy scholar Roz Ivanič, my son affiliated his autobiographical self with this act of authorship. That affiliation lies at the heart of how writers construct complex aspects of the self through discourse. Ivanič proposes three overlapping aspects of the self, all concerned with a writer’s voice. The writer’s *autobiographical self* draws resources from a life-history—experiences, ideas, commitments, and a personal bank of literacy practices—at a moment in time (328). Especially salient in a school context, the *self as author* involves the writer’s stance, and claims to speak (26). The *discoursal self* concerns “the sense of the way [writers] want to sound” (25), and it also signals the degree to which a writer owns, or disowns, a text (221-21).

My colleague Tara Lockhart and I find, in our research at San Francisco State, that undergraduates believe they grow as writers when they can relate aspects of the autobiographical self to their schooled authorship. We’ve interviewed 70 students so far, and collected writing from 22. Here are two examples from our research of students who encountered what Flannery, citing Shirley Brice Heath, calls the “extended reading and writing” practice typical of academic life.

Adrian is a chemistry major who does not believe he learned anything useful from university English classes, where, he said, he was “always” “challenged” to make his papers “long enough,” largely because he was not “interested” in humanistic topics. But in his writing intensive chemistry course, where he had plenty to say, Adrian struggled to make his papers “shorter.” In chemistry, Adrian attended research seminars and wrote reviews about knowledge that “is being used today”; these reviews paved the way for his robust research proposal on how drug transport vehicles could cure kidney cancer. When he imagined how he sounded in his papers, Adrian pictured himself “sitting” and “looking” at the English teacher, wondering what he should write, whereas in chemistry, he pictured himself “talking” “like a narrator” “to a roomful of chemists.”

By contrast, *Cassandra*, a nursing major, passionately affiliated herself with the extensive literacy practices of English class. These essays from English class “challenged” her to “figure out what kind of writer I was.” She felt “connected” “to every single one [she] wrote.” Cassandra invested herself intellectually and emotionally in her writing group, where she experimented with deep revision and “creative” sentence style, emulating authors such as Azar Nafisi. However, Cassandra reported that

her writing intensive course in nursing “was a hard transition,” saying that she felt that the research paper on anti-biotic resistance she wrote “is not me.” The topic excited her but Cassandra felt her instructor forced her to write a specialized analysis of research articles, which also meant she had to narrow the topic to anti-biotic resistance in cancer patients. She had hoped, though, to address her future patients on the perils of overusing antibiotics in their everyday lives. Cassandra disowned her research paper, despite the high grade, because she felt she wrote only for “the teacher.”

Flannery writes, “sometimes in our efforts to ensure that the everyday gets a fair hearing, we have risked losing the power of difference, the power of contrast, the power of academic literacies in relation to the everyday.” For students like Adrian or Cassandra (or my son), this “power of academic literacies in relation to the everyday” is not felt often enough. How can we cultivate the relationship?

Adrian connected his autobiographical self to authorship in an exciting class that was, to cite Flannery, “permeable to the outside.” Adrian attended conferences, and his professor encouraged his students to act as contributors and to tackle big human problems. Cassandra’s composition class, where she claimed ownership over her writing process, was also “permeable” in the sense that students developed relationships with readers other than the teacher. For both students, then, it was not the extended nature of the practice that mattered but, as Flannery suggests, the purpose. These writers experienced meaningful literate moments in classes that had “permeable” qualities: classes that drew energy from the outside world and that supported a rich and interactive composing process.

What Literacy Studies shows Composition Studies is not that we shouldn’t teach traditional literacy because, as Flannery indicates, school genres may offer access to powerful intellectual tools. Instead, we must attend to a more difficult—and often quite subtle—task: imagining the bridge between everyday and academic literacy practices. To imagine it, we must, as Flannery suggests, attend closely to the “ways students have put forms of schooled literacies to use.” Perhaps, too, we can observe what our colleagues do across the disciplines, and work harder than we have to create more “permeable” classes where our students can inflect genres with their own purposes.

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