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Conferencing: The Psychodynamics of Teaching Contraries

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In a recent article Peter Elbow posits that good teaching affirms and practices “two conflicting obligations in the job: we have an obligation to students but we also have an obligation to knowledge and society.”¹ Elbow characterizes the stances in this conflict as “paternal” and “maternal” versions of teaching. Paternal teaching, good for students in the long run, represents “standards and firmness” on behalf of society and knowledge, while maternal teaching, good for knowledge and society in the long run, avows nurture and support of the student (E, 329-330). Elbow suggests that in order to resolve this conflict and to help students, instructors must move back and forth to “function as ally or coach” preparing students for the rigors of achieving “deep knowledge and skills” while “role play[ing] the enemy in a supportive setting” (E, 336, 337). Such an alternation of stances is both nurturing and critical, creating a teaching environment where the student can flourish creatively and critically.

In my experience the conflicting obligations and relationship between support and criticism Elbow describes are integrated and indeed necessary to a particular component of writing classes. I am referring to the experience of conferencing with those students at the University of Michigan who place into remedial tutorial writing classes. Assessment of these students’ writing indicates that immediate and intensive help is necessary if these students are to achieve satisfactorily in their coursework. We believe that the two instructional settings—classroom and conference—provide the greatest impetus to development of writing

skills. In particular, I would like to demonstrate how the teaching environment of conferencing enables instructors to interact in a way that encourages both the nurturing and critical processes leading students to greater control over their ability to generate and revise writing. I will first summarize which features most typically characterize writing in our tutorial classes. I will then explore how the development of writing fluency as described by James Britton depends on a particular dynamic of psychological relationship which also underlies Elbow's notion of paternal and maternal teaching.

Many entering students who place into tutorial writing classes write distanced transactional prose, that is, essays which do not contain clear sequences of ideas, examples, or associations which would develop into a meaningful expository essay. Perhaps the most essential element lacking in these basic writers is a sense of self that integrates social, historical, and moral realities. When asked about their lack of involvement, students say they could muster no personal response to the topic and their writing meant nothing to them.

The courses designed to meet the needs of these students meet twice a week for two hours each and last seven weeks. We know that even though we can require daily writing in each of these class meetings, this setting is not sufficient to help students develop the skills of integration which characterize post-tutorial writing. Frequently our chance to improve students' ability takes place in the mandatory weekly thirty-minute conference with the student. Because intense energy is invested in the gate-keeping and nurturing relationship of teacher to student in conference, effective and lasting gains can occur. Indeed, I will argue that this setting and relationship are directly responsible for the student's ability to produce language with more fluency and to integrate creative thought with critical writing. This is not to overshadow the importance of the classroom setting, where a very different and necessary dynamic takes place, but rather to explore what I see as the necessary component to that setting.

I believe the stages of development in student writing that we see are best explained by the model James Britton uses. The movement from expressive to transactional writing involves using elements of expressive speech and writing even in the most apparently impersonal forms of transactional writing. As Britton says: "Writing best succeeds when it becomes part of the writer's own feeling for the work."² Even in the most formally designed lab report or term paper, we can occasionally detect the writer's enthusiasm for his or her task. Such emotional and

intellectual investment is expressed in the creative vigor or energy which combines with critical application of thoroughness and relatedness to produce coherent and cohesive prose. In developmental terms, the student writer must somehow both internalize and yet move away from the expressive stage to assume responsibility for more formal rules of use. He or she must straddle two worlds: inner and outer, verbalizing his or her own consciousness while synthesizing or analyzing data related to external social, political, historical, or scientific realities. We have all witnessed the painful blocks, fearful steps, failures, and tentative successes as students, writing the conventional classroom paper, struggle to make the break from dependency and insecurity to some level of autonomy, confidence and competence.

Britton argues that the child develops writing skills in a relationship with a trusted facilitator. He says that expressive speaking and writing—that which is very close to the self—relies on an environment where the listener or reader is invited to enter the world of the speaker and writer and respond to him or her emphatically as a person. As the expressive writer masters transactional language, he or she develops the ability to differentiate between the self and other in order to accommodate a wider, unknown audience.

I would like to suggest that the relationship Britton identifies as facilitating transactional writing and that Elbow sees as crucial is one described by the British child psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott. Winnicott asserts that “maturational processes” require a facilitating environment created by a “good-enough mother”—an environment where the infant can move from a kind of magical thinking or feeling of omnipotent control over thoughts and desire to control by manipulating phenomena.³ The stages of development characterized as maturational processes are indeed equivalent to the image of the student straddling inner and outer worlds, for in early infancy, according to Winnicott, the child feels fused with the mother and in time, with the mother’s help, learns not only to distinguish between self and external reality, but to understand that this separation does not mean that nurture and support have disappeared forever. Instead, the self must communicate need openly, through crying at first, and later through language to generate response and to test reality to create satisfaction.

To be sure, Britton’s model is based on the principles of cognitive psychology investigated by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, and not a psychoanalytic model of Winnicott.⁴ This is to say that Britton observed how young writers internalize rules of language in the classroom,

while Winnicott observed how young children internalize rules of interpersonal relations in his clinical practice with mothers and children. Yet despite their apparent differences, their investigations coincide in stressing the same kind of facilitating environment for growth and learning.

I would like to suggest that the good teacher, like Winnicott's "good-enough mother," creates a facilitating environment in which good writing comes into being. In our experience at the English Composition Board, this environment seems as unlikely as it would be in other shared and crowded office spaces. But despite such impediments, on lucky days an instructor may sit alone or pretend to be alone with a student and for thirty minutes allow something very frustrating and exciting to take place. What we do at our best can be supported by combining Winnicott's ideas with Britton's.

According to Winnicott, in order for maturation to occur, the good-enough mother makes an active adaptation to "read" her child's needs and offer nurture and support. In much the same way, through dependable, adaptive response, does expressive language occur. By reading the student's writing needs between the lines, as Peter Elbow points out, the instructor sees through "mistakes and ignorance to the intelligence that lies behind" (E, 322). Express recognition of the student's creative capacity stimulates more writing. Britton says: "And whether we write or speak, expressive language is associated with a relationship of mutual confidence and trust and is therefore a form of discourse that encourages us to take *risks*, to try out ideas we are not sure of, in a way we would not dare to do in, say, making a public speech."⁵

I am not suggesting that teachers are mothers, but that qualities traditionally labeled maternal—nurture and support—are those which men and women teachers need to be effective.⁶ We can see, at this point, that the role of teacher is that of friend and confidant; the teacher makes an active adaptation to the writer's needs that decreases as the writer gains mastery, explores language, and is able, in Winnicott's terms, to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration. In other words, according to Britton, the teacher becomes a stage in differentiation between self and other, between expressive and transactional language, "as a sympathetic and interested adult, rather than specifically as a teacher" (B, 118). This stage is based on a "shared interest and expertise, an accumulating shared context" (B, 122).

This stage, as a process of development and as a space where teacher and student act out the process of writing, is akin to Winnicott's "potential space." For Winnicott, potential space is the hypothetical area that is felt as the stage of "separating out the mother from the self," after having felt at-one with or merged with that nurturing figure (W, 126). It is an area of human endeavor, to quote Winnicott, "whose foundation is trust in the mother experienced over a long-enough period at the critical stage of separation, when the establishment of an autonomous self is at the initial stage" (W, 129). It is a stage where a need to shake free from the mother develops and is replaced by a need to achieve independence.

I would say that learning to write is made possible by the adult equivalent of the process Winnicott observed in his clinical practice. The instructor must facilitate separation and independence by not rejecting the student's need for help, support and criticism. In turn, the student cannot become autonomous unless the instructor is ready to let go. Confidence in the instructor-student relationship is made real as the student internalizes rules of use that come from the relationship; he or she feels the instructor's supportive presence in the experience of writing independently and knows the instructor is there, encouraging more writing on wider subjects to varied audiences. The student must have confidence in the instructor who is willing to share what she or he knows and to facilitate the learning process so that the student can assume the mantle of teacher of self. The student assumes that the instructor who is reliable is available even when forgotten. He is available, in fact, as a resource, but most importantly, according to Britton, as an "internalized other"—as the reminder that this first draft is not the last, that writing is rewriting, and, hopefully, that rewriting is asking questions and thinking and feeling through writing problems that are now recognizable. (B, 119). This learning has occurred in the potential space between instructor and student where creative playing produces writing.' As Winnicott says: "It is here that there develops a use of symbols that stand at one and the same time for external world phenomena and for phenomena of the individual person" and I add, person writing (W, 128).

Winnicott describes the process of separation occurring in the potential space as transitional phenomena. This specifically designates the intermediate area of experience which in the psychoanalytic model is located very early in infancy between a sense of the world as an extension of self and the true object-relationship, between primary creative

activity and a projection of the internalized relationship between mother and self. We have all witnessed this projection in the form of a teddy bear or worn, ratty blanket. Winnicott is more concerned with the use of this teddy-bear than with the object itself—with the way it loses meaning for the child as transitional phenomena become diffused and spread out over the creation of more adult activity. Likewise, in moving from expressive to transactional language, the student is also maturing, moving out. Winnicott would call this process or creative activity “play,” the moment when, according to Marion Milner, an artist-psychanalyst, “the original poet in each of us created the outside world for us, by finding the familiar in the unfamiliar.”⁸

According to Winnicott, “playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects” (W, 55). Because of this precariousness, the conditions and location of the playing environment is of paramount importance. And although through this play the child discovers distinctions between self and external phenomena, the relationship characterizing this transitional stage—that is, the relationship between the child and object and between child and facilitator—is a necessary counterpart to the environment and to the play activity. Playing or writing together is the first step in this process of mastering control. We can see the application of this process to teaching writing particularly in the conference setting. Here the student can read aloud a paper while the instructor reads along silently, thus assuring the student that paper belongs to him or her. For creation is possible only when the transitional object is differentiated from the student yet can only be shaped and reshaped by him or her. Only with this sense of paradoxical sense of distance and ownership can the student feel safe to invest in writing the ideas, emotions, hopes, and fears that constitute a valued portion of the self.

I, for one, will not read a paper before conference and will, with the student, discover the paper by asking questions to clarify ideas and feelings and to encourage development: I suggest that I need him or her to help make the connections necessary to achieve coherence. I hope in this way never to claim ownership of the paper myself, or to control the writing. Instead, the student continues to create the writing while absorbing rules that derive from external, social realities. In turn, these rules make possible a shared play experience that ensures the communicative or transactional quality of the writing. The writing, like the playing, becomes social, rather than solitary, or, in Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s terms, “egocentric.”⁹

Britton has said that the supportive teacher/reader will be able and willing to enter this process by encouraging students to see that what they are—observing, feeling, thinking, and responding selves—can create writing that is worth recording and being revised according to insights they have gained for themselves. The instructor's role in this process also includes setting the limits that provide the sense of security that is the counterpart of nurture and support. As the instructor responds to the student's writing needs, he asserts his own part in the process without repudiating the student's creative efforts; he supplies a supportive critical framework and introduces enrichments.¹⁰ The playing is and must be, according to Winnicott, spontaneous, but the instructor must also be sensitive to that moment of interpretation or enrichment when the student has no capacity to play or to write and when pushing is certain to lead to confusion.

Papers that instructor and student share in conference represent an illusion that what is before them has potential for excellence. This comes about because the instructor has responded to the need for validating ideas and the shape of ideas by encouraging the student who shows signs of being ready to to push further. The student, in turn, shows readiness to respond to this supporting pressure by understanding and coping with the uncertainties of self-evaluation and revision. In this process the student masters skills of writing to make it an object of value. The paper is nevertheless an illusion because although it belongs to the student, the process of creation is nurtured by the instructor. It belongs, in fact, somewhere between them as a transitional object, facilitating both dependence on the instructor and independence through communication. As we negotiate the potential paper between us, the student and I must accept its paradoxical position, learning as well, a critical way of understanding irresolution, ambiguity—in short, process.

Teaching that language interprets and communicates one's world validates the self as a response to external reality. In conference, the writing process permits the expression of discovery in the form of tentative or speculative conclusions and opinion. The instructor in this setting facilitates the writer's link with his or her inchoate thoughts, associations, and feelings. The student gathers phenomena from his or her internal reality and uses them in the service of an idea derived from external and social reality. The student invests chosen external phenomena with his or her feelings and vice versa. Winnicott says:

“There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing and from shared playing to cultural experiences” (W, 60).

Writing as a shared experience is, like Winnicott’s idea of play, both exciting and precarious. It involves risk—that the perfect or “A” paper is surely an illusion this time, that weakness will be exposed, that the interplay between subjective and objective reality may need adjustment and accommodation. There is always the danger that the student’s creativity may too easily be overwhelmed by a teacher who intrudes too much or left to flounder by a teacher who participates too little. We thus talk and write a tightrope, between the student’s anxiety about where writing begins and is achieved, and where it is attached to and can be separated from the instructor who, the student may feel, owns the absolute rules of writing. As writing creates and fills the potential space between the student’s inner reality and the shared reality of the world that is external, he or she discovers cultural experience. In turn, cultural experience begins with creative living which is first manifested in play. Winnicott says: “The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family”—and I’ll add, between student and instructor—“between the individual and society or the world, depends on experiences which lead to and from trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that is here that the individual experiences creative living” (W 121).

NOTES

¹Peter Elbow, “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process,” *College English* 44, no. 4 (April, 1983), p. 327. All future references to this article will be referred to in the text as E.

²James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18* (Urbana: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), p. 28. All future references from this edition will be cited in the text as B.

³D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Hammersmith: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 11, 55. All future references to this edition will be cited in the text as W.

⁴See L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, Edited and translated by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1962) and Jean Piaget, *Language and Thought of the Child* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

⁵James Britton, “Notes on a Working Hypothesis about Writing,” unpublished talk quoted with permission of the author.

⁶It should be noted that Winnicott’s studies took place at a time when women were the primary caretakers of young children. Therefore his clinical practice focuses on mother-child relationships.

⁷In "Play and the Role of Mental Development in the Child," Vygotsky discusses the importance of play to the imagination and the relationship between affective and cognitive aspects of play and rule acquisition, *Soviet Psychology* 5 (1967), pp. 6-18.

⁸Quoted in Winnicott, p. 45.

⁹Although Piaget and Vygotsky disagree on the function of "egocentric speech," they each define it as a transitional form of thinking and speaking emerging "when the child transfers social, collaborative forms of behavior to the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions," *Thought and Language*. p. 19. For my purposes, the idea of transitional language coincides with the stages of a student writer's development.

¹⁰In this sense I agree with Peter Elbow in his article cited above.