

# Letting Our Students Get to Know Us

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“...I used to think about old Spencer quite a lot, and if you thought about him *too* much, you wondered what the heck he was still living for. I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him. That’s awful, in my opinion. But if you thought about him just enough and not *too* much, you could figure it out that he wasn’t doing too bad for himself.”

—J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

A couple of years ago, I was teaching a first-year composition class, a six-hours-a-week beast, notorious among students at UC Berkeley who don’t pass the writing placement exam, grueling for all concerned. The end of the semester was nearing, and the students’ steadily declining energy was starting to get to me; they’d been an especially disengaged bunch all term, and nothing I was doing seemed to be working very well. I glimmered on to an idea on my way into work, and at the usual intermission in our three-hour class, faced with their slumping bodies, I went ahead with it: I told them they’d spend that day’s break coming up with a writing assignment for me. The only requirements were that the assignment be relevant to the course and something I could reasonably complete in a week’s time. This announcement perked them right up. Sleepy students came wide awake, grins animated their faces. I left the room for ten minutes, and when I returned, they told me not to come in yet, that they needed more time to discuss it. When they finally let me back in, the class was all atwitter and I saw my assignment written on the board: *Write a narrative about your life as an undergrad at Berkeley: food, shelter, sex.*

Gulp. I’d told them beforehand that I would reserve veto power over whatever assignment they came up with, but after a deep breath, I accepted theirs and went home to write. I wondered how to give them what they wanted (as a student might for his teacher), while also trying to challenge or impart something to them (as a teacher does for his students). I was also worried about getting too personal or sharing

something inappropriate. I ended up writing about several experiences from my own freshman year at UC Berkeley some two decades earlier. I read it to them the next week, and they clearly enjoyed it very much; I enjoyed writing it for them too. Though I shared some things about myself—my life in the dorms, a break-up with a girlfriend, blowing one of my first final exams—they noted, accurately, that I had hidden myself a little by writing largely about my interactions with and observations of others: my disabled roommate from my first semester, my sex-crazed roommate from my second. (You didn't really think I was going to write about *my* sex life, did you?)

In the course of the discussion afterward, I first laid out some of my reasons for putting them, and myself, through this exercise: I wanted them to think about how one crafts a writing assignment, what it asks the writer to do, and see how that might translate when they went to revise their earlier essays. I wanted them to be more mindful of audience, in part through my explicitly pointing to the ways in which I'd addressed them directly in my piece, and the ways in which I'd conceived of a larger audience. I also pointed out that I wouldn't likely have accepted the "sex" part of their prompt if the list of the three requested items hadn't been an inside joke referring to text from a student's draft that we had workshopped together—and laughed about—earlier in the term. Then, among the key questions I asked them were "Why did you assign me this particular prompt? What were you hoping to see or get? Was it just out of prurient interest?" Among the responses:

So we can know you as a human being, to further establish a relationship with our teacher by knowing a little bit about your private life.

By getting to know you in this way, then it's like you're more of a friend, which makes it easier to listen to your critiques of our writing.

We knew you were a writer, but we wanted to see it in action.

I guess I was hoping for some advice.

This prompted new questions for me that I previously hadn't examined carefully: not so much about the virtues of turning the tables on the teacher-student dynamic or of modeling writing for the students, both of which I do from time to time, but about how much to share with my students about *myself*. While the precise amount and type of this kind of sharing is generally a moving target that shifts according to the purpose, audience, and context within which it occurs, I'd suggest that revealing some aspects of our personal lives to our first-year composition students is helpful and sometimes essential to the students' engagement and eventual success with the tasks we set for them.

## Emotional Connection, Critical Engagement

This sharing of one's self begins treading on ground that makes some educators nervous, on both a gut and pedagogical theory level. Heading down a path that actively acknowledges personal—and therefore emotional—connection in the composition classroom might lead some to think that the students and teacher would engage in a form of doe-eyed sharing in which everyone would feel good and self-affirmed but wouldn't learn a thing about how to write critically. Expressivist writing and sentimentality run amok: that would be one prominent concern, or caricature. Teachers who write personal narratives for their students presumably would ratchet up this concern even further.

Plenty of composition scholars through the years have raised red flags about the use of the “personal.” While rarely rejected entirely or embraced without qualification, the personal in its various iterations has been marked as self-indulgent, as useful, as lacking in rigor, as gendered, and, of course, as political (and that's just the beginning of what could be a long list). Very often these discussions have involved debates about what we should invite our students to write or not to write—and therefore to think—about themselves and their positions vis-à-vis others. Personal, expressive writing has been defended as a student's inaugural dipping into the deep waters of academic discourse, and it's been characterized as setting up students to drown in those same waters by blurring or totally obscuring the expectations of different discourse communities. And if we're not speaking of our students' writing, discussions of personal revelation often focus on what we teachers should or shouldn't (or aren't permitted to) write about ourselves for our peers to read in academic forums such as this one. Arguments have been put forth examining whether the writing of overtly autobiographical, and potentially emotional, pieces for our colleagues furthers or impedes our discourse with each other. However one discusses the matter, it's a touchy subject, because the personal is, well, so personal.

What has been less discussed—perhaps because it has been deemed as so clearly beyond the pale that its problems were self-evident—is not what our first-year composition students should share of themselves in their academic writing, or what we should share with our peers in the same way, but what we teachers should share of ourselves *with our students*. What benefits might there be in it for the aims of student learning if we can avoid the pitfalls? Those pitfalls would be enough for some to dismiss the subject at first mention. Since most of us would concede that students formulate their own individualized perceptions of their teachers through our performances in the classroom or our published writing or other (increasingly on-line) presences, some will surely ask

whether teachers need take their revelation of self much further than that. Isn't the whole subject really just an invitation to the narcissists among us to indulge themselves to the detriment of their students? It's a fair question. One does have to be on guard against what I've come to think of as the O'Mahon Effect.

Mr. O'Mahon (I'm employing a pseudonym) was a substitute teacher who showed up from time to time when I was in third and fourth grade. The word was out on him even before his first visit: *be sure to bring up Ireland*. When Mr. O'Mahon would step in, he'd start with whatever lesson our regular teacher had left for him to lead, and before he'd gotten very far, one of us would say, "Mr. O'Mahon? Isn't your family originally from Ireland?" The whole class knew what would come next. Mr. O'Mahon would reply, "Why yes! They *were* from Ireland!" And then we'd watch, delighted, as he'd unfurl his map of the Emerald Isle, filled with family crests, and he'd be off—no lesson plan, no homework for today. Time to goof off and laugh at Mr. O'Mahon talking about his Celtic roots.

We can all think of similar—and probably more egregious and troubling—examples of such personal sharing, and imagine how a similar degeneration might occur in college classrooms led by teachers who are just a little too interested in themselves and think their students ought to be too (if they are thinking about their students at all). Yet just as we manage our various presentations of self differently in contexts in and outside of academe, titrating the amount of our personal revelations accordingly, most of us have the ability to mindfully do the same in our classrooms in a manner similar to how we choose this assignment over that one for our students, this technique over that one.

In an article summarizing much of the debate over the personal and arguing for personal narratives as an evidentiary tool, Candace Spigelman notes that "personal writing that serves academic purposes need not be, indeed should not be, self-disclosive; neither should its ends be emotive and self-serving" (71). To be sure, personal narratives or personal sharing of whatever type—by students or by the teacher—that engender a purely emotive response are not likely to be worthwhile pedagogically, and could potentially harm the student-teacher relationship. Yet while emotion can hinder progress in the composition classroom, properly channeled, it can also serve a useful role. For good or ill, emotions are inextricable from the writing process, a reality familiar to anyone who's ever tried to write. Because of this, Susan McLeod suggests that student writers should be taught how to manage their cognitive process *and* their emotions since each comes into play as one writes (433). One means of facilitating this teaching might be letting students get to know us.

To be clear about what I'm advocating: though I've begun this article with a personal anecdote of my own, one which references a personal narrative I wrote for my students, I'm not focused here on the virtues or problems of writing personal narratives (which, as it happens, neither I nor my students do very often in the composition classroom). My concern instead is with the emotional connections between students and teachers that can be generated in part by the teacher's sharing of self, and what that might mean for the development of students' writing, especially for struggling writers.

This concern dovetails with the tenets of humanistic education (sometimes called "affective" or "psychological" or "emotional" education), which is interested in "educating the whole person—the intellectual and the emotional dimensions" and "takes into consideration that *learning is affected by how students feel about themselves*" or, more specifically, that "the role of the self-concept in learning is...crucial" (Moskowitz 11-12). Here, composition teachers may pause to contest the notion that educating "the emotional dimension" of the student should be any of their concern. Indeed, though emotion has received increased attention in recent years in composition studies, it is still a loaded, and therefore sometimes an avoided, subject in the field. (Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche's anthology makes clear the enduring stigma attached to emotion in theorizing, in the writing classroom, and in the academic workplace.) However, no matter what one thinks about the overarching aims of humanistic education, it's hard to deny that a student's emotions, especially emotions connected to a student's sense of self, affect the way a student learns. Or to put it more stridently, I'll borrow Alice Brand's description of the way the brain shapes learning in a writing classroom, how our emotional processing affects higher order thinking: "when things are stalled in the classroom it is because of emotion. When things go well, it is also because of emotion" (216).

In a similar vein, Blythe McVicker Clinchy marks the distinctions between "connected knowing" and "separate knowing" as a way of better understanding how to teach critical thinking. While "separate knowing" and its practice of detached, analytical thinking has long had primacy of place in academic discourse, Clinchy argues for the importance of having both types of knowing in the classroom, citing Bertrand Russell's formulation: that one should read with "neither reverence nor contempt" but with "sympathy," and once you've figured out "what it feels like to believe in [the philosopher's] theories" (i.e., connected knowing) *then* one takes up the more "'critical' attitude" associated with separate knowing (40). In composition circles, we'd recognize similar moves with terms like "reading with and against the grain" (Bartholomae and Petrosky 10) or "the doubting game and

the believing game” (Elbow 148). Clinchy, it’s important to note, is suggesting not only the ways in which students ought to engage with texts, but also the ways in which they should engage with each other, and the ways in which teachers should engage with their students, all in an effort to encourage sharper thinking.

She also writes that when she and her colleagues conducted studies of female undergraduates and asked them about “teachers who had helped them grow,” among the characteristics of those teachers were that they “made connections between their own experiences—often, their own failures—and the students’ efforts. Once this had occurred, once the teacher had established a context of connection, the student could tolerate—even almost welcome—the teacher’s criticism. Criticism, in this context, becomes collaborative rather than condescending” (40). You can hear the echoes of this finding in my students’ responses earlier.

But how much do students need to know? More recently, I was teaching a different first-year composition course on argument and research, one in which I didn’t share a personal narrative with my students but instead was mindful of occasionally telling them anecdotes from my life—some of them stories about myself or my family that would more typically be marked as personal, giving my students a glimpse of me outside the academy, and some of them about my personal / professional self at academic conferences and artists’ colonies or struggling to research and write pieces such as this one. Then, as part of the course evaluations, I had my students answer this question: *In a seminar-sized reading and composition class such as this one, how important to your engagement with the course and to your learning experience is it to get to know the instructor personally?*

My students generally said that knowing a little more about me kept them engaged with the material and more comfortable participating in class discussion, less intimidated by the prospect of being wrong or asking for help. They often commented on the importance of having the sense that their instructor “cares” about them, partly as reflected by his willingness to share of himself. A couple of specific comments:

Having a good working relationship, facilitated by some personal knowledge and rapport with the teacher, is very important for the learning experience. I think knowing a teacher just a bit outside of just the teacher-student power relationship can help students to interact and take part in class and to seek help from the teacher.

When an instructor brings part of themselves to class through humor, examples of their own work, or anecdotes from their life, it shows students that the professor is truly engaged. For me, this is very inspiring and motivates me to go beyond what I would with a professor who is not as invested.

These responses and the many similar ones I've received over the years reinforce my conviction that fostering a learning environment of emotional connectedness, in part by letting the students get to know me, creates a greater likelihood that students will be able to develop their writing, their cold-eyed critical reading and thinking skills. The traditional mode of analytic thinking—the “separate knowing”—can follow because the feeling of connection has been established in the classroom. Also, that connection doesn't require the teacher's life story to be laid bare for the students: in many of those responses from my students, they weren't asking for everything. They wanted “just a bit,” “a little bit,” a “part of” me, not the whole of me.

### **I'm a Human Being, Not Your Curriculum Delivery Robot**

On its own, a teacher getting personal won't make students better writers, of course. It's just one piece of a puzzle we rebuild with each class. The other pieces all have to be there—well-wrought lectures and assignments, challenging readings, extensive preparation, theoretical backstopping. But we're people who took various routes to our position in front of the blackboard, and our students sometimes wonder how we got there, or what we're doing when we're not behind the lectern. Addressing some of that curiosity may be productive. Robert Brooke asserts that imitating the model of the teacher as writer and reader can help students develop their own writing identities. He also argues that “[W]hen a student (or any writer) successfully learns something about writing by imitation, it is by imitating another *person*, and not a text or a process” (23). The teacher, in effect, becomes a kind of live text for students (whether the teacher wants to be or not). To imagine that we are merely a clear pane through which the student sees course material, or that we can totally efface our personal selves in the classroom (let alone elide all the cultural factors that bear on the student-teacher relationship) and still be successful teachers—these beliefs may be motivated by virtuous aims, our efforts to avoid narcissistic behavior, but in practice they're probably counterproductive if not impossible. When one considers the classroom from a student's point of view, as Marshall Gregory does, one sees how important the teacher-as-person becomes:

What student learners see in front of them as they enter a classroom is not a disembodied skill or a dissociated idea but a *person* who has mastery over a skill or possession of an idea, and the first thing students respond to is whether the value of the skill or idea is recommended by the manner and the mind—in short, the ethos—of the teacher....If the teacher exhibits an ethos of passion, commitment, deep interest, involvement, honesty, curiosity, excitement, and so on, then what students are moved to imitate is not the skill or the

idea directly, but the passion, commitment, excitement, and interest that clearly vivifies the life of the teacher. . . . only at that point—when we are moved as students to want what the teacher has and is as a person—do we as students begin to place high value on the skill or the idea that the teacher is trying to teach us. (77)

We've all seen how our engagement with and enthusiasm about course content, including responses to student writing, can rub off on our students. These things partly originate in a teacher's personal connection to the material. The buried roots don't always need to be exposed to students—the enthusiasm itself about the text or idea under discussion is often enough on its own—but if we stipulate that the students care in some measure about where the enthusiasm comes from, then it's worth being mindful of when we ought to dig the roots out to advance the aims of our teaching.

Even teachers uncomfortable with opening their personal selves to the classroom still care about how they come across to their students. That projection, or ethos, emanates in part from a teacher's classroom presence, a concept which Jerry Farber offers a useful way of thinking about. Simply put, it's a quality of being "fully present" and expecting of ourselves what we expect of our students: "we want [students'] full presence—but we're not likely to get it if they sense that we ourselves are not entirely, genuinely, there with them" (215). For Farber, as for many teachers, that presence "means holding every single class session up to the standard of the best [he's] been able to achieve," and staying aware of his students' engagement and energy as well as his own "*on that day and at that moment*" (219). It's a practice that can prove challenging but, when done well, comes with benefits most of us would acknowledge: "Presence, more than any particular technique or activity, addresses the potential of the classroom medium because it carries with it a sense of immediacy, openness, and spontaneity, and therefore, even in lecture, draws presence from the other people in the room..." (217-218). This teacher's presence, I would argue, includes being aware of when one might need to reveal more of oneself to draw forth the presence of students. At which points do we cease to be "entirely, genuinely" present if we don't get personal? When does a particular class, or an individual student, need something—not just practice of a skill they haven't yet mastered, or a revisiting of a difficult text, or a break in routine, but when do they need to hear something about the teacher?

That presence of the personal can be planned in some measure, but its power often derives from the same spontaneous qualities that a lively debate features, or the way in which a particular emotion can arrive, unbidden. We sometimes tell our students who we are without intending to. In a class where my students were writing research papers

on the Iraq War, I planned a lesson one day on writing conclusions. As it happened, this coincided with the fifth anniversary of the war's beginning. I began by writing numbers on the board and then talking about the tens of thousands of dead soldiers and civilians those numbers represented in an effort to emphasize the greatest "So What?" of this or any war and to demonstrate that the writing they were engaged in, while clearly marked as academic, mattered in a way that wasn't purely academic. I had gotten through most of my inaugural comments when I suddenly started to choke up. My face flushed, my voice quavered, tears started to well. My students snapped to attention. My emotion could well have derailed the class as it threatened to do to me, but I paused, gathered myself, and then finished what I had to say before we set to work on the rest of the lesson. The students were animated and fully engaged for the rest of the session; it was one of the best meetings of the term.

The student engagement that day was no doubt owing to a variety of factors that it's difficult to tease out in retrospect—the activity I'd designed worked well for them, or they were ready to focus on writing more effective closings to their essays, among other possible variables. But the tone was set by my unplanned welling of emotion. When I started to choke up, I was surprised and embarrassed, but I was also personally present. Similarly, when I asked those students to set that writing assignment for me a few years ago, and certainly by the time I was writing and reading my narrative for them, I was fully present. On another recent occasion, when I was practically hopping up and down in my class as I shared my genuine excitement at the way Adrienne Rich had artfully employed a semicolon, showing my students how beautiful I thought a simple mark of punctuation could be in conveying subtle meanings in a text, I was present. And in each case, my personal presence—emotional *and* intellectual—produced a reciprocal response from my students. They weren't merely entertained or diverted for a moment: they were there with me, prompted in part by my emotions—rooted as they were in who I am as a writer, a reader, a teacher, a person—to engage in the harder-headed critical work of the course.

Somewhere between the involuntary and the scripted moments of personal disclosure like those I have described above, there are the occasions during which most of these revelations of the personal self tend to occur, occasions I would characterize as actively responding to the moment. It's a version of Farber's classroom "presence," or of what Frank McCourt once said of good teachers—that they have "the instincts of a dog," meaning they, like he, "could sniff the air, sniff the mood of the class, and feel it out. You have to have the instincts of a parent, a politician and, from time to time, of a dictator" (qtd. in Aronson). Mc-

Court's choice of terms here hints at some of the different versions of self that teachers reveal from time to time even as they try to maintain a consistent ethos. Teachers must adjust and respond to the students with whom they are presented; teachers do this all the time. With one group, I might need to point to my experience as an assertion of my expertise and my authority as their guide (or point to problems with same). With another, I might need to acknowledge my cultural similarities to or differences from them. With still another, I might need to find a situation I've encountered—a writing situation, a life situation—analogueous to theirs that could be illustrative. But take a precise, and pedagogically successful, revelation of self in one classroom and then try to repeat it in another, and the move may fall flat. Similarly, we've all seen how a dynamic discussion of a text in one class can transform into a soporific experience for a different group an hour or two later. The immediacy of the classroom context matters.

Our students will form some sense of who we are no matter what we do. This sense might be a fleeting thought during class, as unremarkable to them as a brief breeze on an otherwise still day. Or this sense of us, developed out of things we've done or said, might provoke an active curiosity or dislike or admiration. Certainly that sense has some bearing on how students will respond to the work we're asking them to do. Further, whatever identity we think we're presenting to our students isn't necessarily the one they will perceive. The multiple variables of who we are, who they are, what's going on in the classroom and with the subject matter and with the world at large—all combining into that nebulous thing we call chemistry—will cause each student to construct the teacher's self in particular ways, not all of them helpful to the pedagogical task at hand. So why bother? Maybe we ought to just focus on the work. Maybe we can't do anything except to show them we're serious, committed, and knowledgeable. This class doesn't have anything to do with me.

Except we teachers are there. And we've chosen the material, presumably material we care about. Our students see us, they wonder about us, they wonder whether we're not doing too bad for ourselves, or, more to the point, whether whatever models and guidance we might provide could help them manage to not do too bad for *themselves*. Though the answers are anything but simple, it's worth asking, simply, what happens when we reveal ourselves to students, and, given what results, whether this revelation might be a valuable pedagogical choice from time to time, as important in its own ways as withholding personal information is in others.

There is always a vulnerability to revealing who we are. We can keep up not only our professional decorum but also our professorial

mask for fear our students might expose some part of us as the collegiate equivalent of the Wizard of Oz. Keeping the mask in place may be the safer route, but wearing it as if it were a uniform we dare not remove is also more likely to make our jobs harder. Additionally, the more vulnerable our students are, the more necessary personal revelation may be. In a composition class where students enter having been told by the university that according to a writing placement exam they are, in effect, deficient, the students are certainly in a vulnerable position. Indeed, Jane Stanley aptly characterizes the long-held manner—essentially since the school’s founding—in which the University of California has viewed and admitted such students as “the disdainful embrace” (138), an embrace that many other colleges offer to a significant number of their students. Given this institutional commentary on their writing and reading abilities, these students often have negative emotions associated with their placement in the class, and the more deep-seated those emotions are, the more defensive and intellectually resistant those students are likely to be. If the teacher can find a way to connect with the student and foster the student’s sense of self as a writer, partly by revealing relevant and pointed insights as to who the teacher is, then struggling first-year writers—indeed *any* student writer—will have a better chance of neutralizing the negative emotion associated with critical writing and making strides that will help them to succeed. We teachers have ongoing personal experiences, motivations, frustrations, struggles, stories that shaped us, things that led us to our respective fields, to our love of writing and reading and teaching. Surely—and without being self-indulgent or merely sentimental—we can actively share some of these parts of ourselves with our students as long as we do so while keeping our focus squarely where it ought to be: on what our students need to hear from us to best learn what we have to teach them.



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