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Theories of Composition

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The Power of Self-Expression in Digital Writing

When James Berlin published his article "Rhetoric and Ideology in The Writing Class" in

1988, the composition field was first introduced to the term "expressionistic rhetoric" to describe

a group of compositionists who come form a "liberal culture" to create "a scheme arguing for

writing as a gift of genius, an art accessible only to a few, and then requiring years of literary

study" (484). This badmouthing would last until the late 2000s and created a divide our field is

still struggling to mend. During that time personal narrative saw a stark decline in use and

influence in the classroom. The original compositionists attempted to rebuttal the attack but this

unprovoked attack seemed somehow to work against them. Until Newkirk published "The

Performance of Self in Student Writing" in 1997, there was no real conversation against Berlin's

ideas on the field which pushed for the importance of expressivism to return to the composition

classroom. This barbaric time period would become known as "The Composition Wars," where

our field seemed to pull itself apart at the seams. Now that we, in the composition field, feel the

push of a new era where technology and fast data transfer are seeping into writing expressions,

we are currently in search of a methodology which can aid in this growing change. Interestingly

enough, expressivist rhetoric is finding itself a useful ally in the digital writing realm. In a field

divided by war it is interesting to see that the new area of technology within composition is

choosing to side with expressivist rhetoric in the internet's social setting. The slow return of

expressivist rhetoric to the field of composition is still fairly new, my first composition course was in August of 2008, and I was still taught to omit the "I" in academic writing. As digital writing is still fairly new to our field, it raises questions on expressivisms return and how it plays into digital writing. When we look at the world of digital writing and the spaces where it is written, can we really not see the connection between expressivism and digital writing? Digital writing such as social media, online articles, and website essays are all rooted in one thing: self-expression. The digital writing world is where writers go to express themselves and be heard by a global audience. This audience can in turn express themselves right back. The return of expressivist rhetoric in the writing field is tied directly to the emerging field of digital writing, and the way that students use self-expression in their everyday writings in the digital universe. Expressivism and digital writing have both seen their fair share of scrutiny in the composition field. Yet, they both seek to change the mold and upset any attempts at rigorous cannon. In exploring the theory of digital writing and expressivism, I wish to define these terms as they are used throughout my essay.

Expressivist writing as a whole was never defined before Berlin decided to write an article taking different compositionists ideologies and then placing those compositionists into groups where they were hierarchically scaled. Berlin defines the expressivist mind set on writing as "an art, a creative act in which the process-the discovery of the true self-is as important as the product-the self discovered and expressed" (484). The expressivist compositionists wanted a pedagogy that was rooted in the idea that students who write about themselves and their experiences become better writers and therefore better people through their own self discovered writings. The most important part of expressivist rhetoric is "the presence of originality" and that "is the case whether the writer is creating poetry or writing a business report" (485). The idea

that to use your own voice of originality gives you the power to express your own unique individual self. This idea of "self-expression can thus lead to authentic self-experience for both the writer and the reader" (485). As a composition student, I was never taught how to use my voice originally and I feel that this has since hindered me in my ability to write expressive and narrative papers. The years of hard academic discourse which I was force-feed has only worked to disenfranchise me with the tone and use of narrative writing. Now, when I use narrative in an academic paper it seems distasteful and unsavory. I hope that through the change in the current composition field we can help the next generation of students to feel that they can write while expressing themselves. This idea of self-expression has proven useful to the new digital era's students, who find themselves in need of a way to express their experiences since this practice has been taken out of many English classes in education. Interestingly enough, Berlin predicts expressivisms transformation to multiple modes when he describes "sensory images that can be used in order to explore the self, the sensations leading to the apprehending-source of all experience. More important, these sense impressions can be coupled with language to provide metaphors to express the experience of the self, an experience which transcends ordinary non-metaphoric language" (485). The use of "sensory images" introduces the use of visual rhetoric in digital composition. The way that he describes the use of "sense impressions" with "language" seems to show the use of multiple layers used in multimodal composition. These metaphors which he uses for describing expressivism mirrors the multiple literacies which composing in digital writing space create through the introduction of new media.

Cynthia Selfe in the textbook *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for expanding the Teaching of Composition* describes digital writing as artifacts "made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts" (15). Within the digital realm, we

can create writing "by turning pages, clicking links, machining conceptual connections between a photograph on one screen and a poem on another" (17). This new area of creation in composition is an area in which many in the composition field fear to tread, especially when we love to hold dear our print versions of text. Selfe writes that she cannot "deny that it is easier now with computers than it was with printing presses to compose, produce, and distribute texts" (19). This ease of access has changed our way of life completely and now our students enter our class already understanding multiliteracies, even if that is not the word they use to describe it. They have practiced composing in the digital writing space for years and now practice coding websites in elementary classes. We in the composition field should attempt to accept the progressive move from print media to digital texts. Digital writing can be useful because in this generation "technologies take shape in context of everything else that matters to us" (19). Students who use these new forms of writing "can then start to experiment with and construct" connections to critical self-discovery by using other versions of the self. New media texts allow us to create objects which can be entered into "communication channels where we all now move and work with other" (22). Our students use online communities to create their own identity, and this generations online identity is sometimes how they discover themselves. They use the World Wide Web to explore other people's online versions of themselves and their differing experiences as devices to critique their own version of self.

"Digitality ought to encourage us to consider not only the potentialities of material choices for digital texts but for any text we make, and that we ought to use the range of choices that digital technologies seem to give us to consider the range of choices that printing-press technologies haven't" (10).

Digital writing came out of a creative void which many compositionists where feeling in the mid-2000's. Much like early expressivism, this theory came from a generation that needed a way to express their form of writing. Since expressivism was pushed away by our field as anti-Marxist, its return has come to fill a hole that was left from expressivism's tarnished remains. Geoffrey Sirc describes the new generations of compositionists as designers who use these multiple literacies as a way to express their true "self". The use of designer mimics the way that art and creative writing where used by early expressivists as a way of describing writing theory. This self-expressing design style has created assignments which allow students to introduce the self in multimodal creations. A distinctive trait in digital writing is this designer creates use of self, and to map the way that digital writing and expressivism have intermingled we first must identify why and when the "self" reemerged into the composition field.

When reading Donald Murray's article "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader" we come to understand the importance of self in the world of composition. In this article, he describes the way that writers create an "other self," much like students create an "other self" in their online identity. We demonstrate this other self in writing by allowing our other self to critique the self or voice we are writing in. Murray brings a strong point in the argument for the self in writing, that all published writers state that they write for themselves not for their readers. When a publisher online composes a digital artifact they in fact use this other self as a way to self-express in the online world. When students in the composition class begin to write about the self they sometimes become more culturally aware of the online world that they use every day. The creative aspect of the world of digital writing cracked the boundaries which excluded expressionistic rhetoric in the writing classroom. The self has become welcomed into our field again because teachers have begun to realize the need for students to learn about their

"self" through their own writing. This process is essential for students who may have not yet developed their own voice. The "self" in expressivism has always been an important part of the writing process until it was shunned. Expressivism wanted a creative and unique writing experience for each student and this is why theory can often work well in the digital writing field. The self-expression created through digital writing online comes directly from the use "self" in their social media lives

When students write online in blogs, online journals, and social media, they discuss the self in a way that makes them feel valued in the online community. The digital writing universe has created a way in which these students are able to express their inner world with others who may be experiencing the same issues. In these online discussions students are writing about their "self," they believe their experiences and ideas can add to a larger community of writers. This idea is used even by people in times of chaos, where a "tweet" or Facebook update from a victim of war, bombing, and natural disasters use writing in social media as a tool to inform, explain, and educate others that are on the outside. When I entered the writing classroom and began my semester in Dr. Janet Bean's class on "New Directions in The Teaching of Writing." I was unaware of how much "self" I was going to discover. Since I as a student never was able to experience the personal narrative; it was a completely new experience for me. Through my transition into the digital writing world, I came to explore the ways that my own self was discovered in the multimodal projects I created with my own visuals and my own voice. In the world we experience the "self" and this is often how we explain and understand cultures. The self-expression that Berlin ostracized from the composition world has now reemerged in the multiple literacies of our students. Now when students enter our classroom they have already become self-expression writers used to expressing their opinion through online reviews and

social media applications. When we allow students to express their personal narrative in an academic setting, we allow them to use writing that not only brings about self-discovery but allows them to write in environments they are friendly with and enjoy. Imbedded in expressivist rhetoric is the idea that students should first and foremost enjoy that writing they are partaking in. When we bring digital writing into the composition classroom, we allow the hole that the composition wars created to once again be filled. That is why with the use of creative digital writing in the classroom, I believe, expressivist writing is enjoying a revamp in the composition field.

Now that our students have become designer-composers in their own right, self-expression is rampant in the composition classroom. Freshman students are designing essays where they use layers of images, writing, and audial visual new media. We find ideologies of expressivism again finding their place in the composition room. This new generation of students seek creativity and new ways to express themselves online constantly. This ideology allows our students to use new mediums and create a learning environment where they discover more about themselves as they become new designers. The projects that I began in my first year as a graduate student completely differed from the traditional academic essays I was originally given as a freshman. These new projects have allowed me as my own composer to understand first-hand the impact the digital expressive renewal has had.

As a designer in my own digital composition course, I was able to understand more than from a course where the self was taken out. I use social media on a daily basis and the theories we read and discussed in this course allowed me to process the way that my daily writings through social media and the online community have in fact allowed me to have a voice which I thought I would never be able to find. The assignments in this course ranged from creating a

WikiHow to designing and crafting a website. The WikiHow allowed me to understand the importance of audience and how we can use the "self" to draw our audience into our writing space. WikiHow works as a collaborative writing process where audience and writer become one. Through this experience, I was able to better discover my own abilities as a writer, and it built a confidence in myself that allowed me to push my writing further than I ever had. This digital writing creation enabled me to use the narrative 'I' voice in a way that was functional and creative. After I learned to use my narrative voice in a functional online instruction manual, we moved to a creative project which allowed us to create an autobiographical website about a person. Everything on the website was my own creation and showed the self-expression that I had been longing for in academic writing. This website was the first time I was asked to do a reflection on my own narrative feelings I developed while creating this project. I felt lost when I first attempted to address these questions which wanted me to seek the inward thought process my "self" felt as I designed this digital creation. These reflections and design projects allowed me to begin my discovery of my own voice in this expressive digital universe. These projects would have never existed had not a small group of expressivist writers chosen to continue with the tradition of "self".

It is thanks to the survival of expressivism in these small circles of composition which has allowed this creative practice to enter our pedagogy. Where the social critiques fear of the consumer and capitalistic nature of the World Wide Web would have hindered the entrance of digital writing into the composition field, expressivism has allowed digital writing to become a creative design experiment. Though expressivist writing, how it was originally categorized, received a fair share of badmouthing, the world of digital writing seeks to return the creative writing voice in composition to its former glory. Through the multiple modes that our students

use every day such as applications and social media, we will be able to advance the importance of composition studies to the university. The social and expressive nature of digital writing allows for us as teachers to instruct students to create writing that they can again recreate in their own functional realm. The importance of using digital writing as a way to mend and save our field as become more and more apparent in our study of composition. The more technology savvy our students become the more we as teachers must prepare to understand and progress to an era where the composition field is not only in its own backwards looking bubble, but seeks to explore and discover uncharted and creative writing designs. The biggest fear that holds us back from achieving the next steps in our progression to digital formats is the mentality that we cannot catch up to the rate that our students learn and explore new digital writing platforms. But I beg to differ, because if our professors can continue to keep up to date with the theory and wars going on in our field there is no reason we cannot learn to navigate our students technology uses. This fear in our department is why expressivism is needed again in our field. Expressivism was first and foremost a belief that professors wanted their students to not only learn about themselves but to enjoy writing for themselves. This ideology not only helps us as professors to understand the students self but to in turn discover even more about our own selves. Our students love using the internet for socializing and self-interest which is why digital writing now only serves to create a functional use of writing but seeks to use a platform that students enjoy writing in. As these the new era of digital expressivism in composition begins to take hold, we will watch as our students begin to enjoy writing in the composition classroom. The expressivists who brought about a creative way of writing now chose to look at the student as a creative designer which reaffirms their belief that the most powerful writing tools are the writing and the writers themselves.

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