Responding to Student Traumatic Writing: A Psychologist’s View

John MacDevitt

A counseling center psychologist / composition instructor applies psychological research and his experience to the question of how to respond to personal expressive writing in the classroom.

When students are invited to write about their personal experiences, they often choose to relate traumatic incidents and situations. And no wonder. The incidence of psychological trauma among US college student populations is high, with estimates ranging from approximately 50 to 90 percent (see Moser et al. 1042; Watson and Haynes 271). Perhaps a third of nineteen-year-olds report two or more traumatic experiences (Vrana and Lauterback 289). Events that cause psychological trauma seem to linger in students’ psyches as unfinished or unresolved business, waiting for expression. While many students will not consider exposing such experiences to an instructor, others seize the opportunity to strive for release, if not resolution. Research by psychologists and health workers indicates that such personal expressive writing is generally helpful across a wide variety of groups. Because such studies are relatively easy to perform, there have been many of them. Joshua M. Smyth, Deborah Nazarian, and Danielle Arigo report the effectiveness of expressive writing across a wide range of problem areas and subject groups with health concerns: participation in expressive writing has resulted in fewer visits to physicians, better lung function among asthmatics, improvements for rheumatoid arthritis patients, less anxiety and depression, and better GPAs (218). Whether such writing is “good” writing or supports the purposes of the academy is beyond the scope of this article, but it is indisputable that many instructors assign or accept it.

Before beginning to teach writing classes, I was a full-time counselor at a college counseling center for twenty years and I then both counseled and taught writing for another seven years.

My plan is to draw from both of my backgrounds to address the issue of how to respond when students decide to write about personal trauma. In fact, most individuals who experience a significant trauma do not speak about it with a mental health professional. They disclose it instead to friends, family members, lovers, coworkers, and other personal contacts. For example, of the approximately 10
percent of college students who seriously consider suicide within an academic year, only about a fifth of them receive professional treatment during that year (Kisch, Leino, and Silverman 3). Studies conducted by psychologists suggest that there is real value to high-contact workers such as hairdressers, bartenders, divorce lawyers, and industrial supervisors providing empathic listening and, when appropriate, referrals for professional help. Reviews of the research comparing the effectiveness of professional counselors versus paraprofessional counselors by Joseph Durlak; Michael Nietzel and Stuart Fisher; John Hattie, Christopher Sharpley, and H. Jane Rogers; and Jeffrey S. Berman and Nicholas Norton were unable to conclude that professionals were any more effective than paraprofessionals.

Hans Strupp, a noted psychotherapy researcher, conducted a landmark study in 1979 to test whether therapeutic changes were the effects of specific psychological techniques employed by expert therapists or the effects of the factors inherent in any “benign human relationship that affects the patient’s expectations and hope” (Strupp and Hadley 1125). He compared male students treated by highly experienced psychiatrists and psychologists known for their clinical expertise to similar students who met with professors from the fields of English, philosophy, history, and mathematics who were “selected on the basis of their reputation for warmth, trustworthiness, and interest in students” (1126). The students who met with the kindly professors showed comparable improvement to those who met with the highly trained psychotherapists. It is interesting to note that studies about using paraprofessionals (and professors!) to provide counseling appeared to diminish about the time that insurance payments for counseling became available. While it is important for counselors to know when to refer clients for psychiatric or medical evaluation and perhaps medication, the counseling field’s commitment to the medical model may primarily reflect political and financial realities.

**Objections to Personal Writing**

But many composition instructors consider themselves unqualified to read and respond to traumatic writing. Janet Lucas points out some of the arguments of those who criticize using personal writing in the classroom: students may experience shame and maybe even a breakdown from retraumatization (368) or may overexpose themselves in order to get the better grades they believe will come from the most dramatic disclosures (369). Lucas also notes that it can be uncomfortable and feel just plain wrong to discuss grammar in a piece that discloses painful personal experiences (369). Other students, reading disclosures, may be so affected by the content that they balk at examining writing issues, as in an incident reported by Lucia Perillo (qtd. in Lucas 369).

Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler express serious ethical concerns about requiring personal writing of any kind in any courses whatsoever, including composition. The vehemence of their argument strikes me as odd. They come up with reasons why personal writing might be injurious for women, men, and ethnic, social class, and sexual orientation or gender minorities.
They believe that grading is tied to the dramatic nature of self-revelation, and that students may not be able to competently make judgments about what should be revealed to whom. (Then who would make such judgments?) They seem to have had experiences with male professors assigning personal writing in order to gain greater emotional intimacy with some female students. An unethical instructor, they note, could use personal writing to identify those females most vulnerable to sexual harassment. Swartzlander is an English instructor; Pace and Stamler are psychologists at a university counseling center. They claim special knowledge from their experiences as therapists with students in classes where personal writing is required:

Most often it is a college’s counseling staff, rather than faculty members, who end up dealing with students struggling with the issues [from engaging in personal writing] we’ve described. In fact, a student often will just disappear from the class that precipitated the discomfort, and the instructor will have no idea why. We wonder what happens to the students who do not find their way to a counseling center. (n.p.)

I have no recollection of hearing anything like this from any of the approximately three thousand student clients I have counseled in the last thirty years. In our composition program, approximately fifty to one hundred different individuals are teaching a composition course at any time. If such a problem were significant, I should have heard of a number of instances. My inclination is to cast a skeptical eye on Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler’s claims.

However, some of Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler’s concerns do ring true. Students are vulnerable, and instructors are relatively more powerful. Feeling coerced to write dramatic personal disclosures can be uncomfortable and seems unfair, and students who feel forced to revisit painful periods in their lives may potentially again be swept up in painful feelings. Students may become upset when others’ disclosures are painful to read, especially if they have suffered similar traumas.

I agree that courses should not require self-disclosure, but I believe that ideally they will allow it and encourage it. (And students will disclose personal material regardless of instructors’ instructions.) I agree that students should not be given the expectation that writing about past traumas will somehow resolve them. To alter the perception that writing about personal drama will bring better grades, I suggest that grading should be in accordance with rubrics that are made available to students, that syllabi should clearly outline expectations and procedures, including how grades are determined, and that instructors should follow their syllabi. In my composition class, students must write narratives, but they do not have to be nonfiction. My impression, supported by written feedback from my classes, is that students highly value the freedom to choose what to write.

It was not my impression that students made poor choices of what to write about. They seemed to modulate both their choice of stories and how to tell them. The two first-person rape victim stories I read were presented as fiction and were discussed in class as all pieces were: we spoke of the narrator, not of the writer, acknowledging that the two are never the same. When one reader asked the writer
if the piece was actually nonfiction, I allowed the author to state her disclaimer and then moved us along to the next piece. My students seemed to choose to write about traumas with which they had had some time to come to terms. One of my older students wrote a painful family narrative about her father terrorizing the family, beating her mother unconscious with regularity while the children huddled at the top of the stairs. She did not write anything about the divorce she was going through at the present time. Another student wrote very sensitively about his parents’ divorce and its aftermath and his experience of being in an impossible middle position. He wrote nothing about his current battle with testicular cancer. Another student wrote of her guilt about reluctantly going to visit her dying aunt in the hospital, only to find out she was already dead. Before the student wrote her next piece, her father died unexpectedly of a massive heart attack. She did not choose to write about this, even though the class knew about it and had sent her a card (she had notified me by email, and I inquired if it would be okay if I told the class); instead she wrote in a celebratory tone about getting drunk at a big party the previous summer and being unable to find her car the next morning. Given freedom, most students exercise reasonable judgment in their choice of topics.

According to Joshua Smyth’s 1998 synthesis of the research on the impact of written emotional expression on health, there is a predictable and very significant rise in writers’ emotional distress as they write about traumas and in the immediate aftermath of writing. However, in the many studies included in Smyth’s analysis, few subjects claimed to have actual difficulty dealing with the feelings that emerged from their writing practice: they just felt distressed. I think of the emergence of emotion as a good thing, an evidence of caring for oneself (why weep or rage over the suffering of someone you dislike?) and a sign that a pain or a tension is relaxing its grip. Rather than attempting to “do” something, to “fix” the situation or feeling, psychotherapists commonly attempt to receive the client empathically and to communicate that empathy to her. Since Carl R. Rogers’s application of ideas from counseling to the educational process, empathy has been suggested to teachers at all levels as a stance that helps free students to learn.

Empathy

Karen Surman Paley, who was trained as a family therapist before becoming a composition professor, offers a construct from family therapist Salvador Minuchin’s work. Families can be described along a continuum that ranges from “enmeshed”—where there seems to be an absence of boundaries between members—to “disengaged,” where boundaries between members are very rigid. Paley quotes Minuchin et al.’s example: “The parents in an enmeshed family may become quite upset when a child does not eat dessert. The parents in a disengaged family may not respond to a child’s delinquent behavior.” Responding only to problems with grammar and punctuation, she says, the instructor is at the disengaged end of the spectrum. Ignoring writing issues and only focusing on the pain and emotion—playing therapist—she places at the enmeshed end of the spectrum (92).
Paley describes the interaction between two subjects of an ethnographic study she conducted, the composition instructor Helena and her student Catherine. Catherine wrote of the pain of having an alcoholic father and watching her mother suffer with him. The essay was a highly emotional one. At one point, Paley observed Helena commenting on Catherine’s essay, and it seemed to her that Helena was insensitively pushing forward through the text commenting on problems and errors. Paley was pained while observing, and it was only much later, reviewing the transcript, that she saw Helena’s actions as sensitive.

If the composition instructor is perceived by the student as decent, empathic, and caring, the instructor need not agonize about exactly what to say: she can just say what is on her mind, as tactfully as possible. In psychotherapy, the best predictor of outcome is the counselor–client relationship, as perceived by the client. Psychotherapy involves a real, person-to-person connection; it is not merely a matter of making the right tactical moves or following prescribed steps. A good psychotherapy relationship is characterized by therapist empathy, warmth, and genuineness, and by client trust. In such a relationship, the therapist has a lot of latitude: errors or insensitivities may be addressed openly by the client and taken in stride. While the teacher-student relationship is not typically as close, it seems reasonable to expect that student reaction to instructor interventions would be moderated by the quality of the relationship between the two individuals. Paley gives a good example from Helena’s account of her first reactions to reading Catherine’s essay at the beginning of their conference:

And [exhalation] at the end I just paused, I didn’t say [pause] ANYTHING. My first response to her had to do with, you know, um, “This is going to be a bit tricky, dealing with this as a piece of writing and also, um, discussing the content of the essay. In other words, when I tell you that you need a comma HERE, I don’t want you to think that I have missed the weight of the story. But me telling you, ‘This is a fragment, don’t write in a passive voice, um, insert an adjective HERE’ is all to get you to make this into the strongest essay it can be because obviously this is a story you WANT told.” Um, so that seemed to set a nice cushion for things I had to tell her, you know. It’s really hard for me to make little technical critiques about a paper that has to deal with something this heavy, you know, so I tried to set that up, and I think that WORKED. (101)

I think a tactful “speaking of one’s mind” includes using “I” statements instead of “you” statements. For example, I felt uneasy after I read your essay about cutting, and it nagged at the back of my mind last night. I feel like I’m intruding, asking this, but are you in danger of doing away with yourself? This is much easier for a student to hear than You sound pretty disturbed—are you going to kill yourself?

Marilyn Valentino gives a good example of an “I” statement. Talking with a student who had written about a traumatic incident, Valentino asks if the student is writing a fictional piece. The student responds, “No.” Then Valentino volunteers: “I wasn’t sure how you wanted me to respond” (281). This “I” statement is similar to a question in that it displays uncertainty and perhaps an openness to a response. It does not, however, direct or demand a response.
Darrell Fike illustrates the value of empathy as a response to a student’s writing by relating the story of one student who had written an essay about domestic violence for her capstone course. This essay included a courtroom scene where her grandmother was on trial for the murder of her abusive husband (this was fact), and addressed her stirring remarks to the student (who was not yet conceived). The student had failed the capstone course previously because of disagreements with faculty readers and the earlier instructor. Fike suggested the student cut the courtroom scene, which did not seem to fit in the piece, a moment before he realized that this scene was more important to her than was passing the course. Then he said, “I can tell your grandmother is very important to you. You must love her very much.” The student teared up and began to talk, while Fike listened. “After we established her emotional investment in the essay, I suggested that doing the tedious work of incorporating technical revisions to improve the readability of the piece would help a reader understand her grandmother’s story better and ultimately would help Janet honor this remarkable woman” (n. pag.). Ultimately, the student revised her piece, it passed muster with both Fike and the readers, and she graduated. Being received and understood can allow a student to go on to do what needs to be done.

Instructor Self-Disclosure

One way that friends support friends is by making parallel self-disclosures. If one discloses with some shame that she has been raped, the friend may (if it is true) reciprocally disclose that she has been raped as well. This kind of responsive disclosure conveys the message that “you are not alone,” and in so doing it provides support and may reduce feelings of shame. There is some disagreement among compositionists about whether instructors should make these kinds of responsive self-disclosures to students as a way to provide support. Valentino writes that she has been advised by counselors to avoid doing so. The reasons she gives are that students in distress want their distress to be the focus—not the instructor’s distress—and that students need to perceive their instructors as being “in control of the situation” (280).

Carole Deletiner does not offer an explicit rationale for her in-the-margin disclosures to students:

I tell them about my own experiences as an estranged member of a dysfunctional family, a terrified student who never spoke in four years of college, a student now grappling with whether or not I can take another day in a graduate school that feels just like the unaccepting home in which I grew up. My fear, rage and comradeship tumble out onto the margins of their papers in the comments I write to them. (813)

However, it is apparent that her intention is to be transparent, to allow her own vulnerability to show, and to display comradeship rather than superiority. I admire what I take to be Deletiner’s courage and her refusal to compromise about disclosing herself to her students, but I do not advocate it. I agree with Kathleen Pfeiffer, who comments on Deletiner: “I think that students enjoy and appreciate the human
and personal sides to their teachers; but I also think that students are ill-equipped to negotiate responsibly such intimacy as she advocates” (670).

Therapists Sarah Knox and Clara E. Hill report a study by Barrett and Ber- man that found that reciprocal self-disclosures (i.e., those in which the therapist makes a disclosure parallel to the client’s) were associated with more liking for the therapist and less post-treatment distress (532). They offer suggestions to therapists, some of which may generalize to composition teachers. Self-disclosures should be used sparingly and only to meet the client’s needs, not the therapist’s. It is best to self-disclose regarding issues that are mostly resolved, and therapists should return the focus to the client after the disclosure (532–38). To my composition students I disclose aspects of my personal life and even traumas I have undergone, but always with the limitation that I do not make myself feel vulnerable. I would not, for example, disclose something I did that still made me feel ashamed. While I trust myself to handle student disclosures with great responsibility and to respect their rights to privacy to a very great limit, I do not trust them to do the same with disclosures I make. I need to be comfortable in my classroom. I do, when it is appropriate, disclose that my oldest son died in a car accident at sixteen, and that I have been married and divorced three times. I disclose that I was an unmotivated student for most of my undergraduate years, and that I still like to “party.” But I only say these things because I am now comfortable with them. In one of my first years teaching, I modeled openness by disclosing to my students that I was to have a biopsy for a node on my prostate. I regretted it, because I felt I had to follow up and tell them when an aggressive cancer was discovered, before I had had time to come to terms with it myself.

In a recent opinion piece on teacher self-disclosure, Lad Tobin claims that “the effectiveness of personal revelation in a classroom can be assessed only in the context of a particular teacher, course, and group of students” (201). He performs a different version of himself with first-year students than he does for teaching assistants and in his writing for peers in professional journals:

In courses for first-year students, I often reveal personal characteristics designed to reassure my students that I am capable, confident, and consistent. In courses for teaching assistants and in writing about teaching, I often try to reveal the opposite. . . . My point is simply that differences in goals and audiences lead me to different performances of self. (202)

Tobin’s conclusion about whether self-disclosure is advisable in a particular situation is similar to psychotherapists’: it depends. Therapist George Strickler says it differently, but means the same thing: “The impact of every disclosure, whether by the therapist or by the patient, depends upon the response of the other, and there is no prescription for a sound disclosure (other than that it should be in the service of the patient)” (629).

While Tobin says that he performs a different version of himself depending on the audience and situation, he writes that in all situations, “I reveal to my students enough about my personal history, experiences, and values to feel a sense of
“Integration and integrity.” (204). To not do so, he implies, would distract him from his teaching task. This echoes one of the core therapeutic conditions put forth in Carl Rogers’s seminal article on necessary and sufficient conditions for effective counseling: therapist genuineness. Rogers writes: “Certainly the aim is not for the therapist to express or talk out his own feelings, but primarily that he should not be deceiving the client as to himself” (98). I find that to be comfortable in the classroom, like Tobin, I need to feel that I am being honest with my students. If I’m not honest, I’m being disrespectful.

**Traumatized Instructors**

Besides responding to student writing “in the margins” and sometimes face-to-face, composition instructors who read essays about student suffering and trauma must deal with their own emotional reactions. Some authors report that their discomfort with such essays leaves them reluctant to assign personal writing. A number of compositionists discussing personal expressive writing have referred to their inability or unwillingness or refusal to read particular essays. Anne Ruggles Gere writes: “Recently I had to stop reading an account of a six-year-old boy dragged to his death by a carjacker who intended to push the boy out of the car but got him tangled in the seat belt instead. The description of the mother frantically trying to untangle her son from the accelerating car was too painful to read” (211).

Since about 1990, the term *vicarious traumatization* has been used to refer to the negative changes that may arise within therapists and others as a consequence of their empathic engagement with traumatized individuals. According to therapists Robyn L. Trippany, Victoria E. White Kress, and S. Allen Wilcoxon, repeated exposures to traumatic stories “can have devastating effects on their personal and professional lives” through negative changes in counselors’ construals of themselves, other people, and the world (31). The world can become a frightening place filled with individuals of cruel intentions and their victims, and it may become evident that one can neither protect oneself nor meaningfully help others.

When I began full-time college counseling, I found myself once every month or two sitting on the floor of my living room with a bottle of wine, listening to sad music and weeping while I meditated on my clients’ struggles. With time, experience, and a string of personal traumas in my own life, I now usually find clients’ pains less overwhelming. Trippany, Kress, and Wilcoxon suggest that therapists can prevent or minimize vicarious traumatization by sharing their reactions to painful client stories with peers or supervisors, limiting their exposure, maintaining healthy balances in their lives, being trained in working with and understanding trauma, and building or maintaining a larger sense of meaning and spiritual connection (35–36). The suggestions above for therapists should have some applicability to composition instructors. Certainly for instructors, discussing personal reactions to painful student writing with other instructors would be particularly helpful.

Keeping the traumatized students’ current life contexts in mind while reading their disclosures helps maintain a sense of perspective. Students who are working,
maintaining romantic relationships, living with friends in an apartment, paying their own bills, and functioning in academia successfully are not defined by past traumas in their lives. They are defined as successful and healthy by the fact that they are competently navigating the world. If they have been orphaned, raped, molested, neglected, abused, and incurred other terrible losses, it is unfortunate. Perhaps it is even tragic or horrible. But they are okay.

Very rarely students will tell me they have been unable to finish reading a classmate’s piece because it became too upsetting. Usually their written critiques of each other’s traumatic writing include a sensitive, human response as well as on task analysis, criticism, and suggestions. Likewise, the verbal responses given to their peers are generally sensitive but on task. I believe that the way I structure and conduct the class creates a collegial atmosphere, but those topics are beyond the scope of this article. Although I have had students drop out after the first class session when they learn that their work will be critiqued by the whole class, and that they will be expected to critique other students’ pieces verbally and in writing, I do not believe my students have dropped because they found they could not bear to read about other students’ traumas.

**Referring Students to Counseling**

Some of the composition articles that address student trauma and risk display a naive view of counseling center function. Campus counseling services are not the mental health police. They do not contact students who have been identified as troubled and tell them they should or must come in for counseling; a campus counseling center cannot risk being perceived as an arm of the university administration. However, campus counselors do consult with instructors who are concerned about students. Counselors should not share any information about clients with instructors—that is a violation of confidentiality—but they will consult with instructors on the basis of the information the instructor provides. If instructors believe that a student is in imminent danger of suicide or of committing homicide, they should of course immediately contact the police. When instructors feel that there may be some danger, but they do not believe that danger to be imminent, they should consult with someone at the counseling center. In my counselor role, I willingly consult with faculty members who feel they should not reveal a student’s name, but sometimes if I know the name, I can take other information into consideration in giving advice. At some schools instructors will be expected to also consult with their writing program administrator or department head or dean of students, or perhaps other individuals as well. Consulting with colleagues is always a good idea. Sometimes students stay at a moderate level of risk for months or years. In these cases counselors make sure that colleagues and sometimes appropriate others know their concerns, but they do not decisively report the student as an imminent risk, because they are not.

Because instructors do not know which of their students may want or need counseling, and because many students do not know of the existence of personal
counseling services or how to access them, it is a good practice to inform the whole class about services. If your attitude toward counseling and your counseling center is positive, students will be more likely to go.

Marilyn J. Valentino, reviewing an earlier version of this article, pointed out that increasing numbers of writing classes are taught entirely online. She asks, how does an instructor assess the situation without being able to read facial expressions? I don’t have a good answer. When as a counselor I receive an email query from a student whom I have never met, I respond courteously, explicitly (so I will be understood), and conservatively. I suppose that writing your concerns in as personal a tone as you can and asking the student direct questions would be a reasonable way to proceed.

If instructors do decide to talk with or write to a student individually to refer him or her to a counselor, they should consider using a personal approach. While instructors possesses some authority by virtue of their position, in this matter authority as a person is both more legitimate and more useful. Because instructors are aware of a student’s pain, they are likely to feel at least some of it and to experience concern. It is best not to argue with a student about whether to go to counseling. Instructors might tell a student they have been worrying about the student, that the situation is making them personally uncomfortable, and that they would like the student to go to a counselor and talk about what he or she has written. Instructors might say they will feel better if the student will talk to a counselor. If the student is already in counseling, he or she will probably mention this.

The weakest way to make a referral is to advise the student to get counseling. A stronger way is to ask the student if he or she is willing to see a counselor, and if so, for the instructor to pick up the phone and call the counseling center, self-identify, and explain that the student wishes to make an appointment. Counseling centers are usually very receptive to referrals from faculty. The instructor can then pass the phone to the student to let him or her make the arrangements. This allows the student to take more responsibility. The strongest referral method, appropriate when an instructor is worried that a student is deeply depressed, acutely suicidal, or on the verge of a psychotic break, or if the instructor does not think that it will unnecessarily infantilize the student, is to walk him or her over to the counseling office to schedule an appointment.

If instructors do speak with a student about entering counseling, they should not be surprised if the student declines to go. Many traditionally aged college students are struggling to separate from parental figures and do not want to incur the risk of opening a dependent relationship with a counselor. Older students with partners or children, full-time jobs, and other demands on them may be unable to fit counseling into their schedules. Veterans may avoid counseling because of the stigma of seeking help. Students with disabilities including mental health issues may have had so much counseling in the past that they are priding themselves on being independent. High school students who are taking the writing class may be afraid that parents will know if they go to counseling. And in every one of these categories, there are students who expect that counseling would be an intrusion in
which they would be disregarded and disrespected by a counselor intent on “fixing” or “changing” them, rather than receiving and accepting them.

If a student declines to go to counseling, remember that other possibilities for support and growth exist, such as communicative friendships, empathetic family members, clergy, residence life staff, and other faculty and staff members. Remember also that the idea of counseling may linger in such students’ minds, and they may seek it at some point in the future. Frequently students who see a counselor for a single session and then drop out return for a more substantial course of counseling later. Counselors will often tell clients who are reluctant to continue counseling that there is no rush: as long as they are enrolled, the service remains available.

If the student does go to counseling, the instructor should not expect that the student will persist with it. The student may choose to limit contact to one or a few sessions, also for reasons that have to do with avoiding dependency. While the instructor may be breathing a deep sigh of relief that the student will finally be followed by a mental health professional, that professional may be disappointed at the student’s refusal to schedule a second appointment and wishing he or she could phone the instructor with that information.

Air the Pain and Hearing the Pain

Most students who write about their personal traumas, however, are not asking for sympathy, warning instructors that they are on the edge of psychosis or suicide, or hoping that the teacher will find them a counselor. Most often they just want to put it out there, as Marilyn Valentino’s student Mary and Karen Paley’s subject Catherine seemed to be saying: they want to air their pain. If it is not acceptable for students to feel what they feel and to experience what they have experienced, where are they supposed to go from there? On the other hand, if they can write down some of the horrors of their lives for their professor (and perhaps fellow students) to read, that might mean that the horrors are not about them, and they are not about the horrors, and that they can proceed with their lives. There is an intersection between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal in disclosing one’s victimization or something else that is painful to disclose. The disclosure, especially to peers, changes the personal meaning. If it is acceptable for a student to disclose what he or she is experiencing or has experienced, doesn’t that imply that there is really nothing wrong with him or her, or there is nothing to hide or be ashamed of?

When counselors conduct group therapy, students routinely disclose traumas and difficult situations. If a trauma sounds painful enough, the group may try hard to “fix” it by coming up with a solution. After a time disclosers will try to escape the spotlight; they were not asking for or expecting a solution: they just wanted to air something to a group of peers. It will be the other members who are likely to feel uncomfortable with not “helping.” In contrast, when students share a trauma in a writing assignment, there is a task to be addressed: becoming a better writer. The disclosure is made as a part of that project. The students are not the topic: their writing is. This takes the students off the hook, an enormous advantage for
typical college-aged students in particular, because they do not want to feel or appear dependent, needy, or defective. The instructor may share a supportive personal reaction such as *It was painful to read your piece*, convey empathy as one person to another, and then go on to address the task at hand as professor to student.

Most proponents of personal writing in the classroom mention in part that it is helpful for students to express themselves emotionally and to process past hurts. But students in my classes reported via a brief questionnaire that it was more important to them to be able to read the personal stories of others than to write and share their own. Student Lara Milnar wrote:

On the first day of the semester I walked into the class room, sat in the back row and looked around at my fellow classmates. I decided at that moment who I was going to like and who I wasn’t. After reading everyone’s pieces I found out how misguided I was. Prior to this class I had never been mistaken about my snap judgments, but I now realize it was because I didn’t give people a chance to prove me wrong before. . . . I’ve learned that no matter where you’re from or what you’ve gone through, you aren’t a whole lot different from anyone else. I’ve learned that it’s extremely easy to identify with people you wouldn’t necessarily even talk to if not for having a writing class together. (qtd in MacDevitt, 80)

If writing students choose to create and share personal writing, it may be helpful to them and to their readers. It will not damage them. But whether writing is personal and self-disclosing or impersonal and formal, students will feel discomfort at the prospect of being evaluated. Many may feel far more discomfort writing a research paper than a more personal paper. Regardless of the type of assignment, the teacher’s job is the same: to maintain an environment (including relationships) that promotes students’ learning and to help them become better writers. Treating students with respect and empathizing with their feelings are just part of maintaining the learning environment. Sharing an honest but supportive personal reaction and expressing empathy only take a few moments, and those efforts make it much easier and natural to work on the process of improving the piece of writing.

**Note**

1. In Michigan, if a person under eighteen is a college student—that is, he or she is attending college—college counseling centers can treat the student as they do other college students who are over age eighteen.

**Works Cited**


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