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The Osmotic Self and Language Arts Pedagogy

Cover Page Footnote

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Kristie S. Fleckenstein

Despite the influence of constructionist orientations in educational philosophy, mainstream American pedagogy continues to conceptualize identity and development predominantly as the individual or autonomous self. Evolving out of Cartesian rationalism, the autonomous self is one in which ego boundaries are perceived as rigid and mature individual consciousness is understood as detached, isolated, and essentialized. Thus, the idea of an autonomous self implies a reality that separates facts from values, privileges scientific detachment, and justifies the domination of nature (Berman, 1981; Keller, 1985/1995). Learning based on an autonomous model focuses on mastery. Meaning-making is centered on separation—separating the subject/text from the writer, the writer from the reader. Writing and reading are taught as a process of decontextualizing writers and readers so that they can envision a rhetorical situation as separate from self. Students are trained to organize the elements of their particular rhetorical situation in a manner best suited to achieving an individually conceived goal. In view of the social nature of all learning, the isolation of an autonomous student is in itself troubling. But even more disturbing is that school curricula and methodology based on the mastery model of autonomy tend to disadvantage young girls and reinforce limiting stereotypes for young boys. Educators need to evolve language arts pedagogy that privileges an osmotic, rather than an autonomous, view of self.

The Osmotic Self

In *The Reenchantment of the World*, Morris Berman (1981), an historian of science, charts the historical and cultural significance in Western society of the osmotic or participatory self, one in which the ego boundaries are permeable. The idea of an osmotic self, evolving out of animistic beliefs during preHomeric Greece, flourished in Europe until after the Middle Ages and the reign of alchemy. From an osmotic perspective, self and other are perceived as physically or somatically linked, as manifested, for instance, in the medieval doctrine of signatures. During the Middle Ages people believed that eating walnuts enhanced mental abilities because of the physical resemblance between the nutmeat and the human brain. Likewise, mining for minerals was perceived as invading the earth's womb, so the process was treated cautiously, with respect and reverence. Reality that now seems outside of self was, then, physically linked to the self. Eventually, in the wake of cultural movements culminating in Cartesian rationalism, the osmotic self and its world view virtually disappeared from

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Western society. Berman argues that to counter current ills, both cultural and individual pathologies, we need a twentieth century manifestation of osmotic consciousness. That consciousness builds on the somatic nature of knowing—knowing that takes place at least initially on a physical or visceral level—and the interconnectedness of all things.

A twentieth-century osmotic self and consciousness imply a holistic reality. In an osmotic reality, a thing (or a self) can be and *not* be at the same time. In fact, it usually is. So an osmotic reality is guided not by the linear, critical logic characteristic of modern scientific thought and ego autonomy (Keller, 1985/1995), but by a sophistic dialectical reasoning in which opposing concepts (men/women, love/hate, up/down) are simultaneously the same as reflected in the alchemical symbol of the hermaphrodite. Reality/knowledge/self is first a process of embedding or situating, then a process of categorizing or creating taxonomies.

Because reality itself is paradoxical, knowing by accepted means—i.e., the rationalism and empiricism privileged in Western culture—can only be partial, especially if the preferred tool to mediate reality is language. More highly textured, multileveled knowing results from the “union of subject and object, in a psychic-emotional identification with images rather than a purely intellectual examination of concepts” (Berman, 1981, p. 73). Knowledge, Berman contends, is initially imagistic, not conceptual, so reality is mediated imagistically, as well as linguistically. Plato’s attack on preHomeric animism, the root of osmotic consciousness, was heavily linguistic in nature, Berman argues, an effort to substitute a conceptual discourse for an imagistic one (pp. 73, 105). The rationalists’ attack on alchemy—the medieval equivalent of the preHomeric animistic world view—was also linguistically based. But, regardless of the historical efforts to oust imagery as a means to construct knowledge, imagery is currently reemerging as an essential mode of coding reality (Paivio, 1986; Sadoski & Paivio, 1994).

Creating reality/knowledge/self through “a psychic-emotional identification with images” (Berman, 1981, p. 73) requires that as knowers we strive to merge with the thing to be known—to identify with it psychically and emotionally. We do not, as Descartes urged, separate ourselves from the thing to be known. We construct world and self-consciousness through a transaction with an other that is perceived as not self, but knowable only when penetrated by self. We and the world are what Berman (1989) calls a selfother, and the paradoxical reality ensues from the selfother fusion. From this view, we do not dominate in order to learn; we permeate. Thus, any rhetorical act—reading, writing, listening, speaking (and, according to poststructuralists, being) initially arises out of empathic identification with a reader, writer, or text world as an *other* which is knowable by the osmosis of self: a selfother. Neither readerly nor writerly *identity* disappears in this process. We do not lose *self* in the process of knowing other; we lose *consciousness* of self. Ego *awareness* disappears in the act of knowing. Similarly, meaning is not reified or commodified as an entity to be possessed. Instead, meaning is something to be experienced emotionally and psychically, as well as intellectually. One manifestation of osmotic consciousness in reading and writing is the experience of immersion, when self-consciousness disappears in the doing and all that remains is the absorption

in that doing.¹ So, from an osmotic stance, we initially learn for the joy the process of knowing (or writing or reading) brings us, not merely because we wish to take something away from the learning. The joy is primary, the taking away secondary.

The osmotic self holds the potential to address problems, especially concerning gender identity, created in our school systems by an over-reliance on the mastery model of education.

The Mastery Model and Gender

American school curricula, structured with traditional pedagogical techniques, emphasize autonomous, competitive learning aimed at mastery of a body of knowledge or set of skills, what Harry S. Broudy (1977) calls "what and how learning". The goal of the mastery model is to create citizens possessing the qualities Western society deems desirable: rationality, analytical abilities, intellectualism, and independence. Humanists argue that such an agenda is laudable, serving Western culture's best interests. However, if we examine its implications for young girls and boys, we can uncover the ways in which the mastery model damages children.

The general failure of the mastery model to serve young girls has been chronicled by Myra Sadker and David Sadker (1994) in *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*. According to them, gender bias and gender reinforcement in public schools continue to privilege the intellectual and psychological development of young boys. Despite progress since the institution of Title IX legislation within public school classrooms, girls remain silenced, overlooked, and under instructed (Klein & Ortman, 1994). Focusing on science education, Eileen Bryne (1995) in *Women in Science: The Snark Syndrome* describes the ways in which schools indirectly prevent girls from participating, let alone excelling, in the sciences. Even our methods of teaching language awareness as early as preschool tend to reinscribe injurious gender practices, prevalent in the society at large, that disadvantage the educational development of young girls (Orellana, 1995). For instance, choosing boys to make statements (i.e., to answer questions) and girls to ask questions indirectly sets up literacy roles that frame boys as those who possess knowledge and girls as those who lack it. Barbara Guzzetti and Wayne Williams (1996) conclude that these gendered literacy practices are at least partially responsible for girls in high school science classes being informally judged as less knowledgeable than their male peers. Because girls asked more questions and made fewer statements than boys, they were rated by classmates and instructors alike as less well versed in the subject matter than their male counterparts.

In addition, girls are further hindered academically by the contradictory messages they receive from school and the larger culture. Western thinking is dominated by the ideals of rationalism and ego autonomy. But as Andrea Nye (1988) and others have argued, Cartesian rationalism, the philosophical founda-

¹ See M. Csikszentmihalyi (1976, 1993) and flow; R. Spiro (1980) and reading immersion; L. Rosenblatt (1978) and the aesthetic experience.

tion of the autonomous self, is a male-marked philosophy. The intellectual and emotional qualities valued by rationalists are those qualities marked as masculine in our western culture.² Men are gendered as rational, intellectual, autonomous, and analytical (Lerner, 1986); cultural protocols—those unwritten rules about how young men are *supposed* to act, feel, believe, and behave—and academic curricula aim at the development and reward the display of those qualities in all students. To achieve academic success, boys merely need to be in school as they have been taught to be in the culture at large. But girls are not so lucky. The West has marked as feminine those qualities deemed the antithesis of rationalism: intuition, integration, body mystery, nurturing and spiritual concerns. So, to be gendered feminine, girls are supposed to focus more on relationships than on autonomy, resulting in ethical stances (Noddings, 1984), thinking processes (Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1982), and spirituality (Spretnak, 1994) differing from those marked masculine. An inevitable outcome of such a distinction is that girls usually flourish in a learning environment based less on competition and mastery and more on cooperation and negotiation (Belenky et al., 1986)³. These qualities in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem for girls is that schooling, aimed at developing the Cartesian prototype, continues to base pedagogy on the competitive mastery model and assess girls' success on the basis of their ability to acquire qualities culturally marked male (Flax, 1995; Guzzetti & Williams, 1996). The school system implicitly preaches and awards autonomy, while the culture sends the message that girls should not be autonomous. They should not compete, they should not win, but to succeed in school they must do both. To win culturally, they must lose academically, with all the economic and social implications of that loss.

This double bind costs girls psychologically as well as intellectually. And the price they pay is devastating. Adolescent girls growing up in our culture, spending much of their days in our academic system, lose both a sense of self and an esteem for self (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Behaviors such as anorexia, bulimia, and self-mutilation indicate a growing pathology among adolescent girls in our Western culture. Psychotherapists working from a feminist perspective argue that self-destructive behavior among women is a direct outgrowth of the contradictory messages our culture sends to women. Successful therapy requires that women reeducate themselves

²I am not trying to essentialize either men or women here. Neither women nor men are innately rational versus innately intuitive, etc. Culturally, however, both tend to be socialized into certain identities, roles, and attributes. And for women, it tends to lead them into devalued positions.

³This is not to say that girls *cannot* flourish in an aversive learning environment. Many can and do. Thus, those who advocate excluding women from institutions such as the Virginia Military Academy and the Citadel argue from erroneous premises. If such an argument were true, women would not continue to succeed in academic (and military) environments which are already contrary to gender constraints. My concern is not with women's successes in the academy, military, or corporate world. My concern is with women's failures. Merely because women have the ability to make a poor system work for them is not a legitimate argument for supporting that system.

to counteract the cultural double bind that traps them (Mitchell, 1992).

Boys, less obviously, also pay a price. Education based on the autonomous self reinforces injurious stereotypes, particularly reinscribing men in an oppressor's role (Keller, 1985/1995, chapter 4 on the dangers of autonomy). The competitive and autonomous nature of the mastery model of education fosters the attitude that a man should master all he surveys. Control, essential to Cartesian rationalism, is the basis of the mastery model: control of mind over matter, man over his environment, objectivity over subjectivity. Thus, to be successful men, boys must win—at whatever they do. They must be on the top of the hierarchical structures they create, which means that in winning they end up alone at the top. The one in control doesn't share the position. In her study of informal conversation, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1990) notes that a common conversational turn for men is oneupmanship. Men use conversation with other men as another means of competition, as a way to score points and establish ascendent power positions. The psychological and spiritual impoverishment of such positioning (Bly, 1990; Keller, 1985/1995), as well as the social and environmental dangers (Berman, 1981), is devastating to both men and culture.

By restructuring classrooms, especially language arts classrooms that deal with core questions about the nature of meaning, we could help offset these pernicious trends. An osmotic approach to knowledge is based on the interrelationship of all things. Knowledge is not reified into a commodity, but accepted as a process of selfothering (Berman, 1989) because we cannot know until we are linked psychically and emotionally with an other. Such an approach emphasizes cooperation before competition, caring before mastery.

Language Arts Pedagogy and the Osmotic Self

Pedagogically, teaching for and with the osmotic self means teaching sensuously, emphasizing somatic knowing: the complex transaction of body, emotions, and intellect with physical implements and motion (book, pen, paper, keyboard, marks on the page); our physical environment; our visceral reactions and state of body; and the self in the not-self of the text world. Contextualized within the classroom, somatic knowing might translate into two general goals: 1) incorporation of mimesis, or constructing knowledge through identification, and 2) immersion, or fostering absorption in language tasks.

According to Eric Havelock, the major mode of instruction in preHomeric Greece was mimesis, where individuals identified emotionally with the speaker or a chorus. In a state of autohypnosis, the audience memorized the poetry spoken by the chorus, and knowledge was passed on by this method (as cited in Berman, 1981, pp. 72-73). The point about mimesis for our twentieth-century classrooms is not the memorizing of poetry, but the emotional identification of the learner with the material being learned, using language as vehicle and catalyst. Learning becomes inseparable from emotional involvement.

As teachers we need to consider mimesis from two angles: identification *with* our students and *for* our students. Transforming ourselves as teachers in the process of teaching must remain an integral part of osmotic learning. To make our classrooms sites of transformation, we need to make our students subjects,

not objects. Too frequently, we automatically assume that the interpretation of reality we bring with us into the classroom is the *right* one, the one shared by everyone. So we uncritically impose that interpretation on our students and use the extent of our students' assimilation as a measure of their (and our) success. But the starting point for our pedagogy should not be our interior life, but that of our students. We can't engage them in the reciprocity of teaching without understanding their interior reality, the reality that they believe is shared by everyone. Paul Cobb (1990), a social constructionist in math education, argues that we all carry with us an expressionist, subjectively real, vision of reality. It is both a Platonic reality—in that truth is experienced as inner—and an Aristotelian reality—in that truth is experienced as *out there*. The Aristotelian reality is our *taken for granted* reality that we share without question (Berger, 1969). Unfortunately, neither a student's Platonic nor her Aristotelian reality necessarily matches ours.

To even begin teaching, we must engage in mimesis. We need to *know* our students' realities, and, thus, know how those realities diverge from our own. We need to stand in their shoes, or, as Scout Finch does, stand on their front porch and experience the world through their eyes. We need to sit in their worlds and listen so that we hear their hopes, pressures, fears, and values. Such a position is by its nature transformative. By identifying with their worlds we inevitably change our perceptions of our worlds; our starting point as teachers shifts. So if we suffer the hubris of wishing to change their world views, we are obligated to transform our own, learning first hand how that process undermines and challenges everything we hold dear.

For our students, we need to help them learn mimetically, fostering identification in their interactions with the world. The "route to true understanding is to be found in absorption, in the loss of psychic distance," Berman says (1989, p. 112). "Who knows more about medieval sainthood—the historian who compiles data on age and nationality, or the one who goes to a monastery and sits in a cell for several months" (p. 115). The major goal of a participatory classroom is to help our students dissolve that psychic distance, achieve the selfother state through the temporary loss of self *consciousness*. Part of the answer may lie in encouraging empathy.

Psychologist Martin Hoffman (1984) claims that empathy, the sensation of experiencing another person's feelings or reactions, at its most sophisticated, is achieved through either a *self* focus or an *other* focus. With a self focus, we picture ourselves in another person's place and imagine the situation as if we were personally experiencing it (p. 117). With an other focus we visualize another person's situation and responses, imagine how he or she is feeling, and respond as if we were there actually observing the action. With both methods, our awareness of our own ego consciousness is reduced (although our ego identity remains intact); we identify with the other. Such empathic identification is the key to aesthetic reading (Poulet, 1980), teacher-student interactions (McLeod, 1995), and various writing choices (Teich, 1994).

Barbara McClintock offers an example of the power of empathic learning. As described by Keller (1983) in *A Feeling for the Organism*, McClintock, Nobel laureate in corn genetics, evolved her revolutionary theory of transposition (the idea that genetic structures change in response to the ambient environment of the

plant) by developing an *intimacy* for the plants she was studying. As Keller, paraphrasing and quoting McClintock, describes, we “must have the time to look, the patience to ‘hear what the material has to say to you,’ the openness to ‘let it come to you.’ Above all, one must have a ‘feeling for the organism’” (p. 198). McClintock’s ability to *see* complexity missed by her fellow plant geneticists was a direct outgrowth of her intimate knowledge of her subjects. McClintock’s feeling for the organism, Keller says, reflects a desire to “embrace the world in its very being, through reason and beyond” (pp. 198–199). Such a desire yielded a “sympathetic understanding” (p. 200) in which self *awareness* was subsumed in the emotional-intellectual fusion of identification. In a flight of poetic fancy, McClintock says that she feels sorry when she walks on grass because she knows that the “grass is screaming at me” (as cited in Keller, 1983, p. 200).

The second goal—immersion—is an outgrowth of the first. We need to teach so that students experience flow. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1976), a psychologist who has studied the exhilaration of “pleasure pursuits” for over 20 years, flow is a subjective state in which the actor is completely absorbed in her actions:

[A]ction follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He [sic] experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future. (p. 36)

Without flow experiences in the classroom in the process of learning, Csikszentmihalyi argues, children work for the grade, not for the learning itself, thus gradually coming to believe that the work itself is negligible; only the grade is important. When the extrinsic reward (or threat) of the grade is removed, i.e., after graduation, there is no motivation to continue learning. However, with flow, learning becomes a lifelong endeavor.

Flow experiences can occur anywhere at anytime doing anything (Csikszentmihalyi, 1976); they are not limited to pleasurable activities. We can experience flow mopping the floor, mowing the lawn, or making puzzles with our children. Likewise, flow can become an integral part of our classroom methodology. In *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) describes the characteristics of a “flow personality,” a person who has learned to control consciousness in such a way that flow experiences become a way of life. For instance, 1) they can match their skills to their opportunities; 2) they set doable goals; 3) they are sensitive to the feedback from the activity; 4) they concentrate easily; and 5) they don’t fear losing their self-awareness or self-consciousness.

We can help our students develop these flow characteristics in reading and writing by helping them match current abilities to opportunities (i.e., Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development), by helping them set personal goals (instead of merely instantiating institutional goals for writing and reading), by helping them develop metacognitive and reflective monitoring (Brown, 1994), by helping them

learn how to concentrate (as a mother of preschoolers I have discovered that this is a tough proposition), and by seeing that loss of self *awareness* is not a loss of self. Part of the answer may lie in asking students to examine flow experiences outside the classroom, writing narratives of those experiences—engaging in what Britton (1989) calls “constructive reflection,” and trying to incorporate the resulting insights into their language activities. Another strategy may rest with helping students evoke mental imagery both as they read and as they write. In reading, Mark Sadoski, Ernest Goetz, and Susan Kangiser (1985) suggest the connection between the evocation of mental imagery and emotional interaction with an evolving text world, while my work (1991; 1993) in writing correlates mental imagery to text engagement and writing frequency in proficient and under prepared college writers. The possibilities are legion, and the potential of flow worth our effort.

Beyond Pedagogy

Classroom and world implicate each other. How we create self and reality in our classrooms will automatically impinge on our students’ self and reality outside of the classroom. So an interiority and a world view arising out of identification, selfothering, and flow holds the potential of transforming our social reality. It is difficult to lash out—physically and emotionally—at an other when we define self by means of other, when self and other interpenetrate. When we conceive of self and reality as a web of *being*, as well as a web of *meaning*, we will inevitably be more careful about maintaining the fragile threads that constitute and bind us. Basing our language arts pedagogy on the osmotic self may be one way we can preserve our children’s well-being and preserve the world for our children. ☐

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