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Twenty Years: Reflections and Questions

Alice Brand

I was 45. No, I was 40. It was the 4Cs. With a newly minted doctorate, I had yet to serve as a presenter. But I attended not only because of the non-speaking roles that helped pay my way but also for the veritable tsunami of books, people, and sessions that inundated me. I loved it. While composition theorists at that time welcomed the British expressive writing model of the 1960s (e.g., Britton), everyone was beginning to bow at the altar of the cognitive processes movement (see Flower and Hayes): the direct, objective architecture of scribal language. Nothing captivated the larger community of educators quite like pure methodical composing. It was rational and mappable. It was predictable. Cognition was all over the CCCC and NCTE.

Some years earlier when I met with my advisor Janet Emig about my dissertation topic, her first question was: What ideas do you have? Thinking that we would plumb the depths of ideas for the next hour, I responded off the cuff: How do people feel when they write? Boom! Her head straightened. She opened her eyes wide: That's it! We went no further. She was thrilled about my addressing a side of writing that had not been examined before. Surely, no one ever talked about it in the academic circles I was becoming familiar with. I came to this idea from the perspective of a BA in psychology and an MA in English education which insiders knew meant writing/rhetoric. My dissertation on personal growth writing was the wellspring for my first book, *Therapy in Writing*. It argued that if we strip away the academic constraints, writing not only helps the basic need to find meaning and understand but also to stabilize individuals. Individuals come to clarity. Writing neutralizes venom. People feel better.

At the same time as following the psychological and scribal changes of two of the eight students I worked with for six months, the book had much to say about the history of writing therapeutically, the evolution of English education, and teachers in a therapeutic role. I realize belatedly that in my own amateurish and naive way I had made an early case for writing and wellness in the American composition classroom.

While I was riding high on the British expressive writing movement and its American counterpart, no one prepared me for the colossal STOP sign ahead. My book was so out of bounds that it was completely ignored by the field. It was not reviewed. It was not critiqued. It was invisible, easily overtaken by the vocal, well-supported, and organized Cognitive Process paradigm.

The Cognitive Writing Process movement managed to institutionalize itself quickly. Everyone from the NEA to the NCTE applauded the ideals of cognitive science, the intellectual dimension of writing. It was mainstream, politically correct, apple pie, and motherhood. Who could argue? Writing and therapeutic change was, after all, outside the academic tradition. Nobody warned me that my breaking with it was problematic for the academy—on both the secondary and college levels. Administrators were worried. My colleagues were ambivalent. Cognitive process educators felt threatened. Publishing in English journals on this subject was almost nonexistent or masked. Skepticism prevailed. (Remember, too, it was the 1970s. Lingering shame surrounded the term

“therapy,” held over from earlier pathological models of the mind. It was stigmatized, a dirty word that no one was supposed to say.)

I can’t begin to tell you the grief I endured when I wanted to base a unique class on personal growth through writing. At one point, I remember being told by a cognitive writing pioneer (and naysayer incarnate) that my emotions research was merely ho-hum. It had no currency because my work had already been dismissed by editors (he must have been a reviewer). I recall a dean interviewing me for a director of writing position, stuttering that, well, your research uh, uh, emotions. . . that kind of funny stuff, uh . . . won’t interfere with your appointment. I assured him it wouldn’t.

I did in fact finally earn a speaking slot (the first of several) at the 4Cs. (I suspect due to the catchy title, “Hot Cognition,” of a published article). Now every time I presented, there was a kindly, genial, gray-haired gentleman sitting and listening toward the front of the room. We finally introduced ourselves to each other. Alice Brand, meet Dick Graves and vice versa. That began a long and fruitful partnership. Dick’s colleagues came out of the woodwork, interested in emotion and metaphor, body movement, imagery, and meditative practices. My work was heartily received. These scholars and practitioners were grateful that somebody was saying something about non-cognitive phenomena when composing.

It looked like we were forming a group. We began to build a home for like-minded thinkers who felt marginalized by establishment types. The more we as a group met, the more we believed in it. Finally, we decided to formalize this interest with whole sessions and pre-convention workshops. It was formalized further when the NCTE through Charles Suhar recognized our group. Thus formed the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning.

I alone could never have pulled it off the way these practitioners did. I was surrounded by committed professionals of all stripes: teachers, professors, counselors, scholars, social workers, therapists, administrators, poets. So much so that we decided to publish a journal. And I volunteered to be its first editor.

Some composition theorists gradually inched closer to the reality of emotion by sanctioning the themes of social construction or social emotions. Somehow, interpersonal phenomena were an acceptable lens through which to explore emotion. Feelings could be couched in a psychosocial vocabulary. But to my mind that still wasn’t it.

No one had ever asked specifically and systematically—as crude as it was—how writers felt before, any time during, or after writing; the motivation for writing, rewriting, the feelings accompanying writing, the feelings on completion. That research produced *Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*.

Furthermore, when I dug deeper, I wanted to talk about root motivation: our core or primordial emotion, our *raison d’être*, without which we could not exist. We would not have the impulse to eat, stay warm or cool, or procreate. They make up our biological imperatives. In the real world of life, baseline motivation is self-evident. Feeling can be physiological like arousal. It can be psychological like emotion. It can be cognitive where words are key to our social and cultural code. At the far end of the spectrum, emotion shapes values and can take the form of judgments and character, the coolest forms of feeling.

It’s easy to pay lip service to these grand terms: motivation and values, which have

been the subject of countless analyses since the dawn of humankind. I simply wanted to punctuate how ubiquitous emotions were. They seemed to underlie everything. I could not hope to put these terms under one definitional umbrella. But I just couldn't wait until the future produced them, much less *vis á vis* writing.

By this time the cognitive processes movement in writing was losing its one-dimensionality. The controversy between accounts of the primacy of emotion and that of cognition were no longer. Building up was an impressive array of evidence pointing to the significant role of cognitive functions in emotion that could not be ignored. There are intellectual aspects of emotion just as language has emotional loadings. Words have emotional attributes. So, terms like emotional intelligence made sense. Apart from survival impulses, the brain triggers emotion for which the mind quickly finds its name. By virtue of its name, it technically becomes an entity (for want of a better term) of cognition. Emotion authorizes. Emotion interprets. Emotion mediates. Cognition and emotion are barely inseparable, to say the least. Their interpenetration makes me think of a double helix.

Coming from base arousal, my later studies looked at brain structures like the amygdala and into neuro-scientific theories of feelings because it was so compatible with ideas about the primal quality of emotion. And I found that these theories were closely linked to biochemical realities. It was at that boundary that I stopped. The staggering complexity of the human brain made me properly deferent. I was neither a biochemist nor a neuroscientist. I had no access to a laboratory or neurobiologists or physiology researchers willing to forge a protocol to test these ideas—to say nothing of scouting for grants, securing unnumbered approvals, establishing a lab, and so on.

The work began to feel similar to the medical model that many of us were trying to steer clear of. In our research, not all studies can or should be reduced to a pathology or, for that matter, to scientific method and its tightly controlled traditional inquiries. A reductive approach, it ignores the penumbra of untidy detail and the promise (and burden) of infinitesimal variables—which is to us the very navel of writing.

It bears repeating. Such an approach in and of itself is not wrong. It, however, warrants working with researchers credentialed in biology, physiology, neuroscience, and so on. Admittedly a tall order. But in a perfect composition-studies world, there should be room for it just as there should be for cognitive science. We could no longer be at odds with cognitive science. I am not sure what we would find. But I know this: scholarship should not be paralyzed by disciplinary boundaries. My vision is that any neurobiology of writing and its affective and cognitive counterparts would over time bring us closer to understanding the whole discursive person. We have more than a simple pedagogic responsibility to our students. I am happy to note that some work on wellness and healing is moving in that direction.

This is not to diminish what AEPL has done for the profession at large. It continues to be the threshold for considerations of ineffable learning not linked before: creative imagery, spirituality, intuition, empathy, dreaming, inspiration, kinesthetic knowledge, wellness, and imagination. The human capital is here, just beneath the academic surface, knowing when to hold and when to fold—and the willingness to try. Such learning means that depending on their purposes and recipients, writers marshal their feelings, the content of their responses, and their wish to express themselves.

But now I wonder: Was anyone left talking about emotion? Why have there been so few forays into the emotional work of writers since the founding of AEPL? Why has interest lagged into values, motivation, and applications of these processes to oral or scribal language? Has it again been eclipsed by so many newer themes? Is it because emotion is so visceral, so pervasive, so immediate that it still remains largely outside the field of rhetoric and composition? It can't be tamed? But of course, it can be. Isn't that how healing works?

What has endured in me over the years is the truth (but complexity) of the way writing heals. As I point out in *Therapy in Writing*, educators are already therapists in the general sense of the word. Just for starters, let me play devil's advocate for a moment and ask if it is easier for a therapist to become a teacher or for a teacher to become a therapist? There is no question as to the difference in rigor of the schooling between the two professions. Teachers are in general imperfectly qualified to deal with fragile emotional situations. Without considerable formal training, teachers applying therapeutic principles in the classroom could be problematic for all involved. The worst-case scenario could place students in the hands of only partially prepared or completely unprepared educators. Furthermore, the task comes with grave responsibility. Stream of consciousness writing captures some of our deeper mental processes. Yet, could someone get it so wrong that it would precipitate physical harm or suicide? How then can we become better equipped?

Another distinction: in its pure form, the talking cure or the writing cure (and I use these terms broadly) produces similar benefits. But the writing cure carries with it extra syntactic and cosmetic burdens—bringing with it collateral academic benefits. Should our aim in composition be evenly bifurcated between its healing and academic advantages? The talking brings one sort of resolution. Writing is its own reward. And how do we understand their interaction?

To my mind writing and healing is unique in its potentially long-term benefits (see "Healing and the Brain"). Applications occur in clinical settings under the auspices of integrative medicine departments as well as in such quasi-school settings as hospitals, juvenile corrections centers, twelve-step programs, prisons, GED programs, and group or individual counseling. I myself have used writing therapeutically in county jails with some success—even publishing some of the work. It has found a home in work with specialized populations: the brain injured, stroke victims, the elderly, addicts, those with PTSD syndrome, and the learning disabled.

Writing is on its face more durable. I embrace the expressivist genre for its subjectivity, its authenticity and audacity. Nonetheless, the student is at risk (notwithstanding some student material—violence, rape, pedophilia—that makes my hair stand on end). Such work is not for the faint of heart, either from the perspective of mental health professionals, teachers, or writers. (Some academics might wish to jump headfirst into a psychological maelstrom where 30 years ago I wouldn't have dared wade in.) How can we propose such writing without demanding the credentials to address its outcomes?

As a result, I have sadly become unsteady about the mental health role in academic settings. My thirty years in the profession has not seen a dramatic difference in typical schools. Yes, more is being done. Yes, more is being published. However, heady success remains outside of English language classrooms. Culture still privileges the cognitive. Healing writing does indeed fail to square with academic realities; that is, what is taught

is what parents, faculties, and administrators are comfortable with: intellectual pursuits. In this they succeed magnificently. I know. Before and during retirement, I scored hundreds of SAT, AP English Language, GMAT, and GRE essays. I have three children, seven grandchildren, and a dozen others whom I have tutored in essay writing for jobs, colleges, and graduate schools.

Clearly, it is not difficult to understand why. In the hands of unevenly trained professionals is the unpredictability of the process. Then there is no way to insure effectiveness. Students and their personal stories have seemingly unfathomable variables. Writers' emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physiological contents are not easily analyzed. The themes, the threads, the perspectives are profound and often bewildering. Add to that the interaction between individuals and classmates, which further complicates the equation with its mind-numbing moving parts. Then why bother? Because students gain access to themselves through the written word. Because we can teach that this responsibility ultimately falls to them. Because courage counts.

It is easy to see that I have come full circle—perhaps a little world weary but wiser. While the writing and healing movement is on one level more straightforward, it remains a cautionary tale for settings other than stated therapeutic or quasi-therapeutic ones. The bottom line: If writing heals, it must move us from a worse place to a better place. But even under the best of conditions, as Carl Rogers once said, the deepest learning never seems to fit well into verbal knowledge. That's where AEPL comes in.

The Assembly has been stretching. Members are vividly exploring tactile learning, meditation, kinesthesia, spirituality (as opposed to observable reality)—which in its own way is at the moving edge of learning. Because there are holes in my knowledge, I have at best a shallow acquaintance with these phenomena. Like logical positivism with which I have routinely wrestled, perhaps these phenomena are demons that no longer exist. Another way to look at it is that perhaps my hesitations are a reminder of how far AEPL has come.

This is where my mind is today. I am 76, an undistinguished link to the literatures that teach us spirituality and the philosophies of being. I have not systematically kept up with recent work in learning beyond the cognitive domain, except for my abiding interest in writing and psychological healing. I confess that deep pull toward writing to work out my own emotional, interpersonal, and idiosyncratic consciousness. It brings my combined personal and professional history to bear on my perception of the Assembly.

So my sense right now is at least bifold. First, to recognize my own lopsided interest in writing and wellness. Second, to salute this gangly group that is growing up and out under our very eyes, when the world beyond the cognitive was barely mentionable in 1980. For all practical purposes, because our discourse has widened and deepened, I would want to identify the commonalities among the questions raised here—not so much in clinical settings as in various academic and workshop settings. How can our work translate across academic boundaries? How can we transcend the differences between them? What can we learn? What can we share? How can we better respond to the sublime fact of human feeling?

The best answer to these issues at least for me and for now is developing skill and versatility. I would like to make a case for careful individual inquiry into the spectrum of knowledge and processes—the what and the how, if you will. Having these skills

means using them with clarity and wisdom. By now a truism, words are a means of naming and understanding our lives. And, on one level, it's all we've got. At the other end, our lives are experiences beyond our words. Knowing is so much larger than cognition. To say anything less is to severely limit our understanding of the human mind. That insight may in the end be most empowering. Even when the enormity of the task seems impossible.

Such an approach is in deep accord with the spirit of AEPL. The most we can hope for is an assembly of scholars and practitioners working in an ever broadening range of domains that results in psychological, spiritual, and even physical well-being. As we shape language, the event it represents loses the ability to hurt us. And if we are lucky, the writing creates a body of artful expression.



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