



FACILITATING THE WRITER HABITUS

An Exploration in Writing Studies and an Argument
for Sociological Autobiography in the First-Year
Writing Classroom

Robert L. Murray

Eastern Connecticut State University
rlm022596@gmail.com

December 2019

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explore scholarship that discusses efforts to have students recognize their specific identities in the writing classroom. I want to engage in discussion that will combine the ideas of sociological imagination and writer identity in order to find the best methods of encouraging writers to approach writing through their writer habitus. For my discussion, Nedra Reynolds' explication of habitus reflects my understanding and intention for its use: "habitus brings together social class and learned behavior, the body and the material, and habits and practices. [...] Habitus is an attempt to theorize the social as a process, as actively present [including] the analysis of class differences" (Reynolds 58). In my own terms, it is the collective body of individual experiences a person draws upon to navigate their reality. It is influenced by many factors such as race, class, and location, and those factors also work to influence one another. Habitus can further be specialized to experiences that influence particular identities, hence the conceptualization of writer habitus—a body of experience writers draw from in order to guide their writing style and interests. This topic is important to consider because the modern world places heavy emphasis on the resolution of social problems, and as society moves forward and approaches social problems more progressively, the dynamic experiences of students need to be acknowledged to understand how social problems are experienced by individuals, allowing for greater opportunities for students to deconstruct social issues in more thoughtful ways. This is especially true in the writing classroom, as students who are able to more eloquently explain their experiences can better address the farther-reaching implications of the issues within those experiences, as well as critically perceive the influences of power structures in their lives, like cultural traditions, ideological racism, or institutional discrimination, for example. My hypothesis for this discussion is that students who engage in critical discourse and develop a

grasp of their positionality in the writing classroom with a bearing in mind of their own social identity will flourish even more outside it.

There are multiple factors that play into the apprehensions writers have in the writing classroom, such as intimidation from being in an unfamiliar learning environment, feelings of identity potentially conflicting with their writing, and trying to perform to a professor's expectations, and these factors are influenced by the seemingly inherent consequences of the writing classroom as a social space. Writing, by nature, is a social activity—the content people put on the page is subconsciously guided by the values and experiences they carry with them, where that content is then written, in most cases, for one audience or another; therefore, I find it appropriate to pull from scholarship from the pedagogy of sociology as well as that of writing studies, as I see the discourse I want to engage in as an intersection between the disciplines. The key sociological concept for this discussion is the sociological imagination, the consciousness of individual self within a greater, ever-influential society (Kebede 354). I also believe that in order to find effective modes and genres of teaching, a certain level of attention must be given to the socio-rhetorical situation that student writers find themselves in. It is in this crossing of pedagogical literature that I hope to touch on the answers—or even the gaps—in enabling habitus to effectively influence and guide students to construct a writer habitus through their writing. After this initial discussion, I will explicate a writing genre that I believe would be effective in facilitating a writer habitus, the sociological autobiography.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

In order for a writer habitus to be constructed, students need to not be deterred by common problems present in a first-year writing classroom. Among the multiple hinderances to students assuming their roles as writers, the initially mysterious expectations of the writing

classroom seem to be among the most prevalent. In the transition between high school writing and college writing, the standards shift away from meeting the goals of standardization to satisfying a professor-specific curriculum where the expectations and goals may differ.

As students enter the writing classroom, the space carries a connotation of judgement and power; the popular trope of the “enlightened teacher” versus the “apathetic student” comes to mind. The main issue here, it seems to me, is that this inhibits students from feeling comfortable exploring topics, genres, and styles outside of their standardized experience. Though it may not be a fix-all solution, a measure to address this factor would be to deconstruct the power dynamic of the classroom. As scholar David Bartholomae puts it, “if our goal is to make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge, we need to highlight the classroom as a substation—as a real space” (Bartholomae 66). It is reasonable to assume that the writing classroom being used to explore discursive power relations does more for students’ abilities to identify unique experiences and enable senses of empowerment than traditional pedagogical practices, as this creates opportunities for enthusiastic authorship (Longfellow, et al. 103), and “many students will not feel the pleasure or power of authorship unless we make that role available” (Bartholomae 69). By disinhibiting their ability to feel ownership of their ideas, it makes room for the creation of a writer habitus by affording students some form of control in the classroom; furthermore, it allows for students to find a space within a new community of academic discourse that will prepare them for more critical discussion.

Upon finding themselves in an unfamiliar discourse community, the students’ concerns around expectations of their writing become difficult to navigate, for both the students themselves and the teachers. This works in combination with the intimidation new writers can experience to generate a space where writers are not as comfortable or confident enabling

themselves to express their identity. An effective measure beyond making them aware of the power that is inherent in the classroom would be to give them that power. This is illustrated through studies like that of Erica Longfellow, et al., which utilize peer-assisted learning as a tool to engage writing students as members of the writing classroom discourse community. Their research suggests that among the various ways to give students power is to facilitate a sort of “role adoption” wherein students act as teachers for their peers. This is shown to be preferred over modes of teaching that were too disconnected from student experience, like remedial classes or traditional tutoring programs, in helping students effectively express their own ideas (Longfellow, et al. 95). This practice takes from social constructivist theory, “which proposes that knowledge is distributed across social (and language) systems that a given ‘community of practice’ uses in order to carry out its characteristic activities” (Longfellow, et al. 95). Utilizing strategies like these are the first steps in destabilizing intimidating perceptions of writing classrooms and letting students introduce their ideas into a capital “C” Conversation. For example, in the writing classroom, students who engage with each other’s ideas can contribute meaningfully through shared experiences, developing a rapport with their peers while introducing themselves to the knowledge and experience that is relevant to those around them. Where this becomes valuable to the students beyond just the writing classroom, and the overall purpose of this paper, is when the students unobstructed by timidity and aimlessness turn their efforts of critical discourse toward social problems.

In order to fully develop a writer habitus, the writing classroom must become a space where students can explore the real-world problems and influences that affect their lives. In developing writer habitus, a consciousness-raising must be undertaken—recognizing habitus in its general sense is required before there can be effective cultivation of any specialized habitus,

writerly or otherwise. Looking at class specifically, research from scholars like Meredith Madden that promote dialogues of positionality in order to foster critical-consciousness shows that students who look at their lives and experiences as independent and uninfluenced by societal structures tend to downplay the role their class backgrounds have had on them (Seider qtd. in Madden 575). It is essential to address this, because recognizing social class and the experiences related to it are easy starting points before moving into more complex conversations. Students can use these dialogues to examine how factors like race, gender, family structure/pressure, class, interpersonal relationships, subconscious biases, and many other things have affected how they see problems. Additionally, “class consciousness-raising delivered a recognition of their own experiences of being a target of social class stereotypes and biases along with the awareness that they responded with a lack of action” (Madden 582). There is value to writers being able to recognize where they place themselves in social structures, specifically social class structures, but there may be even more value in them recognizing how they have placed others, implicitly or explicitly. This is just one function of the writer habitus, and it can expand further depending on the degree of careful examination given to the influences students encounter throughout their lives.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

The first step toward achieving a writer habitus is for students to begin exercising sociological imagination, “[seeing] the intersection between personal biography and social history” (C. Wright Mills qtd. in Kebede 353), because “sociological imagination is a quality of mind that cannot be adopted by simply teaching students its discursive assumptions. Rather, it is a disposition, in competition with other forms of sensibility, which can be acquired only when it is practiced” (Kebede 353). Through this, students can then draw connections between the

experiences they have had throughout their lives with the social problems and criticisms of power they are frequently asked to engage with in the writing classroom. Research shows that teaching through sociological imagination “is a good way to engage students in thinking about a familiar personal dilemma in broader terms, which reinforces a sociological perspective on the world around them and helps them to better understand the relationship between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’” (Trautner and Borland 379). Though Trautner and Borland’s research is specific to academic integrity, it is reasonable to translate their findings to problems that originate outside of the classroom. For instance, they say “teachers can ask how ‘personal problems’ like pressure to perform could be thought of as ‘public issues.’ For example, for the item ‘they think it doesn’t matter,’ one could use follow-up questions to draw out public consequences” (Trautner and Borland 380), but this same line of reasoning works for problems of systematic oppression/inequalities. If systematic racism, for example, is to be explored in a thoughtful way for a student who has not experienced or witnessed it, they may respond similarly with the assertion that “it doesn’t matter.” However, by then enabling the sociological imagination of the student, they can critically consider the wide-ranging implications of this prevalent social problem that doesn’t affect them directly, thus enabling them to thoughtfully address the topic, drawing out questions like: “does my ignorance contribute to the problem?” Or “have I done anything that was influenced by institutional power structures without realizing it?” This result is likely contingent on the teacher’s ability to facilitate exploration: “[sociological imagination] needs to be nurtured over time through multiple steps, two of which have a notable place. In one of them, the instructor engages students in an intellectual space in which they are able to see the qualitative difference between sociological imagination and other forms of sensibility” (Kebede 354). Following this line of discourse in the writing classroom can lead

students to discover that problems they thought didn't affect them actually do in more subtle ways than they could initially perceive. It is through this discourse, that students can begin to identify their writer habitus.

FIRST-YEAR WRITING & THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PERSONAL WRITING GENRE

The preliminary coursework of a college education provides first-year students an opening to explore a wide variety of content to best suit their interests as they adapt to the university. The first-year college writing classroom especially is an environment of great opportunity. While in their first semesters, college students are expected to cover a lot of important foundational coursework that will support them in their future endeavors; this affords students the ability to explore their interests in meaningful and productive ways. Despite this, whether a freshman semester is encouraged to be exploratory or directed, there is almost always the common factor of the College Writing course. A first-year writing course by another name may serve the same goals as a college writing class: developing students' critical thinking and communication skills through writing, which is ultimately useful in promoting success in the rest of their educations.

Professors in these writing classes have a responsibility to deliver lessons and assignments that best lead students to these goals. Briefly speaking from my experience as a tutor for Intro to College Writing, professors each have their own unique ways of teaching students how to accomplish the goals of the writing class, and the results seem to be similar between the different professors; some students will struggle with certain genres and thrive with others, but as long as they have the consistent support of others in the class, whether that is through peer review, tutoring, or direction from the professor, most students tend to come out meeting the key goals of the class. However, one element of the class which sometimes does not get enough

recognition for helping students achieve those goals are the major essays. In the classes I have been present in as a tutor, they have had 4 key essays throughout the semester that I feel were excellent in helping students practice critical thinking and communication skills: a personal essay/literacy narrative, a rhetorical analysis of an image, a review on an artifact of their choice, and a research/argument essay on a problem they felt strongly about. I think the reason I enjoy these genres is because compared to my first-year writing class from when I first started college, they offer a greater availability of creative expression. While I was exclusively writing more sterile papers and simple synthesis essays, these students get to explore what they feel strongly enough to write about. My freshman plights aside, I am going to focus on one particular genre that was relatively consistent throughout the classes I have tutored for and that I didn't have the privilege of engaging with early in my college career, the narrative essay.

Whether the students are assigned a personal narrative, literacy narrative, or narrative essay, all of them have very important similarities despite the genre's moderate variations. They are the first major assignment students are asked to write in the class, they immediately demystify academic writing for students over-standardized by high school writing, and they ask students to focus on the most important factor in critical thinking: themselves. This is not to say students need to approach writing self-centrally in order to feel engaged; the personal writing genre carries a unique advantage compared to the other genres I had mentioned earlier, in that all of the information a student needs to critically engage with the most emotional or life-changing events that have affected their lives is already within their memory and imagination. There is distinct advantage to this for the students, the least of which being they don't need to feel compelled in their first major essay to perform to an unfamiliar goal that they don't quite understand—such as the case with a genre like rhetorical analysis. In addition to this, they can

immediately see that academic writing does not equate to writer-vacated prose. Literacy narratives and personal essays do well to lead first-year students into the rest of the college writing class, as students then move on to assignments that will come up more frequently across disciplines. But what I envision is an assignment that doesn't necessarily replace the personal narrative. Rather, it adopts the key principles of the personal narrative and combines them with other elements to create an assignment that not only works toward preparing students for the remainder of their one semester, but also provides them with even more tools that will help them well beyond the writing classroom and is more effective in meeting the goals of critical thinking and communication skills.

I previously explored how sociological imagination and individual identity can be highlighted in the writing classroom to enable a specialized “writer” habitus for the purpose of fostering critical-consciousness. Here, I will discuss the effectiveness of integrating a form of the personal genre with sociological imagination, the Sociological Autobiography, in the first-year writing classroom, and why it is an excellent assignment for achieving the existing goals of a first-year writing class and enabling students in their abilities to critically reflect on the world around them with their writer habitus. Scholars like David Bartholomae and Alem Kebede were important to the foundation of my earlier discussion and theory, and their work in combination with another scholar, Peter Elbow, will continue to be the baseline of my argument for sociological autobiography. My argument is simply this: sociological autobiography helps writers not only recognize their own positionality, but also how they have located others' positionality, which is further enhanced through the peer-to-peer collaboration afforded by the writing classroom—this ultimately helps to develop the writer habitus.

SOCIOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Unsurprisingly, sociological autobiography is not a genre that originates from writing studies or writing pedagogy. As the name implies, the foundations of this assignment rest in social sciences and the genre of autobiographical writing. Alem Kebede, a professor from California State University-Bakersfield, did a study where he introduced this genre in his Junior and Senior sociology classes, where it was visibly effective in both engaging students' sociological imagination and being a fulfilling assignment for students to work with (Kebede 357–360). This assignment hinges on the principles of sociological imagination and the self-identity of the writer. Whereas a plain biography tends to be atheoretical and ahistorical (Kebede 355), a sociological autobiography asks students to situate their experiences in the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts of those experiences. In a similar fashion to how literacy narratives force writers to consider how important circumstances and events influenced their life from that moment in time onward, this assignment forces them to examine their positionality in those moments and analyze if and/or how that positionality contributed to that experience.

Some may argue that this assignment doesn't fit in the first-year writing classroom, whether it be due to difficulty, sociological underpinnings, or ideas of autobiography being too private as a genre, but in reality, this assignment fits neatly into the previously discussed goals of the writing classroom, and it involves writing practices that are foundational in writing pedagogy. In the many schools of thought in writing pedagogy, the two that stand out the most to me are expressivism and social constructivism, and the two scholars that I associate these terms with most are Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. Seemingly at odds, these practices focus on writing very differently. When Bartholomae in "Writing with Teachers [...]" says he is "arguing for a class *in* time, one that historicizes the present, including the present evoked in students' writing. Inside this linguistic present, students (with instruction—more precisely, with lessons in

critical reading) can learn to feel and see their position inside a text they did not invent and can never, at least completely, control” (65), I am inclined to see his argument from a position of social constructivism and apply this desire for critical readings of text to critical examinations of experience. Though I am less inclined to side with expressivists like Elbow, I can’t help but contemplate the applicable value to his “[...] Argument for Ignoring Audience” when he claims that “even if ‘private writing’ is ‘deep down’ social, the fact remains that, as we engage in it, we don’t have to worry about whether it works on readers or even makes sense.[...] Social-discourse theory doesn’t undermine the benefits of ‘private writing’” (62). These points are the core of the effectiveness sociological autobiography can have in the writing classroom, as this genre—according to sociologist C. Wright Mills:

Could be viewed as a journey into a familiar social world via a new route. In this journey, the autobiographer objectifies the familiar and the taken for granted while at the same time being immersed in it. By acting as a detached observer and someone who has firsthand exposure to [their] own life story, the autobiographer examines the role of the ‘external’ social forces thereby delving into an understanding of intrapersonal dynamics. Yet the autobiographer, who sees [their] biography as one among manifold intersecting biographies, is able to demystify ‘the increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces. (Mills qtd. in Kebede 354)

If the goals of the first-year writing classroom are to enhance critical thinking and communication skills, and the practices that are preferred to meet those goals are those that either invite first year students to be self-absorbed and place themselves at the center of a discourse (Elbow, “Being a Writer” 79) or ask the writer to locate themselves in a context that is larger than them, that is beyond invention (Bartholomae, “Inventing the University” 8), then the

sociological autobiography is perhaps the genre best suited for students to wrestle with in the classroom setting. In practicing the sociological imagination in this form, students are engaging with writing expressively, activating their agency of writer identity by explicating experiences that belong to them for their own critical examination, while also paying mind to the social constructions and implications of those experiences.

For now, all of this is speculative at best, as it is unclear how this would play out exactly in a first-year writing class; however, this does not preclude discussion on its hypothetical execution. Just as Kebede did with his assignment, the writing students would be given all of the background information on sociological imagination they needed (355), but it would be framed with less technical language so that students do not feel intimidated or misunderstand expectations. The pre-writing for the essay would occur in steps. First, students would be encouraged to make a list of roles they take on, such as student, daughter, volunteer, etc. Then they should be encouraged to think of statuses and labels they recognize in themselves and others have used for them, like their ethnicity, age, sexuality, and so on. Students would never be forced to explicate on topics that make them uncomfortable, but they would be encouraged to engage as candidly as possible with the assignment because honesty and vulnerability allow writers to work with more reflective ability. Students in Kebede's study "generally described their experience as positive, appreciated the opportunity to engage in a systematic reflection of their lives, and noted the welcome but unexpected therapeutic consequences of their self-deliberation" (357), and I think this would be the case for most students who engage in this activity. After listing these "self-identifiers," students would then think of the most significant events of their lives—whether they be spontaneous, momentary, recurring, or even presently affecting them—and identify how any of the statuses and labels they listed would have been involved in those

experiences. After this pre-writing exercise, students would then be tasked with the actual essay asking them to thoroughly examine the contexts of those situations by understanding their positionality through their statuses.

In theory, this could go any number of ways, but the hope would be that students could effectively locate themselves in a grander context (Bartholomae), identifying what structures of power, norms, or related experiences may have been influencing those moments in time. A key status like social class, for example, is located based on income, education, and work factors (Madden 571), and a student may be reflecting on a moment where they had not considered the possibility of their social class influencing that moment, thereby encouraging them to engage in critical analysis of the situation, speculating and theorizing for the purpose of understanding their positionality. This especially can be useful because members of typically privileged classes like white males are able to reflect on how even a privileged status influences life circumstances for the better, which will then help them with the last step of the assignment. To conclude the essay, students would dedicate a section of the paper to reflecting on how they have located and positioned others based on the statuses and labels they have applied to them. A task that requires trust and honesty for sure, but it is one that will certainly help students understand the significance of their own statuses. After a given amount of time, students would need rough drafts completed to move on to the next step in this writing process, peer review.

A classroom setting has some distinct advantages for students over them stewing silently over their own words in the drafting process, the most salient of which being feedback. Feedback, for the most part, is already recognizably helpful to students when it comes from professors and tutors, but it is also useful coming from peers in their own class who are in an equal position to them. This assignment in particular utilizing peer feedback amplifies its

effectiveness in achieving critical thinking and communication skills, while exploiting the classroom as a space for collaborative learning, which are dialogic modes that work to engage students more thoughtfully in an educational context (Bruffee 635). This works in favor of the assignment, as “collaborative learning also provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals: peers” (Bruffee 642). Finding this community of peers will give students a window into another person’s experience and see how certain statuses they share have affected their lives in both distinct and similar ways. This conversation acts as an open engagement of ideas and personal history where no one experience is privileged over others, as all students are meant to critically observe themselves and social differences become abstract equalities (Trimbur 606). Difference is then what becomes privileged as students consider how they have located and labelled others, communicating and dissecting those differences into the autobiography.

CONCLUSION: CONCERNS OF THE WRITER HABITUS & EXPANDING DISCUSSION

The scholarship present in this discussion merely scratches the surface. In future discussion, credit must be given to Paulo Freire, as critical pedagogy theory is essential to the purpose of this discussion. Writing pedagogy styles like expressivism and cognitivism can be contrasted even further with studies like Kebede’s that discuss sociological imagination and constructivism, like the work of bell hooks, to find effective modes of teaching that combine effective efforts from both writing studies and sociological studies beyond just sociological autobiography. There is also a need to address the problem of potentially causing students to develop a sort of double-consciousness that separates their identity as a writer from their normal life, as the goal of this discussion is to have the writerly roles overlap with the writer’s experiences; therefore, including discussion from scholars like Vershawn Ashanti Young and

Richard Lofton to talk about how code meshing and Black habitus can play a role in the first-year writing classroom, provide elements of critical race theory that are also important for critical-consciousness raising. The list can seemingly go on forever, and on the surface, it may appear as though this issue is becoming overcomplicated; however, this discussion only takes implicit conversations and ideas of writing classrooms and explicates them to be critically discussed by both teachers and students.

The writer habitus is a concept that will surely have a varying degree of effect depending on the individual student, as not every person has the same experiences nor the same number of experiences. Another complicated aspect of finding “best-practices” for facilitating the development of specialized habitus is to not undervalue the role of the teacher. Despite the call for decentralizing power in the writing classroom and the necessity for students to feel empowered in order to explore their own individual identity, the teacher must be present and prepared to guide the students. Ultimately, there is a balance to be found, and it would seem that the best way to find that balance is experimentation through assignments. Regardless, this topic must be explored, as the microcosm of the writing classroom can be a suitable analog for modern society in the context of addressing real problems with a critical eye, and modern society demands attention be given to the deconstruction and resolution of social problems. Genres like sociological autobiography are key to unlocking a critical-consciousness, furthering the development of solutions to social problems that extend far outside of any classroom, as “a positive relationship exists between critical pedagogy and liberatory classroom spaces that promote students’ consciousness-raising” (Freire qtd. in Madden 571). Writing is a practice that enables people to think critically about any given topic, so it appears practically irresponsible to not dedicate any attention to real-world issues in these communities of critical discourse.

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