

2 Claiming My Voice

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Lately, because of loud and unruly debates within our profession, I've begun to wonder about the nature and origin of the voice in which I write. In fact, spurred on by friends on both sides of this debate, I've begun a methodical quest to track down my own voice—to identify it, describe it, and explain where it comes from and why.

[The debate goes something like this: One side emphasizes the uniqueness or naturalness (nature) of each writer's voice, arguing that readers can know "authenticity" when they see or hear it. This primarily constructivist view is influenced by Jean Piaget, who views the self as emerging primarily from within. Composition scholars loosely identified with this constructivist position include Peter Elbow (1981), who describes our "real" voices as having "power and resonance" (292), and Don Murray (1984), who explains, "Our voice tells the reader how we think, how we feel, how we live, who we are" (145). According to Peter and Don, when we write honestly, each of our voices will be unique and recognizable.]

[The other side of the origin-of-voice debate emphasizes social rather than individual development, arguing that everything we write or speak takes place within social contexts which make (nurture) our voices what they are. This social constructionist position is influenced by, among others, Lev Vygotsky (1978), who believes the self emerges primarily from without. Composition scholars associated with this social constructionist position include Ken Bruffee (1984): "language and its products, such as thought and the self, are social artifacts constituted by social communities" (641); and David Bartholomae (1985): writers "write in a history that is not of the writer's own invention" (143). According to Ken and David, when we write honestly, our voices will reveal less of us and more of our discourse community.]

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[Quite frankly, I vacillate between these seemingly dialectic positions with remarkable ease] depending upon what I'm reading, writing, teaching, or to whom I'm listening or talking—one day feeling my thoughts are rather uniquely mine; the next, that I have stolen virtually everything I utter. In truth, however, I'm not uncomfortable believing both positions, remembering now that, as an undergraduate, I finally decided to major in English rather than philosophy because I could live with contradictions while philosophers could not.

Actually, if truth really be told, I seldom worry about the matter at all, raising it here only because these philosopher-friends of mine insist on having it one way or the other. Who, I wonder in my saner moments, could possibly have enough information to identify all the determiners of self that are reflected in an author's voice? Sure, biographers and critics attempt such definitive answers about authors with great regularity, but soon after, their successors, and sometimes their subjects, call their answers into question.

[Who, in the end, could know the forces that really shaped the writer's writing? What would the critics know that the author could not? What would the author know that the critics could not? If I bet on the critics, I take sides with the social constructionists. If I bet on the author, I side with the constructivists. But I've got to start somewhere.]

For the balance of this chapter, let me try to answer these essentially unanswerable questions, believing, as I do, that losing battles can be good learning experiences. As the nominal author of my own compositions, I will examine myself as an author, try to describe and locate the verbal constructions associated with *my own name* that apparently presents me—re-presents me—for good or ill, to the rest of the world. What, for example, do people mean when they tell me—as quite often they do—that they hear *me* in my published writing: "That really sounds like you" or "I really heard *you* in that piece." I infer these to be statements about my "voice" ("Yes, that really sounds like Toby's voice"). Are they saying something about my voice—hence my values and beliefs—or are they saying something more superficial about style? ("Yes, that really looks like the style in which Toby writes"—formal, informal, blunt, pretentious, whatever.)

If people hear my voice as somehow unique within my own discourse community (the National Council of Teachers of English?), what does that mean? Where, how, and why does my voice distinguish itself from others who also dwell in this same community, presumably reading the same books, attending the same conferences, teaching at similar institutions? If I look closely at samples of my own writing, will I be

able to identify the uniqueness that others say they find? And will that uniqueness be a telling or a trivial difference?

In the past, I have not pressed these friendly voice-finders on the source of their knowledge about my voice, but now I wish that I had. (If they knew, it would certainly make my struggle easier, this chapter shorter.) Is my voice to be found, for instance, in the particular use of skillful verbal constructions—say noun clusters, prepositional phrases, or appositives? Or in the frequency of more dubious constructions such as split infinitives, dangling modifiers, or mixed metaphors? Is my voice characterized, definitively, by a truly unholy number of fragments, dashes, and contractions? Or by the absence of active verbs, coordinating conjunctions, and semicolons? Am I identified by even more elusive stylistic features of texture, rhythm, balance, scale, or symmetry? Or in more structural features—say in airtight logic, clever transitions, or cogent conclusions? Or is it my choice of topics—like this one about authorial voice—that inescapably marks me? Or in a predictable attitude toward these topics—as in “A personal voice, along with truth, justice, and beauty, is a good thing to have.”

While I am having some fun picking at the particular features of what some of us would call “voice” and others call “style,” I am, at the same time, genuinely curious about whether or not one can answer any of these slippery questions. If I have a voice, is it single or several? Which one(s) is (are) authentic? Where can I locate it (them) most definitively? What does it (do they) actually look (sound) like? How much does it (do they) vary according to audience, purpose, and circumstance? And how much conscious control do I (or anybody else) exert over it (them)?

My Private Self

I began looking for evidence of my own voice where I expected most unequivocally to find it, in the pages of my personal journals in which I write privately to myself. I have kept personal journals on and off since 1962, when I was a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin and Professor Herb Smith required his creative writing class to keep what he called “writer’s notebooks.” Wouldn’t my voice, I reasoned, be most identifiable in these long-kept notebooks, my most candid and unguarded writings? So I flipped through a several-year-old journal to a random page dated 2/29/88, and here is what I found:

Laura’s out with Carol at her book group; Meg’s out after work w/friends; Anna’s upstairs with Allison, mad because I banned the telephone tonight. I have spent all afternoon on catch-up writing tasks—until I really am caught up! (Even got the CCC review done in a record two days!) The reason for a lot of this blocking out of small stuff is to allow me to concentrate tomorrow on the VOICE piece for CCCC—as yet just in the discovery stages. Too, I’d like to get the piece with Hank up and off the computer & sent to the Chronicle . . . why have I been so slow here?

Is this my authentic voice, I asked? (“Sure,” I answered, “it looks like dozens of similar entries on surrounding pages and in current journals.”) And if it is, what are the elements that reveal it to be mine and not somebody else’s? (“Good luck!”) So with as much objectivity as I could muster, I began to analyze the language of this voice as if the author were anonymous, to see what could be said from the outside (at the same time, I’ll let you know what I know from the inside). Here is what I found:

1. Topic: You see the writer (me) reflecting on the current state of his professional life, apparently taking stock of where he is, checking on what projects are finished, what still needs to be done. (As the author, I also know that I write this way as a warmup exercise to prepare for more rigorous, demanding, formal writing later on. I also strongly suspect I do it to procrastinate and put off the more demanding writing for yet a while longer.)
2. Context-bound references: Since the writer writes to himself, he refers to people that strangers cannot be expected to know unless he explains who they are. (As the author I can tell you that Laura is my wife; Carol, a teacher friend of hers; Megan, my older daughter; Anna, her younger sister; Allison, her friend; Hank, a colleague in history at the University of Vermont.) Since the author knows, why bother to amplify to himself?
3. Informal language: Many features here suggest language in an informal or colloquial mode: frequent contractions and abbreviations (& and w/), a parenthetical construction, a variety of marks denoting special emphasis (underlining, capitalization, exclamation marks), vague words (“stuff”, “a lot”), and something that’s either a fragment or a run-on sentence (or both) at the very end. The language suggests a writing that is not self-conscious, as if the writer were talking to himself, not intending it to go very far away from himself. (As the author, I can assure you that I am

from personal
notebooks

talking to myself, taking shortcuts, not thinking much about what the language looks like, being neither clever nor careful, certainly never intending to show it to anyone or even to reread it myself later.)

4. *Punctuation*: Here, in addition to commas and periods, are a whole range of marks, from informal (dashes) to formal (semicolons). Some imply emphasis (exclamation marks, underlining), digression (parentheses), and questioning (?), while others are used unconventionally (an ellipsis for a dash, capitalization to italicize). (As the author, I will tell you that, when writing to myself, I punctuate fast, using marks that are approximately correct and quick to come to mind.)

But, in making these observations, I begin to feel frustrated, if not somewhat silly. As a writing teacher, I've read enough rhetorical theorists, including James Britton and Janet Emig, to know that my journal-entry voice has all the characteristics that typify most people's private voices: personal ruminations, tentative planning, abbreviations, contractions, digressions, fragments, casual punctuation, and imprecise diction. In other words, my so-called most personal and private language is more typical than unique, more like others' journal writing than not.

My mistake becomes clear. Why would a public voice be heard in private writing? Since I share my journals with nobody else, no one has ever claimed to hear my voice in that medium. If I really want to identify the *me* people say they hear when I write, I, too, have to look at my public writing.

My Public Self

When I turn to my public writing for evidence of the voice that is myself, I look at the same sources in which people claim to have heard *me* speaking. To examine my public voice, I selected a short passage from an article in the *ADE Bulletin* (Fulwiler 1987) that argues for more in-class writing to promote more active learning—the kind of argument I made then and continue to make now:

The Monologue in the Classroom. The dominant mode of instruction in American colleges and universities—especially the larger ones—is top down and one way. Walk down the halls and look in the classrooms and what you most commonly see is an instructor standing in front of a class talking and rows of students sitting, listening, and copying. Sometimes these classes number in the

hundreds, making other modes of instruction difficult—but not impossible—to conceive. Even in smaller classes of twenty-five and thirty, the lecture/copy mode often prevails. In such classrooms it is the teacher, not the students, who practices and explores her language skills. This is the mode of education which Brazilian educator Paulo Freire aptly describes as “banking”—depositing knowledge in people as you do in savings accounts. (36)

This writing is clearly different from that in my journal. There are no context-bound references—at least, I don't think there are—for the English teacher audience whom I'm addressing, the broad discourse community to which I obviously belong. Even so, simple concepts are carefully explained in case the reader does not know them. The only possibly obscure reference, the name of Paulo Freire, is identified as “Brazilian educator” just in case. Though dashes are used three times (which seems like a lot in one paragraph of professional writing) each is used conventionally—as is all the other punctuation. There is little of the variety or imprecision found in the journal entry. The diction, too, is more formal, with no contractions, abbreviations, first-person pronouns, or colloquial words (all of which, by the way, might appear in other selected samples of my published writing, such as this one).

In other words, the features in this single sample of published writing are less varied and more conventional, suggesting language aimed at readers who do not know me personally—readers to whom I apparently want to appear conventional and respectable.

At this point, however, the enormity of the task dawns on me: obviously, the only convincing way to locate “me” in my own prose will be to locate, at the same time and on similar topics, a significant number or “not me's” in other people's prose—or for that matter in my own. To locate, in other words, voices against which my voice might be tested for distinction. In order to hear the authenticity of my voice I will also need to hear in-authenticity as well, won't I? So, what do I do now—look for a bogus sample of my own published voice? (In truth, I can't think of anything I've published in which I don't—or didn't then—believe.) Should I look at dozens, nay hundreds, of samples of other authors' writing? (I wouldn't know where to start nor stop.) Should I type all of my samples into a computer for voiceprint identification? If so, who else's samples do I add for comparison? (Maybe I should do all of these, but, this is not, I suspect, what others do when they claim to hear me.) Help!

In the face of other possible, more sophisticated, more time-consuming—but no more certain—approaches to identifying the features that

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voice w/ respect
to others

distinguish my voice from others, I agree to settle for less. It is already apparent to me that many writers, in addition to me, have written about active learning (John Dewey, Paulo Freire, James Britton) informally (Don Murray, Peter Elbow, Nancie Atwell). To distinguish my voice absolutely from all others would be very difficult, if not ultimately impossible.

Yes, I think this published passage from the *ADE Bulletin* sounds like me: the tone, the rhythm, the balance, the passion, and maybe the politics. At least I could still imagine myself writing it—though perhaps I'd temper some of the rhetorical stridency ("top down and one way"). But it's certainly possible, even probable, that others have written similar prose that could be mistaken for mine.

As I continue looking at this sample of my published voice, as well as this current writing about my published voice, however, I am aware of a noticeable lack of sophistication in the language. Instead of being aimed directly at my professional discourse community—the NCTE audience I had (have) in mind for both pieces—the aim is lower, as much toward educational novices as experts. My writing, I imagine, would make sense not only to English teachers, but to first-year college students as well. Its style and sense may be labeled, if not simple-minded, perhaps simplistic—at the very least, simple. And this simplicity suggests an answer that biographers could only guess at and no critics know.

My Eighteen-Year-Old Self

When I examine the characteristics of my public writing voice, I see language that seems a composite at once original and indebted. Until I undertook this light-hearted (but I hope not half-hearted) investigation, I had not been fully aware of its creation. At the same time, I know that as I write and revise I am continually reading back to myself my sentences to see if they "sound right." Until now, I have not examined what I mean by "sound right," but now I ask "to whom?" and "like what?" Simple enough, it seems: I want my written language to be clear to me, and to sound like me—the me I would like to sound like. Before I risk sending out for publication this or any other piece, I make sure it is intelligible, reasonable, and readable to this editor (me) first. My first audience remains the one in my own head—an argument made several decades ago by Walter Ong and more recently by both Don Murray and Peter Elbow (1987).

Why those
goals?

But it is not that simple. Not, at least, if the "me" on whom I test my writing is multiple, dynamic, complicated, or shifty—and it is, I suspect, all of these. I could actually locate many selves to whom I try to get my writing right, selves, created at key social, emotional, and intellectual life markers, for whom I write: the self shaped by protesting the war in Vietnam, graduate school poverty, teaching assistant strikes, first-year teaching, marriage, children, and so on. All selves shaped by life-changing experiences, selves which coexist quietly (and not so quietly) along with my present fifty-year-old self, which emerge at this or that prompt to remind me of who I have been in the past and to whom I still speak in the present.

So, to which of these innumerable self-audiences do I most commonly write (right)? I don't think that I can prove this, but I have a good hunch: I write primarily to my approximately eighteen-year-old self. The me to whom I read aloud my prose is less my current full-English-professor self than my first-year college-student self.

In fact, it was in reading David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" (1985) that I recalled just how much I had in common with his portrayal of the first-year student struggling to join a university community—a community whose governing rules seemed arcane and mysterious. Bartholomae explains that in order to write successfully for him, his students must figure out "what I know and how I know what I know . . . they have to learn how I write and offer some approximation of that discourse" (140). Or, as I many years ago must have asked a hundred times, "What do you want?"

Of course. And that was exactly my problem as a semi-serious college student of eighteen at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1961. Unlike many of my classmates who intended to become scientists, engineers, businessmen, doctors, and lawyers, I was not sure why I was attending college. I struggled mightily to locate myself in the university community, situate myself to speak and write coherently in all my subjects, but I still ended the year on probation—a 3-credit B in English not quite offsetting a 4-credit D in French. (I also totaled my 1953 Studebaker, lost my girlfriend, attended too many parties, and let down my parents.) In other words, hindsight tells me, I was forced to make decisions that year about changing my habits of both mind and body, or dropping out of the academic community altogether.

So I changed my habits. I began to look deliberately for points of entry into a world whose values and habits I did not well understand. In truth, I don't remember the particular insights or moves I made to get off probation, to satisfy academic requirements, and to find a major or plan a career. But, looking back, I can almost hear my eighteen-year-

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to his
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old self knocking at the door, ready to invent or reinvent that university and get on with my life. I knew so little, wanted to know so much, and began the long apprenticeship of trial and error, replicating the discourse of the masters that eventually gets English majors into graduate school, graduate students into teaching jobs, and teachers tenured.

My eighteen-year-old self belonged to discourse communities whose values were shaped largely by local midwestern, white, suburban, middle-class conditions and which resulted in values that were generally materialistic, conservative, apolitical, anti-academic, and so on. The community that I currently inhabit is still primarily white, suburban, and middle class, but also liberal, political, and academic. My former community may be described best as virtually "pre-academic" and "predisciplinary" and, at the same time, essential, elemental, and formative.

That eighteen-year-old self for whom the world of intellectual ideas, historical contexts, and multisyllabic words were puzzles of enormous proportions is still with me. Consequently, I have always tried hard to make my own writing intelligible to that confused kid who wanted in thirtysome years ago. If I can speak clearly so that earlier self understands me, maybe I can be understood by other equally confused, lost, or alienated people as well. In fact, I credit that eighteen-year-old self—for whom nothing could be assumed, for whom everything had to be explained—with my ability to conduct writing workshops for faculty members outside of English for whom nothing—about current rhetorical theory—can be assumed, for whom everything needs to be explained in clear jargon-free prose that cuts across disciplinary boundaries.

Observations

By now, I have approached, grappled with, or answered as many of these questions as I'm able to within the scope of this chapter. I still do not know whether the distinguishing traits of my voice are telling or trivial, whether that voice was shaped more from inside than out, or even how many voices (itches? registers?) I possess. However, I think the attempted answers have taught me a few things:

1. My private voice is less distinctive than my public voice. In that sense, it represents the public me less well to others than my published voice—which is why it stays private and undeveloped in my journal. Its linguistic features resemble other private voices at least as well as it resembles my own public voice. Most often

my private voice sounds/reads as fast and loose, fragmentary, uncertain, digressive, and egocentric. However, the concerns, attitudes, and beliefs represented in my private voice are consistent with my public voice. It is authentic in the sense of being the voice in which I *really*, often, and rapidly write when I am thinking out loud to myself, without conscious artifice. While my private voice is "authentic," it is not distinctive.

2. My public, published voice is carefully constructed—composed, revised, and edited—to present a certain and perhaps collective self to the world. I fuss over words, ideas, and especially rhythms in my writing to portray a writer who is at once liberal yet committed; informal yet scholarly; ironic yet serious. It is protean, multiple, and shiftily, having more than one manifestation, depending upon whom it is addressing and why. I cannot remember writing words that I do not believe—though in documents such as grant proposals and letters of recommendation I may be less candid than elsewhere. The writing that most sounds like "me" is writing I have crafted to do so, which is why so much of my writing is rewriting rather than fresh composing. If it is "authentic," it is self-consciously so.
3. The style of my public voice is largely determined by a discourse community from long ago and far away, one long thought left behind, my first-year college self. It is that earlier audience that I credit with keeping my voice loosely conversational, relatively jargon free, vaguely egalitarian, and perhaps overly simplistic. In fact, I believe that in person I am more interesting, lively, and socially aware than my rather dull private voice suggests. But also more conventional, self-centered, and dull than my livelier published voice reveals.
4. The topics of my writing are posed by the discourse community I currently inhabit. I write about matters of concern within my profession, entering these conversations where I think I have something to contribute. These topics about which I write, along with my attitudes toward them, may prove to be stronger determiners of what I would call "voice" than any specific linguistic trait. In other words, I think voice-finders characterize me as much by a certain kind of argument as by an argument made in a certain kind of language. (Most of my published writing is about writing—in favor of more and certain kinds of it, for instance—so it is unlikely you would find *my* voice in a piece about computer chips, monetary reform, or grizzly bears.)

Understanding
through
clarity

5. [The tone of my public voice, which is both earnest and self-consciously ironic (this latter, more evident in this piece than in the sample I examined), is created, I think, by the juxtaposition of the full professor to the first-year student, both of whom vie for attention when I write. Some of the stylistic and tonal features of my voice are actually at odds within my own professional community—which like all academic communities, has adopted a specialized discourse that makes it difficult for eighteen year olds to enter in and participate.] As much as I can, I construct my public voice to resist the exclusionary language of my profession, in the process simplifying, explaining, clarifying, and preferring always the rhythms of informal speech.

[Given the way I began my academic career—awkwardly and in great ignorance—my voice could have developed in one of two rather different directions: the first, viewing the academic enterprise as a privileged ritual into which one is admitted after a careful screening and thorough initiation; the second, viewing it as a parlor game, full of rules and nonrules, cues and miscues, and, in the end, not all that serious. You can see in which direction I traveled.]

As a result of this small private study, in which I approached my voice from both inside and out, I have come to believe that my own historical development—and the trials and errors contained therein—has made me forever uncomfortable within the more theoretical realms of the discourse community to which I otherwise belong. It is my own paradoxical need to be inside, yet write outside, that most determines the total shape of my voice. If you think about it, which I don't recommend, where in the world does your voice come from?

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