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PREVIEW

AT RISK IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM:
NEGOTIATING A LESBIAN TEACHER IDENTITY

by

Irene G. Meaker

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

Lincoln, Nebraska

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PREVIEW

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DISSERTATION TITLE

At Risk in the Writing Classroom:

Negotiating a Lesbian Teacher Identity

BY

Irene G. Meaker

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

Robert E Brooke
Signature

29 April 1999

Robert Brooke

Typed Name

Barbara DiBernard
Signature

April 29, 1999

Barbara DiBernard

Typed Name

Maureen Honey
Signature

April 29, 1999

Maureen Honey

Typed Name

Richard Meyer
Signature

April 29, 1999

Richard Meyer

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name



GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

AT RISK IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM:
NEGOTIATING A LESBIAN TEACHER IDENTITY

Irene G. Meaker, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1999

Adviser: Robert Brooke

"Education is a fearful enterprise," says teacher and philosopher, Parker Palmer. Student-centered/ process-oriented pedagogy asks teachers to step out from behind the relative safety of the teacher mask and to enter the risky arena of learning. For the writing teacher, a special challenge is to help students negotiate the risks inherent in the act of writing and in sharing writing with the "Other."

To prevent fears from dominating our students, teachers must model risk-taking and risk negotiation. In my own teaching, my fears around students' reactions to learning my sexual identity meant that I more often reinforced fears than dispelled them or demonstrated to my students how to negotiate them.

FOREWORD

At 13 I knew that I was Different. Different from the people around me—my family and the neighborhood kids. The difference wasn't something good, like mathematical ability or musical talent. Therefore it must be some kind of lack. Sensing this, I felt deeply depressed.

I accepted Christ into my heart and joined a fundamentalist church, which gave me a warm, friendly social milieu. I also took up writing poems that expressed my feelings of difference, loneliness, and my yearning to belong. My poems showed me that part of my 'difference' was not yet feeling attracted to boys. Convinced that I needed to more fully turn my life over to Christ, I burned all my poems.

Losing poetry as an outlet for my feelings, I took up journaling. Journaling made a huge difference in my life, even though I spent a good portion of my time writing what I should be feeling, rather than what I actually felt. Despite my best efforts my actual feelings and thoughts occasionally leaked onto the page. Unwanted insights emerged. For instance, at 15 I realized that I still wasn't attracted to boys. Just as bad, I had a crush on a girl at school. In response, I abandoned my journal and cultivated a relationship with a boy. Once this relationship was established, I allowed

myself to return to journaling with the pledge to write absolutely only what I should be thinking and feeling.

My actual thoughts continued to stray occasionally into my journal despite my best efforts to the contrary. These writings showed that none of the things I wanted desperately to change were changing. At 18 I believed everything about me violated God's Plan. I decided that what I most feared must be true: I was evil. I had no control over my attractions, yet I was a sinner, a poison to myself and my church. I had known I was this way at least since I was 13. A third of my life. I became deeply depressed. I knew something had to give.

A year later, I had decided that I was not poison, that God could not be so hateful and vindictive. I decided to leave my church and fundamentalism. Six months later, I abandoned Christianity. My journal—now focused unabashedly on my thoughts and feelings—allowed me to explore what I thought and felt, although I still dropped my journal when the insights my writing produced ran counter to lingering beliefs about who I should be. I enrolled in community college, majoring in business and secretly longing to take a creative writing class. I eventually took the class, went on for bachelor's in English. In my junior year of college, I finally accepted myself as a lesbian.

Herdt and Boxer's research suggests that lesbians and gays go through a three stage coming out process. First, they "unlearn the principal of 'natural heterosexuality.'" Second, they "must unlearn the stereotypes of homosexuality, and third, they must "reconstruct their social relationships in American society based on new and emerging social status and cultural being" (15). Looking back, I realize that I spent my junior high and high school years struggling in the first stage. College exposed me to a wider range of people— including accepting straight people, bisexuals, gays and lesbians and this is where I passed through the second stage of coming out. The third would be negotiated when in graduate school.

It is during my teenage and college years that my own definitions of writing and risk were shaped, along with my social identity. Essential to my understanding of writing is personal discovery; discovery that is often initially painful, but is also powerful because it reveals us to ourselves. Looking back now, I realize just how vital my journal was.

How, I often wonder, could any activity so innocuous as writing have been (and continue to be) so powerful? I have searched for answers to this question, and the answers I like best come from James Moffett and Janet Emig, and are situated in the internal composition process.

Looking at process, Moffett suggests that first the writer engages in "attentional selectivity": the writer "tries to narrow down drastically for the moment his [or her] total field of consciousness--shuts out most things and concentrates on one train which he [or she] has set in motion at will and tries to sustain" (89). Second, the writer opens himself or herself to "some ongoing revision of inner speech, which is itself some verbalized or at least verbalizable distillation of the continually flowing mixture of inner life" (89, emphasis in original).

Writing then combines intention and vulnerability in something like Blake's infinite grain of sand--although Moffett's language isn't nearly so poetic: "a writer stands at the mercy of prior rumination about the subject as it will surface in the inner speech that spontaneously presents itself for further rumination" (89).

Emig's descriptions of writing process explains why discovery and therefore risk--are central to writing. Influenced by Bruner and Piaget's ideas about how we represent and deal with reality, Emig suggests that writing simultaneously employs all three ways of dealing with reality. It is "the symbolic transformation of experience through the specific symbol system of verbal language . . . into an icon (the graphic product by the enactive hand)" (88). Lived

experience is transformed twice: first from action, into images of action, and second from images of action into symbols of images. It is easy to see that the writer cannot know beforehand what discoveries, what insights, these dimension shifts will bring.

My second perspective on the writing process from Emig centers on analysis and synthesis as ways to unite the "three major tenses of our experience [past, present, and future] to make meaning" (91). Analysis is the motion of "breaking of entities into their constituent parts" and synthesis the motion of "combining or fusing these, [constituent parts], often into fresh arrangements or amalgams" (90, 91). Again, it's easy to see how destroying and recreating past, present and future could easily result in new and unanticipated discoveries.

In my own personal definition, discovery means vulnerability, risk, taking a chance. For instance, through my poems I allowed myself to be vulnerable, to take a chance, in order to gain something—insight about my "lack." In my journaling when I wrote what I "should," I resisted risk. Yet I remained vulnerable because what I actually thought and felt occasionally leaked through, showing me to myself. It was my unconscious demanding to speak. Poet Adrienne Rich says, "The unconscious wants truth. It ceases to speak to those who want

something more than truth" (187). Looking back, my teen years were shaped by twin fears—fear of knowing myself, and fear that my unconscious would cease to speak.

Clarifying, Rich says, "There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (187). How fortunate I am that my unconscious found an avenue to speak to me, first through poems and then through renegade journaling! The risk inherent to writing is a vulnerability to insight and to truth. It is taking a chance—even though the experience might be painful.

While I like what Rich says about truth, it isn't a complete definition for me. What Rich names truth, I rename 'insight'. What insight needs to make it truth is perspective—perspective brought through relationship to the Other. Parker Palmer's definition of truth elides insight but expresses clearly how truth involves community, belonging: "Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves" (Know, 56).

I felt very much an island all those years from 13 through my young twenties, despite the friendly church. Yet, I was also always seeking a way to belong. I wanted to belong to a group of friendly people, to society. And I wanted to belong to God. Eventually, I realized I needed to belong to

myself first. Another way to look at this switch is that I allowed myself to be a subjective rather than objective knower. Michael Polanyi, suggests that knowledge is inherently subjective: "into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and . . . this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his [or her] knowledge" (viii). In any relationship, we are each knowers, we are each knowns.

Polanyi's explanation of subjectivity highlights the importance of passion. It is passion, I think, that helps us belong. Without passion I might have died at 13 when I sensed my difference and felt deeply depressed or I might have died again I concluded that I was evil, that I was poison. Or perhaps I would have continued to exist although my unconscious might have ceased to speak.

Writing with its risk and insights, and truth with its increasing complexity and relational nature are intimately bonded to each other by passion. Like Joan Didion, I realize, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means" (114). Writing yields insight; insights become truths when they are heard by the Other, shaped by the Other. Allowing oneself to be heard by and shaped by the Other is a second site of risk. Will my insight be rejected? Destroyed? Will it even be heard? Will

it disrupt the community to which I belong? Will I be rejected? Whatever the outcome, as a writer, I return to writing to allow my new truth to be reshaped by new insight. This is the motion of writing life.

As a teacher of writing, I want my students to experience and explore the power of writing to reward risk-taking with self-knowledge. I want them to experience the communal quality of truth. To create this space, it is not enough for me to say 'Go. Do.' I must model as well. I must show students writing of my own which takes a risk to reap an insight. I must take part in the community of truth forming in the class by sharing my own process of negotiating a risk—i.e., my process of evaluating what to share or not share with a particular audience. Doing this is challenging work.

Others are engaged in conversation about disclosure and negotiation of risk. From my location as a lesbian English teacher, I have often experienced conversation about disclosure as originating from two locations. One strand of conversation about disclosure has come from queer educators for whom a particular kind of disclosure—'coming out'—has been an issue since Stonewall.

A second strand of conversation has been engaged in by educators, whose approach to issues of disclosure has come through an increasing appreciation for the role of

subjectivity in learning. Collaborative learning, feminism, liberatory pedagogy, and autobiographical approaches to learning have all contributed to interest in disclosure and negotiation of difference.

Queer English teachers often participate in both of these conversations, which overlap but maintain separate characters. Among many things both conversations focus on is that the fundamental motion of disclosure is a positive one. For instance, David Bleich explains: "Disclosure should be distinguished from confession and revelation . . . to confess and to reveal have an implied reference to a religious morality, as if one is confessing sins and revealing secrets" (47-48). Amy Blumenthal echoes and expands on Bleich: "Coming out is not confession: confession implies wrongdoing, guilt. However, in coming out, I am saying that there is no confession of wrongdoing. There is honesty, yes, but not confession. This is not a question of what I do, but who I am" (Mittler and Blumenthal, 5).

Each contributor to the conversation offers a different standpoint and therefore a different contribution to the ongoing discussion of disclosure in education. For instance, Mary Louise Pratt suggests that communities are often fraught with struggles. These struggles occur in 'contact zones'— "spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each

other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (34). Pratt has suggested that the classroom is a contact zone and that we need therefore, a pedagogy of the contact zone.

Joseph Harris suggests that as Pratt has defined it, the contact zone is "born out of expediency, as a way of getting by"; "it is not a space to which anyone owes much allegiance" (33). Harris, worries that the result of a pedagogy of the contact zone would be "difficult and polarizing arguments" with "plenty of conflict and struggle [but] very little if any . . . useful negotiation of views or perspectives" (34-35).

As an alternative, Harris calls for a pedagogy of negotiation. Negotiation seeks to create a "forum where students themselves can articulate (and thus perhaps also become more responsive to) differences among themselves." The result Harris hopes for is "a social space where people have reason to come into contact with each other because they have claims and interests that extend beyond the borders of their own safe houses, neighborhoods, disciplines, or communities" (39).

Both Pratt and Harris remind me that both conflict and cohesion are crucial to the classroom. There needs to be some sense of balance between them. Yet how little control I have

in some ways to make these things happen! Although I am the teacher, I am in some ways, only one more voice in the classroom. If students don't consent to be part of the community, if they do not bring goodwill to the class, then community cannot exist.

Thomas West suggests that the cohesive voice is apt to be far stronger than the disruptive voice in the classroom, because "the objective of negotiation is often to diffuse subversive action" (12). This is often accomplished through "the rhetorical conventions of dominant groups" such as what is defined as impolite or polite, rational or irrational or psychological rather than political, (12, 13). Negotiation then favors those in power and seeks to neutralize disruption.

West suggests that it is easy to slip into "a view of struggle as negative and negotiation as positive because one implies violence and the other, ostensibly, does not" (13). West suggests a "modified, critical version" of negotiation, one that "attends more closely to the 'paralanguages of emotions' and specifically to the 'politics of anger'" (13). "The challenge becomes," says West, "how to listen critically, how to relate the political impulses of individual and collective anger to present and preceding social conditions" (13).

Like West, Miller is concerned that voices of disruption get heard. One reason they don't get a hearing is that little professional training in English Studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom. (394)

Academics are taught by "the majority of grammars, rhetorics, and readers that have filled English classrooms since before the turn of the century" to address the disruptive essay as "a piece of fiction," that is, to "speak of how it is organized, the aptness of the writer's word choice, and the fit between the text and its audience" (394).

Rather than elide the disruptive voice, Miller recommends the teacher "establish a classroom that solicits 'unsolicited oppositional discourse' ". The teacher does this by creating a classroom that invites "articulating, investigating, and questioning the affiliated cultural forces that underwrite . . . cultural commonplaces" (Miller, 397). For example, Miller brought in for discussion and analysis, posters through which a "heated, accusatory, and highly coded

discussion about rape, feminism, and sexual politics" was engaged on campus (400).

Beginning where the students are, and allowing students to use their writing to investigate the cultural conflicts that define and limit their lives is not an easy task (Miller, 407). It is apt to result in "the kind of partial, imperfect, negotiated, microvictory [that is] available to those who work in the contact zone" (407).

Patricia Elliott also finds the classroom to be a place of partial and imperfect microvictories. She asserts, however, that the root of these experiences may be a surprising notion: that disclosure does not equal awareness. For example, in Elliott's gender and society class "a high percentage of [women] students (approximately seventeen percent) disclosed personal instances of abuse," yet the class was "unable to entertain the possibility that systemic gender inequality exists" (144). Instead, the women believed that "North American society has now achieved gender equality" (145).

Elliott's explanation for the coexistence of denial and disclosure is "selective reality," a term coined by Gloria Anzaldua and referring to "the narrow spectrum of reality that human beings select or choose to perceive and/or what their culture 'selects' for them to 'see'" (144). Elliott refines

selective reality to mean "the practice of limiting or selecting what sorts of things are counted as real and what sorts of things are discounted, omitted, or relegated to the realm of the imaginary" (145). Selective reality means that those in one culture can (easily) deny the reality of another's culture; this same treatment may be applied to selected elements within a single culture.

This simultaneous denial and disclosure points to a "struggle between insight and the blocking of insight" which occurs continually, because people realize that

critical thinking is political action.

Since political actions can be life-endangering, they are hesitant to proceed until they know more or less how doing that thinking is going to affect the particular political constellation of their own particular lives. (Elliott, 151)

While Patricia Elliott focuses on how disclosure isn't always accompanied by conscious awareness, Mary Elliott focuses on how another kind of disclosure—coming out—may be accompanied by hyperawareness. This is so much the case, says Mary Elliott, that most teachers' coming out narratives "elide, or mention only briefly and then recoil from . . . the dread, panic, confusion, and uncertainty of the actual

moment of disclosure" (694). Instead, of staying with the scary moment of taking the risk, coming out narratives frequently "move on as quickly as possible and without comment to lengthy pedagogical, ethical, and sociological defense of the coming out process" (M. Elliott, 694).

Coming out is so risky that it can generate terror, even if we don't disclose. Elliott explains, "we risk feelings of personal failure if we cannot quite push ourselves over the abyss. We berate ourselves further with the conviction that if we truly had our political and personal houses in order, this trauma would not be happening to us" (M. Elliott, 696).

Staying with our terror long enough to "differentiate the nameless presences in the abyss we wish to cross" could lead to eliminating or at least reframing our fear and shame (M. Elliott, 697).

Ethical and practical methods of disclosure in relation to sexual identity are examined by Kate Adams and Kim Emery. They propose two kinds of "appropriate" occasions for disclosure. The first is the 'good' moment and the second, the 'golden' moment. Both follow general guidelines, but the 'good' moment is planned, while golden moments in teaching happen when "spontaneously asked (or answered) questions lead to brilliant-but-unscripted connections" (Adams and Emery, 27). In the same way, coming out "can be the result of a

similar instance of unanticipated, although not necessarily unearned, grace" (28).

The guidelines for coming out appropriately seem to apply to any especially risky disclosure: be yourself; make the disclosure relevant; come out before you come out (i.e., take advantage of other forms of communication than talk); don't anticipate disaster; practice 'openers' into your disclosure ahead of time; remember that the moment of disclosure is just a moment (Adams and Emery, 27-30).

Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler are also concerned about the ethics of disclosure. They outline four serious reservations about "the impact on students of required writing about their personal lives, whether in journals, freshman compositions, or other writing assignments" (B1).

First, Swartzlander, et al, noticed that some students "believe that the papers that receive the highest grades are those detailing highly emotional events or those that display the most drama" (B1).

Second, they question the extent to which students are able to "make judgments about how much to reveal and to whom" (B1). In particular, they point out that "students who have been sexually abused often have difficulty understanding appropriate limits in relationships" (B1).