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PREVIEW

LIFEWORk: CONNECTING  
ACADEMIC WRITING, TEACHING, AND THE SENSE OF SELF

by

Judith A. Levin

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 Barbara DiBernard

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2000

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Lifework: Connecting Academic Writing, Teaching, and the Sense of self

BY

Judith Anne Levin

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

LIFEWORk: CONNECTING  
ACADEMIC WRITING, TEACHING, AND THE SENSE OF SELF

Judith A. Levin, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2000

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In this dissertation I track ways that actively bringing the self to academic work for students, teachers, and scholars can enrich and strengthen both the self and the work. In Chapter 1 I interrelate theories that suggest connections between academic work and sense of self. These involve sources of identity in social locations that can generate negative or "shadowed" experiences of self, which in turn generate "life themes," persistent emotional issues that students and faculty bring to their academic work directly and/or indirectly. In particular, I explore ways that classes which welcome students' writing about their life experience can help them move toward coming to terms with experience that has felt hidden, shameful, inaccessible, not integrated into the sense of self.

Such integration involves moving from either/or to both/and thinking about aspects of the self that seem mutually exclusive but, in a larger framework, can be seen as complementary and even necessary to each other. I look specifically at the individual ways we experience

connections between emotional shadow and light, thinking and feeling, academic and personal concerns, public and private voices, mind and body, language and the senses. Learning that helps us make these connections can be integrative for sense of self, community, and society. Feminist connected teaching is one way to go in this direction, by moving away from thinking in terms of "killer dichotomies" that divide us from ourselves and others. Chapter 2 draws on participant-observation research that I did with four composition classes. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on case studies of my own experience of integrative writing and talk in school at many stages and students' experience in classes I have taught.

PREVIEW

**LIFEWORk:**  
**CONNECTING ACADEMIC WRITING, TEACHING, AND THE SENSE OF SELF**

by Judith Levin

Abstract

Acknowledgments

1. Theorizing about Academic Experience and the Sense of Self for Students, Teachers, and Scholars - p.1.

Appendix: autoethnographies of passionate knowing - p.37

2. Students Learning Out of Who They Are: "Real Talk" in Community--Life Story, Student Gender Themes, and Integrative Thinking in Writing Classes - p.40

3. Writing and Teaching Out of Who I Am: A Case Study--Personal and Social Roots of Connected Academic Work - p. 94

4. Teacher and Student Stories of Rape: Evolution of Integrative Teaching and Learning over Four Semesters - p.144

Works Cited - p.186



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I live in Omaha and teach in Lincoln, enabling me to have two communities of friends and colleagues and two writings groups that have seen me through every development of thought and expression in this work. The Omaha group goes back some ten years, and I'm grateful for the steadfast help and thoughtful encouragement of original members Diane Gillespie, Kate Brown, Bette Tarrant, and Lynn Bjorkman, as well as our current collection of devoted members, Barb Jessing Jeanne Schuler, Mary Tourek, Ginny Aita, Karen Falconer Al-Hindi, and Jackie Eihausen. Each contributes her own magic.

In Lincoln I have been fortunate in having English Department friends whose work relates closely to mine. Anne Whitney has been there with me since day one,

inspiring both my teaching and writing, and Rene Meaker likewise since virtually day two. They are active presences in this dissertation, quoted as significant resources for my thought and practice. Happily, Beth Torgerson has joined us in the last few years, helping us coalesce as a group and creating the annual Platte River Writers Retreat (the four of us rent a state park cabin over a weekend and write, read aloud, walk, talk, and renew our spirits). We have all given conference presentations together in various combinations and have all written dissertations based in our life experience. I am blessed in their friendship and creativity.

At UNL, essential work is skillfully done by the English department office staff day in and day out. I have benefited especially from Kathie Johnson's capable and cheerful guidance through the workings of the university graduate system--she always knows how to smooth the way. In the Graduate College, Joyce Tyrrel, who could make our lives a bureaucratic hell, has instead worked with hundreds of graduate students individually every year, actively helping us realize our dreams. She makes her office a place of connection and support.

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I have received so much also from my family: Mom, Dad, Bill and Carol, Lynda and Roger, the nephews, and cousins Kathy and Jim. As this work comes to fruition, I realize how much you all have been with me throughout the long evolution of my ideas about the centrality and power of connection in human development and contributions that connected learning can make to ideas, personal wholeness, community, and society.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Bernice Levin and my father Robert Levin. Dad died in the last stages of this writing, and I miss him greatly. Even with Alzheimer's, he had smiles that warmed my heart. I wish he could be here to share this moment. Mom has inspired and supported my midlife graduate education from the beginning, and our lifelong mutual interests in language and people have generated many satisfying hours of connecting conversation. Our recent years have brought it all together, for which I am deeply grateful. So, with love, this is for you.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Theorizing about Academic Experience and the Sense of Self for Students, Teachers, and Scholars**

In this dissertation I track ways that actively bringing the self to academic work can enrich and strengthen both the self and the work. I see this connection as galvanizing for learning, teaching, and scholarship that make a difference in people's lives, and I explore particular ways that feminist and student-centered pedagogies can bring personal life issues into relation with public meaning making and theory.

The foundations for this analysis go back to the first paper I wrote in graduate school, "Women's Work on Women," which explored ways that identity is expressed in and affected by feminist scholarship. I analyzed twenty autobiographical essays by women scholars about their experiences with writing about women they admired, foremothers in their fields. My conclusion was that through their engagement with feminism, "passionate knowing," writing, and a sense of relationship with the women they wrote about, these authors encountered themselves as well as their subjects, deepening their understanding of the women they studied and transforming their own lives. Since that time I have seen how teaching and student writing also can engage individual life issues in ways that give us commitment to what we do

and contribute to richness, fresh insight, and depth in our thinking.

I observed in "Women's Work on Women" that the ways such work reflects and affects identity often aren't simple or obvious--they may be indirect and out of the author's awareness and yet powerfully propel the work toward meaning and significance. But it also seems that it is when the author brings these connections into awareness that the transformative nature of the work fully emerges, for the scholar's writing and her life.

I relate these observations to my sense that I write and teach out of beliefs, values, and feelings that underlie my life as well as my work--I think of this as working "out of who I am." This kind of connected knowing fascinates me, no doubt because I discovered when I returned to graduate school in my forties what a difference it made. I came into my own in academic writing and then teaching because I had support in my department for using school writing to explore and claim what "my own" meant in the academy.

My story as student, teacher, and scholar is an example of how such connected and then passionate knowing can play out in school and in life. In my case, it has meant professionalizing ways of knowing that I had already developed in my private life as a girl and woman in this society. For example, I've always loved

"processing" experience--sharing stories with friends about our lives, telling about something that happened and trying to figure out together what we could learn from it, exploring the feelings it generated and what insight it might yield about ourselves, the life around us, the world beyond. The version of such reflection that I do fits linguist Deborah Tannen's description of women's "rapport talk," also self-in-relation theory perspectives on how women may foster each others' development through mutual empathy in conversation, and what Women's Ways of Knowing calls women's interest in "real talk," which often functions in the private sphere to connect and maintain relationships and the emotional infrastructure of life. This talk is often built around life story, which has come to be my special interest in composition and women's studies.

I'm also drawn to reflection on life story as it plays out in literature and in personal essays, memoirs, and autobiographies. And since I have been doing and writing about feminist teaching, my favorite of all is women's reflections on the place in their lives of learning and knowing.

I have always been moved by a piece of writing about the roots of such reflection in Tillie Olsen's novel Yonnondio. It begins in the voice of a six-year-old girl: "'I am Mazie Holbrook' she said softly. 'I am a-

known things....I know words and words'" (12). Known things, putting words to meanings about what she saw and heard and sensed, saved Mazie's inner life, and I think mine too.

Like me, Mazie asked questions constantly about language and knowing--for instance, what miners like her father do when they dig into the bowels of the earth: "'Bowels is the stummy. Earth is a stummy and mebbe she eats the men that come down. Men and daddy goin in like the day and comin out black....Coal is black--it makes a fire. The sun is makin a fire on me, but it is not black. Some color I am not knowen it is,' she said wistfully, 'but I'll have that learnin' someday'" (12).

Mazie's images of the darkness below the surface and the color of light and the way she connects them, her child self yearning to understand how it all fits together, go straight to the heart of my own learning. My work is about figuring out the mysterious and frightening depths that Mazie imagines and the light she can't yet name. For me, these have to do with experience of the self--alone, with others, in the world. I ask here what the longing to understand that experience has to do with learning in school.

As a teacher who is fascinated with the relation of feeling to thought, I often wonder how my own and my students' ideas might relate to our inner emotional

lives. The idea of subconscious learning about who we are and what we want and are capable of has intrigued me for many years, as I've made my way through a mine of difficult feelings that seem to go back to childhood beginnings. So I'm drawn to everything "sub" and "meta"--I want to unearth meanings by asking what seems to be behind or below or beyond what we see, and I'm always speculating about what shows up. I love what Ann Berthoff calls thinking about my thinking, writing about my writing, and--my specialty--processing my process. As a teacher and writer, I often ask myself meta-questions: what did I do there (in the classroom, on the page)? What do I want to happen? Why? What actually is happening?

This dissertation is a focused exploration of these kinds of questions through telling and reflecting on stories about lives in school--those of students and of myself. So I'm doing ethnography, through interviewing students and observing them in classrooms, and also autoethnography, in reflective practice about my own life, writing, and teaching. This is a search for what we can learn about academic work when we look at the selves who do this work. It's about what students (and I) call deep learning. And it's about connected research--that's why I tell the sources of my method in the ways I live my life: I want to show how I bring what



I love--what drives me--to this work and suggest what difference that makes for the scholar and teacher and for those she hopes to reach.

I find inspiration and companionship in this exploration among some forty autoethnographers in education, almost all women, whose writings I list in the Appendix at the end of this chapter. I'm drawn especially to three--Natalie Goldberg, Kim Chernin, and Jane Tompkins--who help me see complex ways that interactions between self and work play out for sophisticated thinkers who struggled in school themselves and now teach and write "out of who they are." That includes transmuting early painful life experience into learning and social value in their academic work. I discuss these developments for Goldberg, Chernin, and Tompkins in the Appendix.

I also find inspiration for looking at the self of the teacher in Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach, another source listed in the Appendix:

Seldom, if ever, do we ask the "who" question--who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form--or deform--the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes?... (4)

[To chart] the inner landscape of the teaching self...three important paths must be taken--intellectual, emotional, and spiritual--and none can be ignored....They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best...(4)

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves....(11)

Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials....By choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am....Then teaching can come from the depths of my own truth--and the truth that is within my students has a chance to respond in kind. (13, 33)

These quotes give a flavor of the kinds of questions and issues raised in the ethnographies listed in the Appendix. To explore them in more detail is beyond the scope of this chapter, but together they constitute a rich body of literature informing my research.

From the beginning, another central source for my thinking has been Women's Ways of Knowing, which inspired my paper on women's connected scholarship and over the years has remained remarkably relevant to the work I do. The book is by now something of a historical document and has been criticized from various feminist positions in academia, but I find it still useful for relating ideas about connected knowing to the teaching and learning developments explored in the following chapters.

What WWK calls "passionate knowing" is "the elaborated form connected knowing takes after women learn to use the self as an instrument of understanding" (141). My writing and teaching still come right from there--the

authors name what I have been deeply drawn to do, which suggests that my learning and teaching stories are related to others' and that passionate (also called constructivist) knowers come to their commitments and methods systematically. WWK describes the experience of passionate knowing for women in their research as

weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing....There is an impetus to allow the self back into the process of knowing, to confront the pieces of the self that may be experienced as fragmented and contradictory....A thoroughgoing self-examination at this juncture leads to the construction of a way of thinking about knowledge, truth, and self that guides the person's intellectual and moral life and personal commitments....They develop a narrative sense of the self--past and future....Women constructivists show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity. They abandon completely the either/or thinking so common in the previous positions described....They want to avoid...the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other....It is in the process of sorting out the pieces of the self and of searching for a unique and authentic voice that women come to the basic insights of constructivist thought: All knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known....When truth is seen as a process of construction in which the knower participates, a passion for learning is unleashed....Connected knowing is...a way of weaving their passions and intellectual life into some recognizable whole (136-37, 141).

This has been the evolution over many years of my life in school, and from this place I have developed my own sense of the path a connected, passionate knowing process can take, with related versions for students in writing classes like mine and perhaps for connected knowers in a range of fields. My sources for this

thinking include readings on the psychology of women, feminist teaching, composition, and a cluster of theories that I relate to learning in social, family, and classroom systems.

Specifically, I posit here a sequence of connections that brings the elements of apparent dichotomies like thinking and feeling, academic and personal, public and private into dialogue with each other in school. Of course the sequence isn't as neat and linear as the scheme I describe below, and it doesn't march along in such conveniently discernible steps; I see it more as a movement that brings us back to original questions and issues at another level, with a more developed and complex sense of how we relate to them. In putting this sequence together I draw on feminist ideas about the politics of location, family systems theory, and women's psychology and epistemology, as well as Jungian psychology, life theme research, integration of what Ann Berthoff calls "killer dichotomies" in thinking about the self and others, and spiritual sources for experiencing and reflecting on sense of self. I'm using the format below as a shorthand way to show interrelations I perceive among these terms over time, because they seem to be real in my experience and in the experience of students I describe in the following chapters. So here is a schematic layout of the sources and sequence of

learning developments that I have in mind:

1. Social locations (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and all groups of which the person is a part, including family as the site where these locations and all experiences of self are first interpreted) act as fundamental sources of identity, visible and not visible, external and internal, which may generate---
2. systematic negative response of others and negative internalized responses to what are experienced as problematic (or worse) aspects of self, which may generate---
3. "shadow" aspects of self that the person has difficulty knowing, claiming, or accepting in a realistic way, which may generate---
4. life themes or personal themes that come out of fundamental personal issues that engage individuals, often without their full awareness, in a search for resolution of what feels negative or shadowed in their sense of self, which may generate---
5. connected learning when students, teachers, and scholars can find ways to bring compelling inner questions to their work in school, which may generate---
6. caring about school in ways beyond dutiful achieving and bringing to it elements of emotional life, which may generate---
7. movement toward integration of thinking and feeling, which may generate---
8. enhanced insight into what we study and ongoing development of powers to integrate dichotomous thinking about self and others, including academic and personal knowing, public and private voice, and many other pairs of "opposites" that traditionally divide us from aspects of ourselves and others, which may generate---
9. greater empathy for and openness to self and others, which may generate---
10. movement toward wholeness, including zest, creativity, and flow in what we do integrated with a sense of dynamic balance in who we are, which may generate---

11. potential for making connections between personal wholeness, community, and social equality, going back to issues of social location that are hard for many to deal with and encountering them on a new level, moving into another cycle that uses what we're learning to get to a new place in this lifelong movement toward personal and social integration.

Naming these nodal points in such an evolution helps me think about how students learn in writing classes I've observed and taught and to link that perception with my own development in school as a thinker, writer, and person. The following chapters explore different aspects of this evolution through a series of learning and teaching stories. Meanwhile, here I unpack my basic terms--social location, shadow, life themes, and integration--and reflect on some theories that illuminate the underlying processes I describe above.

About social location: I'm interested in the complexity of individual responses to one's social roles and labels, given that each person has a unique combination of many locations and ultimately has to negotiate personally her/his relations to them. And I'm interested in how shadow feelings generated in and about these locations may get addressed through life writing in school. My own experience suggests ways of thinking about how this works. As a Jewish teacher in a sea of Christian students, I have discovered through writing with them that I am always in complex, evolving, and problematic relation to my Jewishness. In classrooms as

both a graduate student and teacher I have explained "my people" in discussions, brought my ethnic identity forward in defining myself with others, and eventually articulated the loss I feel about ways that my family has been silent or rejecting of this aspect of who we are.

Sharing this personal writing with students and colleagues has brought home to me how alone I feel in this location. There is no longer one or for that matter three or ten ways to be Jewish in this country, and I have never met one person who has the particular background and response to it that I do. So in bringing out varied features of my relation to my ethnic identity, I have come to encounter problematic elements that I never seriously struggled with until I started writing about them in English classes at UNL, where multicultural issues are brought to the fore.

In this school setting I created a trail of writings that have led me to recognize that I'll probably always be half in and half out, to feel more acceptance about living with that ambiguity, and to see in its tensions a spring for new thought about others as well as myself. And I've learned from readings such as Adrienne Rich's essay "Split at the Root," about her Jewish identity in a similarly ambivalent family, that I'm not alone in my reflection on the slipperiness of this social location that seems both important and elusive. I'm not through with all of this

and may never be, but I've moved to a new place with it that feels more clear. I've seen and felt and thought more, and that makes a difference, even though it's not a "solution." It's a chance to explore what feels internally authentic for me here rather than accept conventional assumptions about who I must be. It's a grieving and claiming of mixed reality, for now. And I think a parallel process operates for students in classes where personal experience writing is valued. Here, as I discover so often, my subject is subjectivity.

Shadow, life theme, and integration are the other terms I want to unpack here. In the context of this dissertation, I see them as a cluster of related elements. This thinking builds on my paper about women scholars, which explored the power of academic writing to bring out feelings the authors experience as shadowed--too problematic or negative to know. From there the writing process helped them move toward claiming these "dark" or submerged aspects of self and integrate them with more socially and personally acceptable feelings and qualities, allowing all to contribute to a more complex, developed, and large-hearted whole. In this process of seeing, acknowledging, and claiming, shadow can remain "juicy" in its generative power for creativity but not so frightening or depressing, as alternative ways of experiencing it become more real.