

Responding When a Life Depends on It: What to Write in the Margins When Students Self-Disclose

Guidelines help teachers with effective response when students self-disclose personal problems in writing.

by Marilyn J. Valentino

Introduction

Rushing through journal responses to Langston Hughes's "Harlem" a few years ago, I was elated to find that one student was seriously attempting to explicate Hughes's anger at a dream deferred. But as I read on, I was shocked and certainly ill-prepared for what followed:

When Hughes asks "Does it explode?" He wants to know if you finally just burst violently. . . . Are you filled with rage? Personally, my dreams were shattered [sic], and it wasn't by my own hands. My family took my dream and consumed it like a bunch of vultures. I'll never be able to be the pure, trusting person I once was. I was pushed into society, and corrupted. My body belonged to the highest bidder.

My first reaction was one of disbelief. I had not asked my students to write a personal response. I had precisely instructed them to stick to the poem. Yet, even though its context was far removed from the experiences of a white woman in the 90's, the passage had evoked this past trauma. What was I to write in the margin? If I wrote nothing, I would not be acknowledging the courage it took for this student to reveal her most personal experience. If I wrote, "Thank you for sharing this with me," the platitude would be merely a safe, generic response, inadequate drivel signifying nothing. I finally decided to say, "This must have been horrible for you," addressing her pain while not judging her parents. I also made it a

point to broach the subject privately with the student--I'll call her Mary--after class in case she wanted to seek professional help. At the end of the term, along with my gradebook, I filed the incident away as an anomaly.

The next year, when I asked my fiction class to respond to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, I made sure to ask safe, "objective" prompts. Yet, again I was surprised to hear from a distressed older student, crying into the phone and pleading, "I can't write a response to that story. It's too close." I excused her from class and told her to write about another short story we had read instead. A little shaken, I went to class, only to be handed not the required two pages, but a seven-page journal from a student I'll call Sarah, part of which read:

Pecola's life sears my soul. I feel empathy for her. I wasn't raped or molested as a child, but in my immature pre-adult life I was, and not by a parent. I'll never forget it because not only did it scar my body, but my mind as well

I hadn't asked to bear witness to this personal tragedy. It made me feel uncomfortable, worried I'd say the wrong thing, frightened to say nothing. I realized, though, that these private revelations from students were not going to go away. However, when I broached the subject with colleagues, I heard: "You shouldn't ask them to write personal journals. I never do anymore. I don't want to know their problems. I'm not a counselor." (Neither was I, nor did I have any aspirations to be.) One good-naturedly advised: "Why not just drop Morrison since she deals with awkward subjects?" (If I did that, I'd have to eliminate half the authors in my syllabus.) The most unsettling reactions were these: "That never happens to me" and "It's not a problem here."

It wasn't a problem either for Francis Thumm's high school songwriting class until he overlooked this warning in a poem by a student:

The air gets warm/and thinner by the breath
When will be the mercy/of the
coming of my death?

Not long after she submitted these lines, the student committed suicide. The teacher now warns us: "I have learned over time to pay close attention" (in Louv 429).

Like Thumm, I want us to "pay close attention" to the warning signals of a growing number of college students with emotional and psychological disorders because, as writing instructors, we are often their first contact. Many of us can recall students who acted strangely or withdrawn in class,

or others who, in a conference, revealed past experiences with addiction or post-traumatic stress disorder or recurring problems of physical abuse or depression. Or worse, perhaps we didn't notice a student had any problems at all, only to find, as two of my colleagues did, the student's name appear in the newspaper as a suicide.

Since very few of us are trained in counseling but are often involuntarily confronted with students' problems, I want to discuss the rise in the number of high-risk students, examine student self-disclosure excerpts, and suggest general guidelines for responsible and effective response.

Rise in Number of College Students with Psychological and Mental Disorders

Whether caused by the increase in violence, family abuse, and drug use, or the bombardment of sex and violence in the media, or the disintegration of family support systems, more and more students must deal with very serious problems. Along with the increase in the numbers of college students reporting disabilities, as high as 9% among first-year students (Henderson iii), teachers face new challenges, especially from high-risk students suffering from hidden psychological or mental disorders--schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, manic depression, and suicidal tendencies--or more common mental disorders stemming from drug addiction, depression, or post-traumatic stress from war, abuse, or rape. Some mental illnesses, like eating disorders, schizophrenia, and depression, are also more likely to develop during college years. While current statistics count college students with psychological disorders at only 3% (Phillippe), the percentages increase to 10% to 16% when considering emotional disturbances (Segal). The figures are compounded when we learn that these students are almost twice as likely to be enrolled in community colleges (63% vs. 37% in four-year colleges, according to the *The Directory of Disability*). Added to these numbers are other potential students bound for college from the pool of over 300,000 elementary and secondary students who have been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, and who, with the help of services mandated by The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), will be mainstreamed. Yet, unlike most four-year resident campuses, community colleges rarely have mental health professionals on staff to support adequately this new influx.

In addition, community colleges educate a majority of older, non-traditional students, many of whom have dealt with the effects of poverty, divorce, abuse, death, and mental illness for years. It is no surprise, then,

that a Michigan study last year found that one in every two Americans has experienced a mental disorder at some point in his or her life and that 30% of Americans suffer in any given year (Goleman A-1).

Moreover, societal pressures, federal government budget reductions for mental institutions, and advances in psychotropic drugs have hastened the release from institutions of more and more patients into the community. The good news is that around 80% of most disorders can be controlled through drugs, counseling help in the community, and special needs assistance on campuses (Bango). The scary news is that under ADA regulations, if these high-risk students do not require classroom accommodation, they do not have to disclose their illnesses to their professors. An even more dangerous situation is that many more who are unaware they even have a problem or have not yet been diagnosed are receiving neither medication nor counseling but are potential students.

Currently, composition teachers may be encountering this scenario. A counselor tells the student, "A full-time job is too much stress for you. Why don't you sign up for courses at a community college?" Then, when the student becomes overwrought in trying to manage family, part-time work, a college schedule, *and* the rigors of writing, their naked emotions may emerge in their papers. And many teachers do not know how to respond, verbally or in writing.

Until recently, composition scholars have generally shunned advice on responding to personal problems since mental illness is so complex and still often taboo, and since our discipline is writing and not counseling. Their attention has been rightly devoted to examining the cognitive level of response, that is, global vs. local, rhetorical vs. formal, descriptive vs. evaluative, etc. Teacher responses have also been analyzed to determine how response shapes revision, how teachers negotiate meaning through response, and how response reflects composition/literary theory and personal style (Anson 1989, Beach 1989, Straub and Lunsford 1995). Even though this research has been valuable, it has neglected instruction in how to respond to students who self-disclose serious personal problems.

Some literary scholars, especially those proponents of expressive writing and reader-response theories (Bleich, Lent), have affirmed the value of students' self-disclosure in writing essays or in response to literature. Some composition critics, on the other hand, have recently initiated debate over the necessity, ethics, and dangers of students writing about personal experiences (Johnson; Miller; Singer; Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler). Richard E. Miller has decided to face head on the anger, racism, and other

"unsolicited oppositional discourse" in student essays. He advises us not to "exile students to the penitentiaries or the psychiatric wards for writing offensive, anti-social papers" or to hide ostrich-style by commenting solely on surface errors (408). Instead, his response is to enter into the "contact zone" with his students by using their papers as texts to be analyzed in class. This is a radical step for many of us. And certainly, self-disclosures of suicide attempts, abuse, and other private issues are not appropriate subject matters for class discussion; however, his warning about the inherent dangers of not dealing with certain revelations should be heeded.

Carol Deletiner has been one of the brave few to introduce us to the uncomfortable revelations of real students, who in their written response to literature, or in their personal essays or after class, told her about suicide attempts, divorce, abuse, and addiction. She offers samples of her personal responses to their disclosures, but wonders about crossing professional boundaries by relating her own "experiences as an estranged member of a dysfunctional family, a terrified student . . ." (813). She didn't have to wonder long, for she was criticized in a later issue of *College English* by Kathleen Pfeiffer, who dismissed personal writing as simply "self-absorption" and warned that instructors "shouldn't solicit such confessions and disclosures" (671). In the same issue, Cheryl Alton worried not only about the dangers of "open[ing] Pandora's box" but also over the response of students who "receive an unsatisfactory grade after sharing their deepest pain . . ." (667). She tells Deletiner that "personal problems" are "none of your business" (667).

I, myself, tried to avoid assigning autobiographical essays and even personal responses to readings, thinking naively that the problem of self-disclosures would be eliminated. It was not to be so. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose explains that personal, social, and academic anxieties often leak into students' writing. Especially in journals, Toby Fulwiler admits that teachers avoid writing that is "too private to witness," yet insists that journals are one of the few places students have "license" to "try things out--freely, without fear of penalty [or] censorship" (160). Unlike formal essays, says Fulwiler, journals contain connections, digressions, and dialogue with the teacher. The students through this dialogue presume an intimate relationship with their readers. Because of this, some student disclosures require more than a comment on structure or grammar; they require different kinds of responses, ones we need to learn so that we don't do more damage by either ignoring or writing inappropriate remarks.

Journal writing especially encourages confessional writing. Its informal,

subjective, self-expressive nature elicits self-disclosure even if unconsciously. Asking students to respond objectively to powerful literature about traumatic issues is also likely to evoke suppressed emotions that writers have experienced in common with characters they are analyzing, even if the experience itself does not necessarily match. In a 1994 article, Cheryl L. Johnson recounts how at various times students were unable to complete an assignment because the atrocities in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Jones's *Corregidora* had sparked private recollections of murder or sexual abuse. Even though students had sometimes misinterpreted the text, Johnson realized that "as painful as this may be . . . we have no other choice but to allow space in the classroom for such encounters with our students"(418). The intimate nature of writing itself may serve as both a stimulus and a catharsis for past experiences. When those feelings are expressed, albeit unsolicited or unforeseen, the teacher cannot avoid or dismiss them. To do so would be negligent.

If the teacher's role is to establish an atmosphere of trust in which students can express feelings and attitudes freely without threat of condemnation or personal judgment, we have an ethical and legal responsibility to respond effectively and refer students to other professionals if necessary. It is not expected that we must "cure" or solve these problems. "We are teachers, not therapists," Pfeiffer reminds us (671). Most teachers have neither the background nor the expertise to cope with these special needs. However, teachers are in danger of getting caught in the quagmire of students' disorders if they don't acquire some guidelines for appropriately dealing with disclosure.

The following guidelines I developed with the help of counselors, mental health specialists, psychologists, and colleagues. All excerpts are from actual student papers from two- and four-year colleges across the country. In all examples, I use pseudonyms.

Guidelines: What You Can Do Beforehand to Prepare

0. **Learn about your legal responsibilities and the support available in your institution and community** . Know your college's student code of conduct and what procedures should be followed if a student threatens harm to himself/herself or to others. Learn the legal implications. If the student has not disclosed a disability to you, you are not liable. If a student becomes a threat, even if the disability has been disclosed, confidentiality is suspended. Know what

- professional support is available on your campus and locally. This could include clinical psychologists, counselors, special needs/ADA coordinators, social workers, even a suicide hot line.
0. **Indicate support services in your syllabus.** Always include phone numbers, location, and names if possible. The professor should call ahead so the counselor can be apprised and ready to greet the student.
 0. **Devise alternative assignments and ways of responding.** To offer students an alternative to writing about a topic that deals with abuse or trauma, some instructors add to their syllabi: "We will be discussing current social issues this term. If some of these are offensive to you or make you feel uncomfortable, please see me about an alternative essay or assignment." To enable students to write freely without fear of scrutiny or retribution, you may decide to divide journals into academic and personal (not read by instructor) sections. You may want to tell students you will turn down the top of a page that interests you for whatever reason, and that will signal you'd like to discuss the contents with the student. Be sure to tell students ahead if they will be sharing their writing with classmates and give them the option of not sharing anything personal.

Guidelines: What You Can Do When Students Self-Disclose¹

- . **Assume nothing. Ask questions before rescuing.** Sometimes students are not suffering from any disorder but make up stories for attention, as was the case with Mick: "I sometimes dream I'm a giant penis. I order men to bend over. Someday I'll have kids, and I won't have to do it anymore." The single, female professor, who suspected the student's intent to shock, chose not to respond verbally or in writing. A few days later Mick showed up at her office and confessed it wasn't true. Rather than probing further, the professor changed the subject. The "attention getting" disclosures stopped. Yet, if a pattern of inappropriate remarks were to continue, the issues would have to be addressed in a conference or with a referral if the student were threatening.
0. Sometimes students have had real problems but have resolved them or are already being counseled. It's important to ask up front. When I spoke to Mary after class, and asked if perhaps she were writing a short story, she said, "No, it really happened." I said openly, "I wasn't sure how you wanted me to respond." And then she said something very interesting: "I just wanted to say it. I didn't expect you to say anything; I just had to say it." I also found out she had

worked with counselors and was now in a healthy relationship.

0. Finally, just ask simply: "What would you like me to do?" Often, as with Mary, it was nothing; she just wanted someone to listen. If students seem to become an overbearing presence in your office, on the other hand, follow step three below.
0. **Don't keep it a secret.** In all cases, you should ask a professional for an objective point of view, for possible responses, and for an understanding of your legal obligations. That might be a mental health counselor at the college, in the community, or your ADA coordinator, and you should consult your supervisor. It would also be wise to keep a written note of the occurrence, especially discussion in a conference, in case a pattern of abnormal behavior develops. There have been rare instances where professors' lives have been threatened or where unstable students have filed sexual harassment suits when they felt their affections were not reciprocated. A professional distance even at the earliest stages is recommended.
- . **Keep a professional distance and set limits.** The nature of students is that they tend to be takers, and often unwittingly, we become "rescuers." We do not need to "fix" all problems. We can't. We can, however, listen and refer students to others with the expertise, experience, and resources to help. We can also separate treatment issues from education issues and set priorities and assignments as we would with any other students. Let students solve their own emotional problems. Often they can identify their own solutions. Rhonda, one developmental student in her twenties, revealed that her head was "ready to explode." She continued with a litany of serious problems:
 0. My mom tried to kill herself, one of my best friends is 7 1/2 months pregnant and has nothing, my other friend has guy problems, I quit my job and have no money, I can't concentrate in school, I have a guy who I care about 2500 miles away and I have bronchitis. Also my car is in the shop AGAIN! . . . I don't know what to do I might go up to the mountains for a few days to sort things out. My grandparents live ther [sic].
0. It appears that Rhonda has come upon a healthy solution. A short affirmation may be all that is needed: "Sounds like you need a break (or are under a lot of stress). The vacation seems like a good plan. If you need help sorting out your feelings, there is a place on campus"

0. There has been a question over whether or not to reveal one's own experiences with abuse or emotional disorders, etc. as a way of relating to a text or in responding to similar student revelations. Counselors have advised me to keep these experiences from students for two reasons. First, students who are stressed want someone to attend to *their* issues and do not want attention deflected onto the teacher. Second, students need to see instructors as empathetic but also as in control of the situation. To expose one's personal trauma is to make oneself the victim, not the sounding board and referral source. Despite these caveats, there may be unique occasions based on age, experience, and relationship, that would warrant private revelation. I'd suggest asking a school counselor for advice.
0. Up to this point, most of my examples have been from females. Yet, more males are disclosing physical abuse, emotional distress, or being distraught over the illnesses of others. Steve recalled his mother's attempted suicide:
 0. When I found out I more or less freaked. My whole body was shaking and I felt wick [sic]. . . . She felt so lifeless that I immediately broke down. . . . I feel sad, scared, happy that she is OK, angry at her for doing what she did, overwhelmed because of work, school, and taking the time to see her, so frustrated because I didn't see this coming.
 0. Some reflective responses would be: "How difficult for you to go through all this. I'm sorry that this happened. It seems you've been going through a lot. Do you need to talk with someone about this? Would you like to talk a bit after class?"
 0. In another case, Keisha was suicidal and practiced self-mutilation by cutting her arms with glass. She was not only being counseled on campus but was also being seen each week by me and a professor in another department. Both of us were drowning along with her and not helping her. I should have asked any one of these questions:
 0. "Is there someone [not me] you trust that you can call to talk to about this?"
 0. "Are you talking to anyone else about the problem you are having?"
 0. "How would *you* want to solve this?"

- . "I don't have the authority (experience, background) to help you, but I can give you the number of our campus counselor so you can make an appointment to talk with someone. Or would you like me to call him or walk over with you now?"
- 0. "There is a place on campus where you can talk with someone about this. Would you be willing to do this? I will still support you, but I am not a counselor. You can still call me once a week if you'd like, but you still need to see a professional." If a student seems suicidal, counselors advise that you may want to ask: "Is this the only solution you see?" and remind him or her that once that option is used, there are no other options.
- 0. **Make a contract for schoolwork; outline responsibilities.** Even though the student may have a disability and require accommodation, there is no need to lower standards. There is a need to separate treatment issues from educational responsibilities. You can provide structure and clarity by offering to accept a late paper but with one grade lowered or find another equitable solution. In both Steve and Rhonda's situations, a late paper or incomplete may ease the current stress, even if that means a lowering of a few points as an option. Sometimes, as with someone who was in the psych ward for five weeks, I had to say: "I've had others who had to drop for various reasons. You need to take care of yourself first. This college will be around for a long time. When you get back, if you want to talk about academics, please come in."
- 0. **On papers, use reflective statements.** If you read a shocking personal experience, as in Mary's and Sarah's examples above, you may want to write in the margins:
 - 0. "This must have been horrible for you."
 - 0. "That must have been upsetting."
 - 0. "You seem upset. Is there someone you can talk to about this? Would you like to speak to a counselor?"
- 0. In the instance with Sarah mentioned earlier, the rest of her journal seemed to reduce the need for outside help:
 - 0. I was teased and abused by other children as a child, but I defended myself, thus not considering myself a victim. I tolerated adults with their abusive language, but it didn't drive me to madness" [as it did Pecola in the story].
- 0. Considering this last admission, an effective response might be: "You sound healthy now. That must have been a terrible time in your life. Your survival skills are commendable."

0. A colleague showed me Susan's diagnostic essay in response to: "Describe a contemporary problem in America." While most students discussed drugs, education, or public concerns, Susan described the verbal abuse she suffered first as a child from her father and later from her first husband. The last lines of her essay read:
 0. Now, having been remarried for nearly four years, I find myself again, in still another abusive relationship. This time though, it's not just verbal, but physical as well. I've already recieved [sic] a broken hand, black eyes, and have gotten pushed around repeatedly. I love my husband and just don't know what I'll do.
 0. At first, the instructor wrote, "Good organization of your ideas" and "Review use of commas." But later she decided she needed to address the content and added: "Good luck in working through this situation. Please protect yourself. On campus, a group called Women's Link has lots of info. You can just drop by the administration building and see Cathy. It's all confidential." She could also have said: "You may want some assistance with this. If you'd like to talk, come see me after class."
 0. Sometimes, we read essays from students who seem confused and frustrated. It's often a judgment call whether or not to suggest a referral. Of course, by midterm we may be able to ascertain if a student is joking or just venting. Still, we need to be ever cautious. Kate, a twenty-year old developmental student, disclosed this:
 0. Sometimes I feel like I'm wandering around in this life accomplishing nothing. . . . I don't want any of the options the world is offering me. I don't think I want a family. I can't work just at a romantic relationship with a male; it doesn't fulfill me. Because I don't have any real goals of my own, everyone in my life rules who I am. I hate that I don't know who I should be. Nothing in life makes me happy.
 0. When a counselor read this excerpt, she advised that Kate needed direction and goal setting and offered: "How might you gain control of your life? See me. Perhaps I can give you some suggestions."
 0. Once you suggest a referral, do not assume the student has gone or received help. Since many county agencies are overloaded, the wait may take weeks or months. Counseling, itself, is only one step in the process and does not constitute a resolution. It is good practice to follow up later, and, if the student is unable to get an appointment,

you can call to find an alternative or intermediary source. If the student is successful, you can reinforce the action by saying: "I'm glad you are getting the help you need."

0. The guidelines above are just that, suggestions and starting points to conversations with students. Marti Singer suggests that "once we have read a paper, there is a contract between us and the person. . . . We need to respect the students' possible anxiety in telling the story at all. . . . [Then] we need to ascertain what the writer needs and what our role is to be-- advice-giver, classifier, info-giver, listener, facilitator, friend" (74). I urge you to share your experiences with mental health counselors and with colleagues to develop appropriate strategies for handling self-disclosure in students' papers. Responding to student writing, we all know, is the hardest part of our job, and in some cases, it can be the most crucial.

► Note

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