

ENGLISH

Still Weaving of a Written Self: Reflections on the Whole Student

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I turned around to survey the classroom one last time, checking to make sure I'd left nothing behind. As I went to switch off the lights, I stood there, briefly, taking in the silence. Here I stood immediately after the final, and I was already missing their voices. As a writing instructor, this is nothing new: I spend the entire semester "listening" to my students' voices—in journals, in papers, in emails, in classroom discussions, in individual conferences, and even in the informal spaces before and after class. So at the end of the semester, it should come as no surprise that the sudden ceasing of all these voices leaves such a void.

This school year I had spent so much time cultivating those voices, searching out those voices, that the silence seemed that much more stark. This year verified for me the real need, the real thirst, the real hunger our students have for understanding—of the self, of the world around them. In fact, my students were so eager to use their voices as a means of exploration—not just of their academic selves, but of their whole selves—that encouraging that expression, and hence understanding, through language was relatively effortless. And that understanding of the self is what a college education, particularly a Jesuit education, is all about—or at least it should be. But this year, more than any other, I have become aware of how much we are failing our students, of how much we separate our students' intellectual selves from their whole selves, their souls. And we all suffer as a result.

My interest in this idea of the whole person was piqued in the fall semester. I had one section of English 115, the university's honors first-year composition course, which in particular used the class journals as an outlet for their personal, social and emotional searchings. Since I don't normally provide prompts for these online—and therefore semi-public—journals, I was amazed to see how their class writings evolved into fairly consistent, frank and honest explorations of identity. They wanted to understand their lives, their world and their place in it. As I began exploring Ignatian/Jesuit education with my mentor, Dr. Trudelle Thomas, I was drawn to the idea of *cura personalis*, the concept that students are complete persons, not simply intellectual beings. *Cura personalis* is a trademark of Jesuit education, "where in one-on-one spiritual guidance, the guide adapts the Spiritual Exercises to the unique individual making them" and "where the teacher establishes a personal relationship with students, listens to them in the process of teaching, and draws them toward personal initiative and responsibility for learning . . ." (Traub 391). Ignatian principles tell us that education must revolve around individual adaptation and connection. My role as an educator at a Jesuit institution, then, must include an understanding—and even valuing—of the personal issues my students are experiencing. Personal identity, an understanding of the whole self, appeared to be the thing my students were grappling with, whether or not I included it in the course.

As I listened to students explore topics such as sexuality, drinking, loneliness, isolation, fitting in and growing up, I realized that the composition classroom in particular—because of its focus on writing as a means of thinking, searching, expressing and understanding—had the potential to allow students a full exploration of self. I also understood that a course which neglected such "peripheral" aspects of students' lives was, in fact, failing them. As observed by Susan J. Korth, "Since human experience, always the starting point in Ignatian pedagogy, never occurs in a vacuum, we must know as much as we can about the actual context within which teaching and learning take place. We as faculty need to understand the world of our students, including ways in which family, friends, social pressures, politics, economics, media, and other realities impact them" (Korth 281). With this in mind, for spring semester, I fashioned for my students a more focused exploration of self, particularly through their journals and their research project. I wanted to provide a place for students to explore their whole selves, not just give them a string of purely academic objectives.

The Journals: Weaving the Self Still

One of the things I did for my spring courses was refashion the way I conducted the online journal for my classes. Typically, students write journals 2-3 times per week, which are posted to an online discussion board. The idea is that frequent, informal writing helps them hone their writing skills in ways formalized assignments cannot. In the past I haven't always provided writing prompts, allowing students to write about the readings, explore concepts, begin drafting major assignments—to simply write. Because journals appear in a public forum, the audience becomes not only the teacher, but their classmates as well. Students are encouraged to respond to one another, to engage in real community dialogue. To allow for me to read their writing before class and possibly incorporate

student ideas or concerns into class discussions, journals are due at midnight the night before class. I often use student journals as springboards for discussions in class by asking a student to share the previous night's response or by directing students to classmates' journals that might add to the ideas they were contemplating. I do not give feedback on every journal, though I did send a private email when a student wrote something particularly compelling, interesting or inventive. At first, students seemed taken aback by the more personalized response to their writing (as opposed to simply a comment or a score on a piece of paper). Over the course of the semester, many students began responding to the emails from me, allowing for one-on-one dialogue and engagement about their writings and reflections. While I made sure to respond to each student multiple times throughout the semester, only some engaged in such dialogue with me. But through course evaluations and comments in the journals, emails or in-class writings, I know many of the students appreciated the individual acknowledgment—of their writing, their ideas, their questions, their worries—of their individual selves.

Initially, students from the two English 101 (the non-honors first-year writing course) sections I taught in spring expressed anxiety by the openness of the journals. In response to this anxiety, as well as in hopes of encouraging that exploration of self, I created a list of prompts to help guide student writings, while still leaving the journals as open as possible. Some of the questions were more benign, such as "Describe in detail a favorite childhood memory" or "Describe in detail one of your favorite places." But there were other more complex questions that stirred more discussion from the students, particularly "What is your greatest fear?" and "What do you think is the greatest challenge facing students of your generation?" These questions elicited powerful response and expression, leading to stronger (and more personal) writing. Oddly enough, through encouraging students to explore and express themselves as whole beings, I stumbled upon another basic tenet of Jesuit education: reflection, and thus discernment. Again, Sharon Korth describes the significance of these principles to our students:

Reflection and discernment were integral parts of Ignatius's learning process. Reflection is a thoughtful reconsideration of some subject matter, experience, idea, purpose, or spontaneous reaction, in order to grasp its significance more fully. Thus, reflection is the process by which meaning surfaces in human experience by understanding the truth being studied more clearly; understanding the sources of one's sensations or reactions in the consideration; deepening one's understanding of the implications for oneself and others; achieving personal insights into events, ideas, truths, or the distortion of truth; coming to an understanding of who I am...and who I might be in relation to others. (282)

Through these reflections and explorations, as well as my own reflection and exploration, I was reminded that the ancient concept of the heart entails "the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self" (Palmer 314). Through my students' journals, I learned that we cannot neglect portions of ourselves without creating real damage to our souls; I learned that we must reflect on ourselves and on the world around us and our relationship to it; and I learned that it is only when we join all aspects of ourselves that we can be completely filled.

I was also reminded how crucial it is for us as educators to create safe spaces, such as the online class journal, for students to reflect. I read while students shared feelings of isolation, of confusion, of fear. I read while students shared personal tragedies and triumphs. I read while students explored their world, their relationships, their behaviors. It created an amazing dialogue, both within and outside the class. I was caught up in a weaving of knowledge and understanding. Parker J. Palmer, a professional educator, describes good teaching in this way, "good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life They are able to weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (314).

Allowing students a space for exploration and expression granted students a liberty that is too often lacking in their lives. They simply don't know how to disconnect—from technology, from each other, from all the noise in their lives. Asking them to reflect and write forced them (well, most of them) to slow down long enough to think. Perhaps because I often run at such a hectic pace myself, I was struck by how often students confessed (either in their journals or to me privately) that they had just stepped back and listened, observed and pondered. Without knowing it, they were learning the wisdom that "*Listen* and *silent* are spelled with the same letters. To listen one has to be silent" (Malloy 308). And not only did they make the connection; they practiced it. Sometimes, their journals simply shared an observation made while practicing being still: the beauty of spring, the joy of a starry night, the joy of just being. Their journals allowed them this freedom—to explore issues of real urgency or simply to pause, to reflect, to express.

I was amazed to watch as students, initially apprehensive about the journals, became increasingly more open and more comfortable expressing themselves. Their responses ranged from the mundane to the monumental. (Selected responses are included below.) Students shared their fear of the future: selecting a major or profession, wondering how they would manage the changes of the coming summer. Students communicated personal challenges:

reflecting on the death of a friend, describing a tornado striking one student's hometown. Students expressed their current fears and insecurities: questioning the need to drink to fit in, ruminating on their quest for identity and acceptance. Students celebrated their successes: reminiscing on their growth over the school year, sharing their personal and academic discoveries and achievements. Ultimately, by the end of the semester, students realized that they were not alone in their fears, struggles or searchings—or in their joys and personal victories. They had truly become a community, weaving their own tapestry.

I was also thrilled to witness my students' sheer will to explore, to be understood, to be heard. Though I definitely witnessed moments of complete exhaustion and fatigue, burn out and apathy, frustration and aggravation, I was privileged to behold their courage and fearlessness.

The Research Project: Reflecting on, Defining and Solving Issues of the Self

Much of this exploration occurred as I gave them a more directed research assignment. For their project, they were required to select a pressing issue for young adults, their generation. The first year writing curriculum requires both an argument essay and a research paper. I typically bring these together as a group project focused on a specific issue. Students write an individual argument essay on the same issue question as their group members. They then write a solution-based collaborative research paper for their particular issue, building off of their individual argument essays. This semester differed in that I required groups to focus on "a key issue facing students of your generation (or possibly even high school students). Think about issues that affect you or your friends personally, and that affect multiple facets of young adult life: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, etc. Obviously, these overlap a great deal—look at it in the context of the Jesuit ideal *cura personalis*: the whole person. You may be investigating an issue that seems purely social, but find that it influences and is influenced by the emotional or the spiritual, for example." Students were also asked to consider an appropriate audience for their topic—an entity that could effect change. Groups met with me periodically to select and narrow a topic, as well as to discuss how the group might approach the topic. There were papers on the particular challenges facing international students (written by two students, one from Ghana, one from Saudi Arabia), commuter students (by a group with one commuter and two non-commuters) and minority students (by a group with a student from Africa); there were also papers on the effect of media on body image and the effect of sexist language on gender relations. I watched with interest as groups chose to write about more sensitive issues: underage drinking and its accompanying pressures, the saturation of sex in the media and its impact on their perceptions and relationships, the use of Facebook by students as well as potential employers. And they wrote about these issues with passion and conviction.

Students wrote with real searching as well, which is the ultimate goal of a Jesuit education. In this more formalized academic exercise, they sought to understand the pressures facing them—and sought to make more informed decisions as a result. The assignment required their personal as well as their intellectual investment. Indeed, as Korth points out, the true challenge of this Ignatian model is to develop students "who will gradually learn to discriminate and be selective in choosing experiences; who [are] able to draw fullness and richness from the reflection on those experiences; who [become] self-motivated by his or her own integrity and humanity to make conscious, responsible choices" (284). They must not only be able to seek out truth, but to enact it in their lives as well.

Asking students to search out or create a solution forced them to look beyond the fear and stress and aggravation of the issue they had selected and to seek ways to implement change—either within themselves, within the community or within society at large. As they worked with one another and met with me again to discuss potential solutions and an appropriate audience for their proposal, students began to take personal ownership for the issue they had raised, seeking out real, viable plans of action. They also began to see their relationship to the identified problem, and hence to the community within which they were writing. Their solutions became real pleas for change and for help. As one group put it in their final paper, "in reality we believe American teenagers are just looking for guidance; because in today's world with wars, recession, poverty and the like, teens need to have some kind of support system to show them the way." In response to the issues they had identified, groups proposed how Xavier could better address the issue of underage drinking, or how students could combat the saturation of sexual images in the media, or how students could be more aware of the implications of what they were posting to Facebook. They proposed not only how the community they were writing for might address the problem, but also how they, individual students, might seek change in themselves.

The Final Outcome: Weavers of the Heart

Ultimately, this bravery and exploration reminds me why I teach—and why it is such a challenge. I am reminded that, as the teacher, my "heart is the loom on which the threads are tied . . . teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be" (Palmer

321). Teaching the way I do, investing personally in students the way I do, connects me to my students, to the their struggles and their pains. When I hear of their loneliness and their fears, I cannot help but be affected. Fortunately, this personal connection also allows me to experience their triumphs and their glories. One last quote from Palmer sums this up for me—and leads us back to that image of the heart: “I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know” (311). Watching students work through real adult issues and engage in thoughtful, mature dialogues with me and with each other as they do so is undoubtedly the most rewarding aspect of my job. And that is precisely what happened this year.

Near the end of fall semester, several students reflected on the journals in particular and the role they played for them as students as well as writers. Students appreciated not only the safe space to explore the challenges and issues of their daily lives, but the power of belonging to a community. One student described the journals and class discussions as “the vital area of class that preserves our Jesuit tradition at this college. I can name on one hand the number of people that I can call by name in my other classes at Xavier (and most of them I know from Rhetoric). Especially in my lecture classes, I can only pick out familiar faces, never names or memories. Where are the interactions with other students that are meant to expand my mind?” Another student responded to this journal, “Like you, I don’t know the names of everyone in any other class . . . and I feel that our class has achieved that personal level necessary to feel comfortable I think that although we are learning English, this class is helping us learn how to act around one another, how to deal with people and views other than yourself or your own.” Students recognized the importance of reflection and its expression not only to themselves, but also to their academic pursuits and their social interactions.

In fact, I had many students, particularly in my fall semester courses, express sorrow when we were not writing journals—especially when journal writing was suspended during the drafting of a major paper. One student, after fall semester ended, emailed me to say, “so I was having a bad day yesterday and I almost wrote a journal type thing, but I didn’t know what I would do with it afterward because I didn’t want to just write it for myself, so I didn’t write. I really missed our class journaling.” Many students acknowledged their initial apprehension at writing the journals—and their eventual appreciation of them. One student from spring semester summed up her (and many others’) experience with the journals by citing the multiple functions of the journal: drafting essays and seeing other students’ writing, “venting” about problems and learning about other students in “ways I wouldn’t have been able to had the journals not been posted,” and sharing ideas and learning from the ideas of others. For her last journal, she concluded, “I really like the option of writing freely, because I initially thought college was going to be a lot more about facts and less about my ideas. I love that Xavier and the professors in particular give me the freedom to discuss my ideas and give input on the world.” The journals, with their focus on reflection and dialogue, and the research project, with its more focused academic approach, validated student thought and experience. Instead of treating their personal lives, ideas, struggles and challenges as something separate from their academic experience, these assignments allowed students to grapple with their whole selves—the real work of a college freshman anyway.

By the end of spring semester, I felt like a weaver who has let her students go, and watches as they weave an intricate, colorful masterpiece. Except that they were weaving the fabric of their souls, their spirits, their very hearts. I watched as they learned to understand themselves and their classmates and their universe. I watched as they learned that “becoming an adult necessitates extended periods when a person steps back, stops, reflects, thinks, ruminates, wonders, and ponders” (Malloy 308). That steady, measured reflection and passionate, articulate dialogue was a magnificent thing to behold.

As I left the last classroom for the last time, I stood there, reflecting. I realized that as much as this had been an exercise in reflection for them, it had also been one for me. I paused to soak in the quiet, to listen for the reverberations of their voices. I was reminded of a quote from a favorite Christmas card: “To see the sacred, we must slow down.” And so I had: I slowed, I reflected, I observed, I learned and I grew. And I realized that they had, too. My eyes scanned the room one last time, then I switched off the lights and walked away, their voices echoing still.

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Class Online Journal Excerpts

"I have no idea what's going on in my life. I have no idea what I'm meant to do, who I'm meant to be with, or where I'm supposed to go. Every time I have to think about my future, or how I'm going to make my life significant, I feel like I'm going to puke. Everything in my stomach seems to vanish and I shiver at the emptiness. I'm a planner by nature—lists are my best friends, and weekly organizers are practically family. I like to know what I need to do in order to accomplish my goals, and I like to know what it is I'm working towards. The uncertainty of my future kills me. What I would give for someone to give me no choice in a career—just pick one and let me simply achieve it. Seriously, I appreciate the sentiment, letting us create our own futures and all, but it is honestly a nightmare that I experience every day."

"After only five, short months of my college career, I have witnessed many of my peers turn to drinking as a means to mask themselves from the things that haunt their minds. From failed tests, unexpected pregnancies, dealing with the grief of losing a loved one, nasty breakups, and a myriad of other reasons, I have watched as many of my friends have attempted to 'drink away their sorrows.' While they are sometimes successful in distorting their reality for a single night and forgetting about their current problems at hand, reality always comes crashing back the next morning. These nights of drunken distortions often only add to one's problem due to the poor decisions that are commonly made while one is intoxicated. While this method of forgetting the burdens of life may work for a few hours, it is nothing more than temporary."

"My greatest fear is being alone. I do not know why. I have just always been around people who I can relate to, or who know and love me. When I came to Xavier, I did not feel the Xavier spirit or love for my school. I felt alone, misunderstood, and a whole list of other emotions that have made me feel like an outcast here. I do not party much, I do not drink or smoke, so I am left out of a lot of things people do on the weekend. I am a natural science major so I am always studying and do not really have the freedom to go out and just chill Therefore, I sit alone in my room. I sit alone not because I choose to, but because I have to."

"Sex? This is how the Facebook conversation started. I had been in this guy's . . . class last semester and we were still friends and talked every once in awhile. After I read 'sex?' I just blew it off. I mean, I thought it was a joke. The way people talk about sex all the time and the innuendos, I just assumed it would be. So we went on with the conversation. A little later, however, he says that I didn't answer his question. 'What question?' I asked perplexed, not realizing what he was talking about.

'Do you want to have sex with me?' My mouth literally almost dropped to the floor, I was so shocked. Who asks a question like that, and over Facebook? Really?"

"I know that at times consistency can be a good thing, but I'm afraid that I will never be open to change because I am just not that used to it... I'm not saying that I am going to go out and get a tattoo, drop out of college, and do something I plan on regretting later, but I would like to mix it up a bit. If anybody has any suggestions on how to do so, please let me know because it honestly feels like I am just sleepwalking through my own life. These are supposed to be the best years of my life and it is almost as if I am just going through the motions of college. I am doing what I think I should be doing, wearing what I think I should be wearing, and hanging out with whom I think I should be hanging out with. Like Sam said in his last journal, he is comfortably numb. Well, I think I have reached that point."

"Our class discussion on Wednesday revolved mainly around the idea that violence in video games, on television, in music and in movies can have a negative effect on young viewers. Recently, some friends and I had a late night discussion on porn and other adult sexual content available in our society today. Weird, I know, but it's made me think a lot about all of the material that can seriously affect a child's mindset and development. . . . We reprimanded our society for the amount of violence we convey through the media, but we completely overlooked the extensive sexuality our siblings, cousins, and kids see today. How will that affect our society? How is the media going to change the world our kids will live in? Will they illustrate the effects of an oversexed society in years to

come? In class, we concluded that violence was not a bad thing for our kids to see, with moderation and guidance. Can we say the same about sex?"

"For the past few months, the girls' bathrooms . . . have had "What's Your Secret?" posters up in the stalls, where anyone and everyone can write anything and everything. Now, granted, the anonymity factor meant that people got carried away with what they wrote . . . but the whole thing really showed me that people aren't just doing whatever the hell they want without any second thoughts, whether they be of regret or of pride. My hall filled up almost three sheets of blank poster paper with their thoughts on whether what they were currently doing with their lives was making them happy. In a hall of Jesus freaks, partiers and everything in between, we all shared some common concerns."

"Since when does going out to a party always entail drinking? Can't college kids go out and not drink? My friends and I usually end up concluding that it won't be that fun to go out if you don't drink—no one wants to be the babysitter of all the other drunk friends, and no one wants to be the quiet sober girl in the corner."

"All of these musings really make me think that a lot of our worries as college students come down to the fact that we have a lack of respect for each other It really is crazy to think just how much sex and drinking and all of these roles and stereotypes play a part in our everyday lives, whether we're actually partaking in these activities or not. It really is crazy to think just how polarizing these elements are on our campus. But it's at least a small good-crazy that many of us are open to talking about them."

"For the first time in as far back as I remember, tonight I stood outside. It was cool, but there was anticipation and opportunity blowing on the breeze. Tonight was one of the first nights that it was warm enough to stand outside, to not need to hurry from building to building, seeking shelter from the icy chill. Tonight at 11:17, I stopped walking and stood still."