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# Freewriting and Free Speech: A Pragmatic Perspective

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# FREEWRTING AND FREE SPEECH: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Janet Bean and Peter Elbow

This book is dedicated to those people who actually use it—  
not just read it.

Epigraph to *Writing Teachers*

Freewriting seems to have lost its political edge. When Ken Macrorie brought it to the attention of writing teachers, it was controversial (his first mention in print was in 1951), and it remained radical for a while after Peter started celebrating it in 1973. Gradually it became orthodox—widely used (or at least tried out) in composition classrooms, and widely described in textbooks as an effective invention strategy. Then in the 1990s, it came under sharp criticism as part of the critique of expressivist pedagogy. Now it's scarcely talked about: freewriting seems to have become commonplace, depoliticized, simply a classroom activity—ignored as often as used, and seldom used for its political force. In almost an aside, Bizzell and Herzberg call it “part of every writing teacher’s repertoire” (8).

Why has freewriting, which seemed so strongly countercultural when Peter wrote about it in the 1970s, become disconnected from its political roots? This question has been the driving force behind our research, and it has taken us in some unexpected directions—specifically, to the First Amendment and legal scholarship on free speech. It was Janet who came up with the idea of comparing freewriting with free speech, in fact through a piece of extended freewriting. Here is a passage from it:

I have the feeling that free speech actually WORKS as a widely held concept, but people really don't believe in free writing . . . . It's ironic that we might view free speech as a political act but freewriting as an asocial, politically naive practice. Of course, the first thing someone might say is, of course they're different—free speech is rhetorical and public, freewriting is expressive and private. (I've just sat here for five minutes, thinking—by god, that's right.) . . . . But maybe we need to free writing (like those posters, FREE MANDELA, FREE THE WHALES)—free writing from the racist and classist practices of educational institutions. ha. no small order, there.

Janet's comparison of free speech and free writing began as a simple, even playful, association. But soon we realized that putting these two concepts in conversation with one another was a rich and fruitful approach: it pushed our thinking, challenged our theoretical frameworks, and helped us look at freewriting in a new way.

At first glance, free speech and freewriting may seem to be very different, but both are attempts to foster freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. And both have come under criticism for their universalist, modernist foundations. Although freewriting is generally accepted as an effective classroom exercise, its theoretical underpinnings remain suspect. How can there be a neutral space where writing is "free"? Isn't language always part of a social and ideological context? Doesn't an emphasis on "one's own" personal voice and individual autonomy blind students to the ways in which language itself is caught up in an oppressive structure of society? Legal scholars have critiqued free speech in strikingly similar ways: feminist and critical race theorists have raised strong objections to the idea of a utopian space for free expression, and postmodern theorists have discounted the possibility that free speech can even exist.

Yet as we looked at legal scholarship, we were struck by a flexibility and robustness in free speech as a live functioning part

of our culture—even in the face of strong critique. Free speech is vulnerable because it is commonly understood in modernist terms as giving an absolute freedom. As such, it runs into a buzz saw of criticism from postmodernist thinking that undermines the validity of absolutes like freedom. But First Amendment legal thinking and court rulings are grounded not only in modernism, but also in pragmatic philosophy. Pragmatism frames free speech in terms of *effects* rather than absolutes, opening up a “third way” around the epistemological dead end argument about whether there is such a thing as freedom. This pragmatic perspective has helped us to see freewriting in a new light. Instead of viewing it as an absolute open space for absolutely free personal expression, we’ve come to think of it as a social contract—an agreement to treat language in a particular way because of the good effects this has. (Here are a few: when used regularly and thoughtfully, freewriting acts as a site of negotiation between the individual and institutions; it helps students draw on the languages of their communities for academic work and invites them to explore the relationship of those languages to the language of the academy; and it allows writers to work in the liminal space between their public and private lives, between speech and writing.)

In the first part of this essay we’ll explore how modernist habits of thought shape our understandings of free speech and freewriting. This will lead us to address the problem of universals in a postmodern age. We’ll end by exploring the political implications of freewriting from a pragmatic perspective.

### **Freedom, Authority, and Habits of Thought**

Free speech and freewriting both draw on the rhetoric of rights: individuals have a right to express themselves, free from undue restraints. This rhetoric is particularly powerful because freedom of expression is linked closely to how we define our national identity. We tend to understand free speech in terms of individual rights, and we locate the source of these rights in our founding documents. Perhaps no other part of the Constitution is more familiar to Americans than the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The text seems to provide a clear mandate, simple and elegant. Yet First Amendment legal doctrine has proven to be highly complex, and scholars have found it difficult—if not impossible—to develop a unified theory that justifies free speech or explains how it should be applied (Alexander; Bunker).

According to David Strauss, there are two basic competing models that explain the authority of law: command theory and common law theory. In command theory, law has power because it is *mandated* or commanded by a sovereign entity—whether it be a king or a legislature or even a hallowed document. But in common law theory, law is more a matter of *custom*; legal rules evolve through judicial practice, case by case. Our U. S. Constitutional law finds its somewhat slippery footing somewhere between these two theories and sets of assumptions, with the question of authority in continual dialogue: does authority lie in the Constitution (in effect mandated by the sovereign text), or does it lie with a “custom” that consists of how judges interpret precedent and apply it to new contexts? Command theory, with its general-to-specific approach, encourages us to think in universals. Common law theory, on the other hand, works from specific interpretations and rulings to generalizations—and this makes it impossible to think of legal concepts in terms of universals. These two broad interpretative approaches fuel not only legal arguments but also larger debates within the political culture (Strauss 34-35).

What’s most significant for this essay is Strauss’s claim that most people—including many lawyers—tend to frame freedom of speech issues in terms of command theory. We assume that free speech derives deductively from a universal principle mandated by

a sovereign body (“We the People”) in an authoritative text (the Constitution). But there is a catch, says Strauss:

[C]ommand theory simply cannot account for the constitutional law of freedom of speech today. Neither the text nor the original understandings provide much support for the principles of free expression that we today take for granted (36).

Freedom of speech is not a “given” derived from the First Amendment. Rather, it developed largely through a common law process, evolving through time as justices made rulings case by case. For example, the original framers were comfortable with government restrictions that we today would see as violations to our right of free expression.

It is habit of thought, Strauss argues, not our legal history, that leads us to locate the authority of free speech in the Constitution. These habits of thinking are rooted in eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals and the works of John Milton, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill. Liberal political theory infuses our basic conceptions of democracy; Americans are well schooled in the idea of “inalienable rights” and the necessity for citizens in a democracy to have freedom of press and freedom of expression. These ideals are expressed in our Constitution, but they also grow from our sense of natural rights—and our habit of thinking in generalizations. It’s important, though, to remember that these are modernist concepts that developed in a modern context. They seem timeless because they are framed as universals.

Yet free speech as we know it is far from timeless. It is a relatively recent development in Constitutional doctrine, beginning as a response to the silencing of dissent after World War I. Our current understanding of free speech is “largely a creation of the twentieth century” (Bollinger 1). As the protection of free speech expanded through a trio of landmark Supreme Court cases in 1919, justices drew on modernist ideas of individual liberty, faith in progress, and autonomy (White).

Ironically, the evolution of First Amendment legal doctrine represents the classic working out through time of common law theory, yet the Supreme Court decisions themselves drew on the universals invoked by command theory—tracing the law’s authority back to the Constitution. In 1927 Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis defended free speech in these absolutist terms:

Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the State was to make men free to develop their faculties . . . . They valued liberty both as an end and as a means. They believed liberty to be the secret of happiness and courage to be the secret of liberty.

Justice Hugo Black called the language of the First Amendment “absolute,” reinforcing the command theory assumption that the power of the law flows from a sovereign mandate (Strauss 35). And so freedom of expression becomes a truth that is “self-evident”: a universal right set in a modernist framework.

Our habits of thinking about freewriting take a similar form, leading us to frame it in terms of universals. Freewriting taps into deeply held cultural ideals of individualism and freedom. It sees the threat of coercion coming not from the government but from the teacher and even from an imperious *internal* editor. As Peter wrote in 1973, “The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he’s doing while he’s in the middle of trying to do it” (5). The power of freewriting lies in the opportunity it gives individuals to develop their ideas with little or no editorial interference, toward the same goal that Brandeis articulated: to “make men free to develop their faculties.” Like free speech, freewriting seeks an open space for expression to occur without intervention or restriction, so that we might explore without fear and find out what we think.

And like the modernist concept of free speech, freewriting makes even broader universal claims. It configures the writer as a universal subject in a newly democratic classroom. *Writing Without*

*Teachers*, which popularized the concept of freewriting, makes the claim that everyone can write and everyone's voice should be heard. The locus of authority is decentered in the teacher-less writing classroom, democratizing writing instruction and giving power to the people. In the introduction to *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter explicitly addresses the way writing can create agency: "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words" (vii). Freewriting, then, becomes attached to the ideals of autonomy, liberty, and democracy.

This deep current of modernist thinking that runs through so many people's conversations about free speech and freewriting has left both concepts open to criticism. Most readers of this essay will be quick to acknowledge that all speech takes place within cultural contexts where power and authority are always in play. Before anyone opens her mouth to speak, whether or not there are any listeners, she has been "socially constructed," her language infused by larger cultural forces. Rita Felski critiques the "ideal of a free discursive space that equalizes all participants . . . but is achieved only by obscuring actual material inequalities and political antagonisms among its participants" (168, quoted in Slaughter 1408). The idea of free speech can serve to obscure real inequities and thereby heightens them. The First Amendment right of free speech can be used to protect the interests of powerful corporations, economic and political elites, and even those who instill hatred. The Supreme Court has ruled that money is free speech when it comes to campaign financing, so huge corporations or other groups can spend all they want to try to influence elections. When the "universal right" of free speech is granted to some, it is likely to conflict with the rights of other individuals or groups—for example, ethnic or sexual minorities or majority groups like women. Even in the small worlds of our individual classrooms, we suspect that most of our readers have



struggled with the question of limiting free speech in order to stop racist, sexist, and homophobic comments.

So too, freewriting (insofar as it means writing that is truly free) is open to the same powerful critique. Writing can never be free of social contexts and constraints. To believe otherwise, argue Min-zhan Lu and Bruce Horner, is to participate in “the politics of linguistic innocence: that is, a politics which preempts teachers’ attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing” (57). In his widely read exchange with Peter (CCC, 1995), David Bartholomae argues that the notion of

a free writing . . . is an expression of a desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic setting free from academic writing (64).

Bartholomae’s critique reflected a growing concern in the field about the dangers of understanding students and writing processes in universalist terms. The social turn in Composition Studies, exemplified by books like Lester Faigley’s *Fragments of Rationality* and Kurt Spellmeyer’s *Common Ground*, rejected the modernist ideals of individualism, the autonomous self, and progress. Freewriting’s emphasis on voice—with its implications of a coherent self and individual autonomy—made it suspect, as did its reliance on a psychological model of the writing process at a time when universal cognitive processes were being called into question.

Critics of modernism have made powerful and persuasive arguments, shaking the very concept of freedom. “There is no such thing as free speech,” declares Stanley Fish in an essay with that title, and he goes on: “‘Free Speech’ is just the name we give to verbal behavior we wish to advance . . . . Free speech, in short, is not an independent value but a political prize” (102). Fish, who has been highly influential in the field of Composition and

Rhetoric as well as literary and legal studies, argues that there is never a neutral ground for language, written or spoken. From an epistemological perspective, freedom is not possible.

This is one way to tell the story of free speech and freewriting: through the lens of modernism and the subsequent challenge of postmodernism. But we'd like to call attention to the limitations of this approach. We grant that the social turn in both legal theory and Composition theory has done important work. Since modernist habits of thought have dominated and still strongly influence the way we see the world, postmodernism has called much needed attention to the problems that come from absolute faith in progress and individual agency. But this story—modernism trumped by postmodernism—leaves us at an impasse. The concept of freedom is left so tenuous as to be unusable.

Yet there remains a resilience in the notion of free speech—not just among the (sentimental) general public but also among hard headed and scholarly lawyers. Although there are good reasons to believe free speech and freewriting participate in a vulnerable modernist tradition, there are also good reasons to question whether modernism provides a sufficient framework for understanding and critiquing the concept of freedom. The rhetoric of free expression may be individualistic and universal, but free speech also has foundations that are deeply grounded in the social and contextual. In short, there is another way of telling the story—one that is framed not in absolutes but in experience.

### **Pragmatism and the Law: More Freedom Rather than Less**

Free speech would not have had its long history even into the present if it were seen only as a universal absolute or metaphysical right. The soil that has nourished it in our country is the long tradition of American pragmatism. In an important book for our field (*Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism and the Teaching of Writing*), Roskelly and Ronald explore how this tradition goes back to the earliest days of English settlement in this country.

Cornel West celebrates the American roots of pragmatism in a striking phrase, “the American evasion of philosophy.” He insists that pragmatism involves “a kind of inseparable link between thought and action, theory and practice” (West 10, quoted by Roskelly and Ronald 56). The colonists, for understandable reasons, developed a tradition of crude, everyday, see-what-works pragmatism. But Peirce and James and others developed pragmatism as a philosophical theory. Pragmatism assumes that truth, values, and what we think of as “reality” are not eternal, universal givens but relative and contextual. As Roskelly and Ronald put it, there is a “strong emphasis on experience as opposed to *a priori* assumptions” and pure theory (86).

The goal of pragmatism is to avoid the swamps and dead-ends that come from debating absolutes (for example, does freedom exist or not exist?). “Grant an idea to be true,” pragmatism says, then ask “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life” (James, qtd. in Roskelly and Ronald 87). The questions—what works? How does it matter to lived experience?—these are central to pragmatic methodology. And they radically change the nature of philosophical inquiry. As James puts it: “It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence” (qtd. in Roskelly and Ronald 21). (Compositionists should not forget how much Ann Berthoff was indebted to Peirce).

Once we understand the pragmatist frame of thinking, it’s worth looking again at the First Amendment. As the framers wrote about freedom of speech, press, assembly, and so on, they were working out a pragmatic response to the specific conditions of their lives. The founders didn’t pretend they were protecting the speech of women and slaves. What gave meaning and urgency to the first amendment were the historical and contingent circumstances they were living through. The force of the First Amendment had to do with consequences and effects—the essential pragmatic criteria. People were put in American and English jails for what they wrote and said in public, and even for

gathering in groups on street corners to criticize or even just discuss government policy. The framers took concrete action to prevent the creation of explicit laws that would underwrite the use of police or troops to stop people who dared speak.

Some people may fall into the trap of thinking that the First Amendment creates a perfect space for pure freedom, and others into the trap of thinking that “freedom” is nothing but a naïve illusion. But the genuine traction that free speech manages to retain in our society comes from an awareness that we *continue* to live in historical conditions where free speech is so easily abridged—where we are continually confronted with a choice between more freedom and less. Free speech seems all the more precious in light of the Patriot Act and other contemporary government activities. (On discouraging days, a cynical thought recurs: free speech survives as a concept but not as a practice; freewriting survives as a practice, but not as a concept.)<sup>1</sup>

First Amendment legal practice is notably complex and context-dependent. Free speech cases have always necessitated a pragmatic approach. Even though justices like Brandeis might sometimes frame free speech as human universal, Supreme Court decisions are always about particular, contingent, historical judgments. Lawyers for one side argue that the particular case should be seen as an instance of one statute or precedent, while lawyers for the other side say that a different statute or precedent should decide the case (or at least that the first rule should not apply). Pragmatism, perhaps even more than Enlightenment ideals, has shaped how the First Amendment actually operates in our society through the legal system. When legal scholars and lay people evoke the metaphor of free speech as a “marketplace of ideas” or the concept of “clear and present danger,” they are indebted to the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (who, as a young man, was a member of the Metaphysical Club with William James and C.S. Pierce). In classic pragmatist fashion, he argued that truth is contingent and must be tested by experience. The Constitution itself, he argues, is grounded in pragmatic theory:

. . . the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution.

Freedom, argues Holmes, is valuable because of its usefulness. Even bad ideas need to be heard (just as Peter has argued that “bad” writing needs to be committed to paper). Society—and individual writers—need an arena for uncensored expression, not only to discover the (contingent) truth but to serve the ultimate good.

### **Reclaiming the Universal: Pragmatism and Possibility**

In recent decades, a number of scholars who accept the postmodern critique of universals nevertheless find themselves trying to rescue the notion of universals. In Paris in 1948, a special U.N. committee adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling for “a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want” (1406). Joseph Slaughter calls the idea of universal human rights an “enabling fiction” (1407). It is a piece of “naïve,” “commonsense,” “liberal-democratic ideology,” he acknowledges, that can be used against marginalized groups. But he points out how it has also been used politically and effectively *by* marginalized groups themselves in *fighting for* human rights. He shows how the principle of human rights can be critiqued as mere tautology and paradox—an “enabling fiction which presupposes that the person *is* a person in order to effect the person *as* a person.” But instead of critiquing this tautology, he insists that “we can attend to its productive possibilities” (1412-13).

Stephen Mailloux, in an important recent book, develops a theory that universal concepts like “human rights” can be meaningful and useful, and yet not be based on a metaphysical absolute or preestablished notion of human nature. He draws on

work by Fish, Richard Rorty, Edward Said, Alain Badiou, and Etienne Balibar, but he works out his own “way to salvage a rhetorical pragmatist use for the notion of universality” (119):

Universals, in my sense, are not philosophical notions at all. They are actual or perceived commonalities, empirically not metaphysically established as rhetorical resources for supporting specific beliefs and practices at specific times and places. . . . [for example the] promotion of peace, say, or prevention of injustice . . . . (119)

Mailloux points us to the ultimate pragmatic question: what does the universal do? (For another scholar in our field who is working in this same pragmatist direction, see Spellmeyer.)

We concede that absolute freedom may be a fiction, a delusional impossibility, even a philosophical mistake. But if there are only two possible human conditions, free and unfree, we are cut off from thinking about whether some conditions are less free than others, whether some spaces are more free than others—free from institutional pressures and the influence of culture and the past. Under *certain* conditions we are more likely to be forcibly silenced than in other conditions. We are in trouble if we cut ourselves off from the kind of careful analysis and observation that distinguishes between differences of degree and talks only about absolute yes and no.

If we look at freewriting through this pragmatic lens, we see that it has striking political effects. Neither free speech nor freewriting are formulated in terms of universals (despite that word “free”): both are about institutional power. They don’t pretend to legislate absolute freedom; they rest on formulations that are pragmatically *negative*. The entire multi-pronged First Amendment is powered by a single negative clause: “Congress shall *make no law* . . . respecting . . . prohibiting . . . abridging . . .” So too, freewriting (despite the positive name) is characteristically conceived and explained in negative terms: *don’t* stop writing, *don’t* try for good or correct language, *don’t* worry

about making sense, and most of all, *don't* worry about being evaluated, because no one will grade this or even read it. To conceive things negatively in this way is to acknowledge the impossibility of pure freedom—but the possibility nevertheless of fighting against restrictions on freedom.

In both cases, the negativity reflects a sturdy, political pragmatism. Politically, the First Amendment is all about the power of the state to lock people up and freewriting is all about the power of teachers to collect and grade writing. We can't create a country where everyone can speak with absolute freedom, but a pragmatic lens emphasizes that we can at least stop Congress from making a law abridging freedom of speech. We cannot create a classroom or even a ten minute period where people can write with complete freedom, but we can refrain—at least temporarily—from treating writing the way it is normally treated in a classroom, as something that will be collected and graded. Indeed, we can refrain from treating writing as it's usually treated in the world: in most people's minds, the medium itself of writing implies being careful and doing things right. Freewriting invites us to be careless and wrong.

If we stay stuck in the postmodern frame of thinking that declares "There's no such thing as freedom," we have a poverty of language for talking about the difference between whether a teacher collects writing or not, grades it or not, marks errors or not, insists on care and standard language or not. The postmodern critique of freedom is essentially totalistic and blots out distinctions between degrees. In contrast, the pragmatic emphasis on negative formulations (at least we can restrict restrictions), serves pragmatically as a way to work *towards* future possibility and action. By creating ways to limit restriction, it insists that in certain contexts of teaching and writing, we can struggle to move *towards* more freedom. We act differently and think differently when we adopt the pragmatic principle that it is possible to make progress toward goals that are nevertheless impossible to reach.

## Political Virtues of Freewriting

No one doubts the political dimension of free *speech*. It's always been about helping individuals and small groups speak out and indeed speak back—not be silenced by governments or powerful organizations. The political *roots* of freewriting are also widely acknowledged. It was introduced in the 1960s and 70s and associated with anti-war and anti-establishment thinking. But those politics have often come to be felt as fossilized “sixties thinking.” We sense that many teachers now see freewriting not as a mode of political action but rather primarily as a technique or exercise for helping students feel more comfortably fluent and generative in writing and to find more ideas about a topic. In this essay we're insisting that freewriting carries an inherent political effect—an effect that is blunted if teachers use it only as an occasional exercise for fluency or invention. Here are five ways that freewriting can powerfully help students resist institutional and cultural pressures and thereby to achieve more freedom of thought and inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

(1) Where free speech is a way to open up more thinking in society, freewriting is a way to open up more thinking inside the individual. Freewritten words may have no public political impact since they are private, but it's this very privacy that helps open up an internal “town meeting.” That is, people need a safe space for “dangerous” thoughts and feelings—and also, just as important, for writing out their *confusion*. Frequent practice in freewriting helps create a space where students can articulate thoughts and feelings they might not otherwise write or even say to teachers—or even to classmates.

(2) Freewriting helps students glimpse ways in which their identities are shaped by social forces—at least it does if the freewriting is paired with a chance for reflection. For one thing, freewriting leads to blurted, unplanned thinking that sometimes startles the writer: “Am I really that angry? Maybe I need so-and-so more than I realized. Do I really hate those people?” In our own teaching, we try to exploit this benefit of freewriting when we are treating issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class.



As we are discussing the issue (whether or not in response to a reading), we specifically invite fast uncensored freewriting about the issue at hand. We invite students to use private writing for feelings they don't want to say out loud.

Of course we're not arguing that a piece of freewriting gives a perfect picture of the writer's mind. Even in freewriting, we often censor our words and thoughts—consciously or unconsciously—especially with loaded issues like these. But we learn from students that they feel much freer and safer here to let words tumble out than when speaking in class or writing for the teacher. So we like to invite our students to look back over what they've written as a snapshot (however imperfect) of their thoughts and feelings. Then we ask for more private writing—but this time slower and more conscious and reflective. We suggest they address questions like these:

- Which elements in your freewriting most reflect what you have inherited or breathed in from growing up with family, friends, or society? Can you remember particular experiences or people that played a big role in leading to any of these thoughts or feelings?
- Of these “inherited” thoughts and feelings, which are you most willing to “own” or stand behind or affirm as your own? Which do you now question or reject?
- Which thoughts and feelings seem *least* inherited—most derived from your own experience or worked out from your own thinking?

Discussions of issues like race, class, and sexual orientation become much more thoughtful and productive after using freewriting in this way. If teachers use freewriting with political and ideological awareness, they can help students explore the ways in which they are often shaped by or “written by” larger forces of authority and society—family, friends, and the wider culture. In this way, a very abstract theoretical concept (“social construction”) turns into something students can investigate concretely.

(3) Frequent freewriting helps students develop a meta-awareness of the complex forces of authority and convention in the classroom and in the culture. When students experience a teacher using institutional authority to get them to write—yet with no explicit mechanism to require it . . . and promising not to collect it . . . and pushing them to write without stopping and without worrying about whether it even makes sense or is any good—this feels very strange. But strangeness is the point. Students get a chance to glimpse how their own ideas and goals for a piece of writing—even a graded piece—might be more important than those of their teachers.

Many students don't quite notice that when they start to write for a teacher, they unthinkingly use a linguistic and mental gear that's different from what they normally use for writing outside the classroom. But the discipline of not stopping almost forces them to produce *unplanned* language, which almost invariably forces them to use speech for writing. Even the "standard" speech of "mainstream" speakers is wrong for "correct writing" or the grapholect. Yet freewriting can help students discover that "inappropriate" "talking onto the page" sometimes yields language that's better for writing than their careful "writing language."

As teachers continue taking time for freewrites but not even collecting it, students gradually begin to notice, bit by bit, what it's like to feel less of the teacher's presence in their "school" writing. They get a politically salutary chance to notice their habitual fear of writing wrong. This effect of freewriting can be particularly powerful for students who speak stigmatized varieties of English (whether or not they try to freewrite in standardized English).

But often it's skilled, diligent students who benefit most from the political (and linguistic) benefits of unplanned language and thinking. They are so skilled at planning thought and language that they don't know how to not plan; so good at giving teachers what teachers want that they don't have the experience of writing what they know teachers would criticize. Through freewriting, these

students get a better view of how they function and how institutional contexts have led to these habits of functioning.

(4) Freewriting fosters equality. The practice of freewriting helps communicate a crucial assumption: that students walk into our classrooms already possessing the core linguistic resources they need to develop as writers. Their experience with speech can be the foundation of their written literacy. This notion of student competence is a profoundly political one, for it asserts the basic equality of all languages and dialects. Not all dialects have the same cultural capital, but all are equal from a linguistic perspective: intricate, complex, and rule-governed language systems. Freewriting invites students to notice how they draw on their spoken language competencies to develop their literacy skills (see Bean et al.).

In this claim about the politics of language, we connect freewriting with what is perhaps the most radical document in our field, *Students' Right to their Own Language* (STROL—see Conference). Freewriting helps students see that even the most stigmatized versions of English are rich and intricate and work fine for writing. In removing the pressure to write “correctly,” freewriting helps students focus on clarifying and developing their ideas. This is especially important for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds: “Perhaps the most serious difficulty facing ‘non-standard’ dialect speakers in developing writing ability derives from their exaggerated concern for the least serious aspects of writing” (CCC, *Students' Right* 8).

Teachers who use freewriting when they actually care about a student’s right to his or her own language are likely to assign some respected published literature or nonfiction that’s not written in standardized English—and also invite students to share some public freewriting that’s not in “correct revised edited ‘standard’ English”—and also revise and copy-edit some pieces without trying to get them into that orthodox dialect. Freewriting and these other practices invite students to question the idea that written language works best for readers only if it conforms to standardized written English. Which readers? The students

themselves are readers, and they often have a different experience. And many of them will know audiences who would appreciate writing entirely in other versions of English. Ultimately, freewriting moves us toward a hybrid discourse—home and academy, personal and public, rational and emotional—with profound political and social implications (see Canagarajah). It helps us reject simplistic either/or arguments that try to force us to choose between standardized edited English and other versions of English.

(5) Freewriting often brings pleasure. There's an unexpectedly subversive dimension here. First, there is the pleasure in breaking rules. As Bordieu points out, literacy is continual training in having to do things "the right way." In response to this pressure, we see a widespread human pull to do things the wrong way. De Certeau explores the myriad ways people resist the authority of propriety, many of them seemingly trivial—like wearing baseball caps "backwards" or using "bad" "vulgar" language. People cannot seem to resist flaunting "wrong" writing in the public space—whether it's special spelling for text-messaging or graffiti or neon signs that say Kwik Kleeners, E-Z Car Wash, 7Eleven, or Toys Я Us).

No less important from a political point of view is the pleasure of spontaneous generativity. The free play of unplanned language issuing from moving fingers tends to give a kind of pleasurable release. It's not uncommon for freewriting students to find themselves pulled forward when words pour forth on their own. T.R. Johnson speaks of

that strange, highly positive surge of energy that can possess students when they enter the zone and their pens begin to wiggle across the page more quickly than a moment before, their heads lower a notch, and they emanate a whole new kind of intensity (624).

Spariosu, in an ambitious study of "Play, Poetry, and Power in Hellenic Thought," explores the pleasure of emotional release that

comes from experiencing words and feelings that well up. He explores how this kind of carnival play resists power when power is based in rational control. (See also Bakhtin on “carnival” in *Rabelais*.) Our schools are largely dedicated to rational control or even obedience, and have developed a culture characterized by domination and apathy. Freewriting offers a space for a counter-culture of pleasure, one that decouples writing from punishment.

## Conclusion

There’s no way to freewrite wrong. (If the only way you can get yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes is to write the same word over and over—or even to quickly plan every word first in your head—that’s fine. Repeated freewriting will lead somewhere.) But is there a wrong way for teachers to *use* freewriting? In earlier drafts, we wrote that freewriting needed to be used with thoughtful awareness of its political implications. But the more we reflect on how freewriting works—theoretically and in our teaching—the more we toy with a more ambitious claim: if freewriting is used frequently, it will do some of its political work even if the teacher and students are not conscious of it.

But, as politicians often remind us, freedom isn’t free. One of the most important things we have learned from free speech scholarship is that society will not maintain it without intervention. The strong tend to out-shout the weak: governments and large corporations tend to move toward a monopoly of power unless there is a mechanism of restraint. The First Amendment depends on the exercise of power by people with institutional authority, and the courts have the explicit job of using their authority to help protect and preserve individual expression from undue restriction. So too with writing: unless we use our authority as teachers to intervene and create spaces of *relatively more* freedom of expression through practices like freewriting, teaching will tend to push in the direction of conformity and the restriction of discourse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Domna Stanton, speaking as president of MLA, underscores the importance of a particular form of free speech: the tradition of academic freedom that goes with tenure in most colleges and universities. She points to a threat in the “Academic Bill of Rights” that has been introduced in fifteen state legislatures that “claims [in her words] to protect the rights of students by empowering those who feel uncomfortable in class because of something a teacher says or does to institute grievance procedures against that teacher” (4). She concludes: “As crucial as conceptual clarity may be, and as difficult—perhaps impossible—as it may be to realize this idea(1) in any society, academic freedom nonetheless needs to be defended wherever it is under attack.” (3) Even as we recognize the impossibility of absolute freedom, most academics hold to the idea that freedom of expression is crucial to our work as academics.

<sup>2</sup>The term *freewriting* is used rather freely. (It’s remarkable how many teachers collect students’ freewriting.) It’s worth spelling out the main points of definition. Regular default freewriting is private and doesn’t specify a topic. It’s an exercise; the goal is not a product. There are two variations on freewriting that result from reimposing two constraints. *Focused freewriting* says, “Try to stay on one topic; when you wander off, pull yourself back.” *Public freewriting* says, “Write with the understanding that you’ll share what you write.” (Focused freewriting can be private or public; public freewriting can be focused or unfocused.) For a volume of essays about freewriting, see Belanoff, Elbow, Fontaine.

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