Voice as Process

Lizbeth A. Bryant

Foreword by Peter Elbow

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword by Peter Elbow</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Why Voice Matters</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1    Disruptive “Sexual” Voices in English</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2    Jason’s Voices</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3    Leah’s Story</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4    Studying Our Voices</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5    Voice as Process</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6    A Pedagogy of Voice as Process</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Illustrator</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Liz Bryant found herself to be a teacher who brings out strong student voices—even when she doesn’t want to. She begins this valuable book with a story from her early teaching when students kept disrupting her grammar discussions with bawdy comments when she asked questions like “Where would you stick your comma?” or “What part belongs here?” As a new teacher, she couldn’t stop her students from breaking up the class and preventing serious work. Before long, however, she took things in hand and put a stop to the eruptions. But then she discovered that the class was dead. This was no good—even for her. So she had to set out on a teaching journey that was more perplexing and adventuresome.

This story could serve as a summary of Bryant’s whole project. Her book is about the collision between what is proper or appropriate in school and what comes out of the mouths of adolescents: between the voices of school-and-academy and the voices of the home-and-street. She found that if she was going to have any kind of satisfaction as a teacher, she would have to let herself be the kind of person she finds herself to be—a person who somehow invites students to be themselves, to make themselves at home in language, and to let down their hair. And still teach writing responsibly—teach good and appropriate writing.

This book is about what she’s learned since coming to accept the gift she finds herself stuck with—to welcome it and enjoy her students’ voices, but also to learn to help them develop voices and styles appropriate for school. But in helping them develop the voices they need for academic work, she learns to find ways to retain the strengths of their disruptive, eruptive, from-the-gut, felt voices.

There are two problems in trying to write about voice. The first is procedural. How shall we work on the problem of voice? Our field has been awash in writing about voice, but this writing is long on theory and short on extended examination of actual student writing and how it changes. (I guess I’m one of the guilty parties here.) Bryant has fought her way through the sprawling but sometimes heated scholarship about voice, and she comes to our rescue with what we now need most: lively case studies.
Bryant gives us detailed portraits of a handful of students and their writing, and she looks in detail at many passages from each one’s writing. What’s particularly interesting and valuable is how she shows us, in Bakhtinian fashion, how a student’s different voices commingle and sometimes compete, not just across writing tasks but even as a student works on a single academic writing task. She gets important leverage for her work on voice by being more empirical than theoretical. Yet with this grounding in the actual writing of actual students, she gives us good theoretical insights.

The second problem of voice is practical and substantive—the problem most teachers will call the real one. As Bryant poses it, students are often “torn between voices of home and voices of the academy.” There are theorists who try to make this problem disappear in theory, but it won’t go away for teachers. Many or even most students experience a conflict between the language that comes most easily to them and feels like “their language” (how I talk and experience myself as myself) and the language they are supposed to use in writing, especially writing for school. I’d say that if students don’t notice and feel this conflict, they are in a bad place as writers.

Bryant manages to take what we sometimes feel as an intractable problem—a lose/lose perplexity—and turn it into a productive question and practical quest: Under what conditions and to what extent is it possible to develop a voice or style that is appropriate for academic work—yet still feel you are not giving up on the kind of language and thinking that feels as though it is “you.” How can we learn to do what our teachers want and still feel like ourselves? I drifted into the first person as I was drafting, and as you see, I decided to leave this “inconsistency of voice.” For her book is about a problem that doesn’t go away. It persists into graduate school and beyond. Indeed, the problem is all the more pregnant because it resonates with a larger psychological/moral question that so often emerges in people’s experience: how can I be “how people seem to want me to be” and yet not give up on “how I feel myself to be.”

Bryant herself is a person with a strong voice; restrained propriety never came easily to her either. Her book draws also from her case study of her own struggles in graduate school. The remarkable virtue of Bryant’s book is that she actually gives some practical, concrete, and detailed help with this problem of trying to do it right and also feel like yourself.

Her answers are grounded in case studies that follow students through a semester and sometimes much longer. In her answers, she finds a productive path around the four easy and overused responses to this experience of conflict:

1. The teacher’s job is simple and straightforward: teach students to use academic or literate discourse and stop using inappropriate
language, register, or voice. Or: “Suck it up. Grow up. Learn to play the game. Stop whining.”

2. “The teacher’s main job is to cultivate each student’s precious, unique, single, and unchanging voice.” Or from the student’s point of view: “This is my voice, damn it, and don’t mess with it. I’ll fight you to the death to keep it.” This is a tempting path that Bryant is not taking. It’s tempting because it’s the most fun; it’s the best way to help most students love writing—and it just happens to lead some people to be real writers. Unfortunately, it’s not the path that helps students succeed in the short run in school or on the job. (Though she doesn’t take this path, I’m impressed at how well Bryant learned to deal sympathetically and productively with some students who did hold to this stubborn view.)

3. “This is a false conflict. It comes from naive thinking and false consciousness. You think you have a self, but that just shows how you’ve been programmed by our capitalist corporate individualistic culture. You have no self. There is no problem. Learn to think straight and stop having those stupid feelings.”

4. The simple, happy “appropriateness” dodge: “You simply have to learn when it’s appropriate to use which voice or register. You can talk that way on the street and at home and write that way to your friends. But here we use a different language—and you have to learn how to use it.” I know I shouldn’t call this a “dodge” because it clearly works, and it’s the easiest way to deal with the problem and stay sane as teacher and writer. But it makes me sad because it tempts people to build walls between voices. In that way, it tends to sap people’s “academic” writing of life and power—and it tends to sap their “personal writing” of intellectual depth and complexity.

The virtue of Bryant’s book is that she has hung in there, avoiding these paths, and persisted in trying to follow a more perplexing and struggle-filled route through the real forest of “voice.” Through her dogged persistence and deep humanism, Bryant has learned to show how the collision between the language that comes most easily to mouth and mind and the language that teachers are looking for need not—at least in the end—be an either/or collision or a “zero-sum” contest—where only one entity can win at the expense of the other. She shows how the writing classroom can be a tricky “construction zone” where students work out different voices or styles. But they’re not working out different voices for use on different sides of exclusionary walls; they are working out productive interactions that often involve complex and hybrid solutions in the same text.

In addition, she shows a classroom that’s not just for doing but also for reflecting. Students learn to think consciously and rhetorically
about their various possibilities of voice. Her approach is all about helping students gradually develop and construct new and mixed voices, but voices that retain many of the strengths of their home voices—and at times even retain, too, the instinct to disrupt.

It follows, then, that Bryant is particularly interested in authority: how students can learn to trust their voices and have the gumption to speak out—not be scared. There are interesting paradoxes here. There is the authority of courage (“I’m going to say it my way and I’m not going to be intimidated by worries about how you might react”); there’s the authority of academic usage and scholarly grounding (“My argument builds on Marx and Freud . . . , and is supported by the following reputable published research studies”). Even the five-paragraph essay is an attempt at a kind of authority—that is, the authority of the unassailable objective distanced voice. All these kinds of authority can sometimes work—and sometimes backfire. Bryant shows how she helps students manage the task that Bakhtin articulates so helpfully, namely to learn to inhabit the authoritative voices and registers of the academy and make them “one’s own.”

Finally, happily, Bryant’s last chapter is a concise gathering together of concrete practical classroom activities to help students develop and get control over this kind of rich complex of voices—in order to do the work of school but still stay true to themselves.

Let me end with a few words from a wider perspective on voice. In recent decades, we have seen more and more interest in voice in our field.¹ Even people who are against the concept of voice seem preoccupied with it. I’m not sure why this has come about. But it’s helpful to remember—whether we are writing or teaching or analyzing—that there are various ways to describe what’s going on in a piece of writing and perhaps try to figure out what is effective or not. Instead of talking about the voice in a Henry James story or a student essay, we can talk about the style.

Style is a more text-centered concept or lens for looking at writing; voice is more person-centered. Style seems a bit more literal than voice as a concept for talking about words on a page. Voice seems a more frankly metaphorical lens. (Of course style is ultimately a metaphor, but there seems to be a longer tradition of scholarly studies of style in writing.) Style analysis implies relationships between a given passage of writing and other structures and stretches of language; voice analysis implies relationships between the words and persons.

Compare style-oriented terms (such as nominalized, literal, metaphorical, convoluted, formal, passive verb forms) to voice-oriented
terms (such as authoritative, pompous, intimate, sarcastic, standoffish, insinuating). The style terms seem closer to the words on the page and more literally descriptive of language—yet by the same token they are further from the feelings and reactions and motives of persons doing the writing or reading. The voice terms are closer to people but further from the text. It's a trade-off.

Thus, style analysis gives more precision in the description of language. We can talk about nominalized constructions and passive verbs and get at the very machinery or structure of how the words are linked together. If we describe the same words using terms for the human psychological effect—words like *pompous* or *distant* or *putting on the dog*—our description is much more open to dispute, yet it's easier for students to figure out what we experience as a problem and make an immediate and almost effortless improvement. Students can do this without having to understand the grammar and linguistics of it.

Style analysis can focus on the differences in one writer’s work (looking at different styles that a single writer has), or it can focus on a single stylistic quality or complex that runs through a writer’s work despite differences of genre or register. Voice analysis is more likely to make us notice an interesting intersection of these two focuses (difference and sameness in one writer). Considering someone’s voice, we inevitably notice the different voices that he or she uses in different situations—especially as we try to judge his or her mood. Yet we inevitably hear a commonality in someone’s voice across many different occasions and moods and voices—even after ten years and through a bad cold.

A voice spectrograph (a visual picture of the sound waves produced by someone speaking) can identify a particular person’s voice across a wide range of occasions and moods of speaking—as reliably as fingerprints. In writing, we can more easily disguise ourselves. Nevertheless recent scholars in one field of stylistics have developed subtle computer programs for text analysis that can do the same detective work and fairly reliably identify individual writers. (See Peng and Hengartner 2002; Pennebaker and King 1999; Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth 2001.)

We don’t have to choose between the text lens and the voice lens for looking at writing. In fact, it would be sad to do so. Like all “terministic screens” each lens brings out certain dimensions and ignores others.

The textuality metaphor highlights how discourse issues from other discourse (seeing all texts as “intertextual”), while the voice metaphor highlights how language issues from persons, indeed from physical bodies. The text metaphor highlights the visual and spatial features of language and emphasizes language as an abstract, universal system, while the voice metaphor highlights sound and hearing rather
than vision, and it emphasizes the way all linguistic meaning extends through time rather than existing simultaneously in space. The textuality metaphor calls attention to the commonalities between one person’s discourse and that of others throughout a culture. As text, one person’s *cat* and another person’s *cat* look very similar; but they sound very different as spoken or voiced. The voice metaphor thus calls attention to the distinctiveness of different peoples’ discourse and ways of seeing the world.

We will always find it useful to analyze writing in terms of style and text, but Bryant’s book shows why so many people find it useful to look at writing in terms of voice.

### Note

1. Rich Haswell, the compiler of the database of bibliographical sources in the field of composition, *CompPile* (http://comppile.tamucc.edu/), did a short search of the literature in composition. Searching for “voice” in the title field, he got the following results. (I draw on his e-mail to me):

- Before Walker Gibson (early 1960s), there is hardly anything that sounds like it is discussing “voice” in writing as you and I mean by voice today.
- Following on down the years, we get just a few hits per year until 1980, when things start picking up.
- Between 1980 and 1989, 116 hits;
- Between 1990 and 1999 records 402 hits—an exponential rise.

### Works Cited


Disruptive “Sexual” Voices in English 101

On the inside cover of a final portfolio I read these words: “If you smoke after sex, you did it too fast.” The writer appreciated the play on smoke and the indefinite pronoun, it. I was not surprised by this seemingly inappropriate quote because it followed the discourse pattern of this first-year, first-semester writing class. Sexual words, images, and innuendoes snuck their way into my class—or what I thought was “my class.”

Earlier in the semester, in an exercise on sentence combining and commas, I asked, “Where would we stick the comma as we combine these sentences?” Muffled, from the back right corner in a deep voice I heard, “I wouldn’t stick mine in there. Don’t know what I would catch.” Snickers erupted. I smiled and chose not to respond to this seemingly inappropriate response. I repeated my question. At that point, I did not know how to react; my smile only accepted this sexual comment and welcomed their voices to the classroom.

Next week, another student voiced a joke with a sexual innuendo. I asked the class, “Which parts will you be including in your analysis essay?” From the back I heard, “Which body parts will you include, Mike?” The snickering began, and I heard, “Not this part.”

Teacher Describes, Labels, Analyzes, and Judges

Attempting to understand these persistent sexual innuendoes, I analyzed the rhetorical situation, making assumptions about the students’ audiences, decisions, and choices. This rhetorical context was a classroom, a public forum in which personal and intimate topics such as sex
are not appropriate. A college classroom calls for academic voices full of insight and analysis—not silly voices full of sexual puns. I characterized these voices as humorous and sarcastic, labeled them as sexual based on the subject of discussion, categorized them as private, and judged them as inappropriate for the classroom. As a result, I composed a response to quell them.

In an exercise to practice analysis, I created a scenario for the class: “Pretend that we went to a great party last night. What made it fun?” They responded with, “The music was loud.” “The food was great.” “Lots of beer.” Giggle, from the back of the room I heard, “Yea, it was great. We had a wild orgy.” The class began to snicker, and another student responded, “Yea, man. Great sex.” I was ready: “You must stop this expression of your teenage sexual fantasies. They are not acceptable in this public classroom. I would like to hear some intelligent conversation. Knock it off! Now, let’s continue with our discussion.” The laughing stopped, and the class stared at me in an awkward silence with each of us wondering, “What will happen next?” After a moment of silence, I repeated my question. No one answered, and I called on a student. For the remainder of that class period there were no more jokes.

But my attempts to silence their sexual comments did not work; they continued to resurface, and I wanted to know why. In an interview with two class members, Tammy and Tracy, I asked about the sexual comments. Tammy responded, “We are more laid-back and free in your class, so it’s okay to talk about sex. We [the students in the class] are real close. We know each other. We sit at meals together and talk about sex. It’s a conversation starter. Everyone’s interested in it. I can say to anyone, ‘I did this on the Empire State Building.’ And they can respond with ‘You did! Well, I did this.’” Listening to her classmate, her face red with embarrassment, Tracy said, “Tammy, I can’t believe you said that.” Tracy was uncomfortable with these sexual conversations that included me. Tammy was willing to talk about sex in the public arena of our conversation or the classroom.

New Perspectives

Labeling and categorizing these voices was not helping me to understand the discourse patterns in “our” class. First, my labeling was incorrect; a label of sexual and judgment of inappropriate was from my perspective. From the students’ perspective their voices were attempting to join the teacher’s discourse, combining their sexual words with the academic words. And second, I was seeing the voice struggle from my perspective of getting students to speak in an academic voice. Their agenda was different. I needed a new way to conceptualize voice, an understanding of
voice that represented what student writers actually do when the voices of home meet the voices of the academy—not what the academicians and composition theorists say that students should be doing with their voices.

Kay Halasek supports this shift from focusing on what the teacher does in the classroom to what students are doing. Rather than assuming this 101 class was “mine,” over which I had control, I had to re-envision the dynamics of “our” class. Halasek asks teachers to examine the preformative nature of our pedagogy as an act that “entails answerability,” answerable to an audience of students as coauthors of our pedagogy (1999, 179). Rather than focusing on inappropriate comments, I could focus on how students react to my demands to quit their “bar-room humor.” Rather than relying on what composition scholars say students should be doing with their voices, I began to listen to what students were doing as they dealt with the power of academic voices. Students have an essential part in constructing a pedagogy—a part I was not acknowledging. Halasek’s vision of pedagogy shifts the focus from what teachers do to how “teaching is received, which, in turn, allows us to examine the ethics of teaching” (180). And when I understand how student writers approach voice, what is my ethical responsibility?

Mary Louise Pratt labels what students do as “pupiling.” She examines what pupils do in light of hierarchical classroom structures, helping me to understand my part in using the power of the academy to impede a student’s process of voice development. When a teacher asks Pratt’s son Manuel to imagine a helpful invention and write about how this invention would help other people and what it would look like, Manuel replied with some “grate” invented spelling:

Some inventchins are GRATE!!!!!!!!!!!! My inventchin would be a shot that would put every thing you learn at school in your brain. It would help me by letting me graduate right now!! I would need it because it would let me play with my freinds, go on vacachin and, do fun a lot more. (Pratt 1991, 38)

The teacher neither acknowledged nor responded to Manuel’s attempt to be humorous and critical, unlike my direct attempts to silence the sexual comments. Manuel wrote a paragraph that “sought ways to resist or subvert” the assignment (38). Pratt asks, “What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community?” (39), much like my question: What do I do with these sexual voices that are oppositional—not appropriate in the academic discourse community?

Pratt likens Manuel’s resistance to that of Guaman Poma who in 1613 wrote to King Philip III of Spain a text in which the conquered one from Peru attempts a dialogue with the conqueror. In his critique
of the Spanish occupation of Peru, Poma attempts “to construct a new picture of the world, a picture of a Christian world with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it” (34). The voice of the conquered enters the tension-filled zone with the authoritative discourse of Spain. Poma positions his text in the contact zone, representing the movement of the marginalized perspective of the conquered group into print culture. Pratt uses the metaphor of a contact zone to characterize “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34).

Manuel and my 101 students come from a long line of resisters. Like Manuel in kindergarten and Poma in conquered Peru, my 101 students in their first college semester were establishing a place for themselves in a new social situation by speaking their voices in the best way they knew. How can they establish their presence in a classroom focused on language? Through their own use of the language. They subverted my control of their language by taking selected words—stick and parts—and using them in the way they found appropriate. They did not directly confront the authoritative discourse of the academy that I yielded as leader and grade-giver; they exercised a subtle resistance through mimicry and parody, accompanied by snickering. This is less about sex and inappropriate voices, and more about disruption and students’ attempts to enter the discourse being controlled by the instructor. Pratt describes this type of oppositional discourse as “the attempt to be critical or contestatory, to parody the structures of authority” (39). The authoritative, academic voice of the teacher meets the humorous, disruptive voices of students in the construction zone of the classroom.

**Insights from This New Perspective**

Rather than delineating the defining features of a voice, I began to look at interactions between voices: how students were navigating, negotiating, rejecting, and combining voices of home, community, and the academy; how I was resisting their voices; and what forces controlled these interactions. Each student brings a conglomeration of voices to class—a web of voices not easily differentiated. The demarcation between voices is not clear, simple, or fixed. It is very difficult—I would say almost impossible—to hold these voices and their creation process still long enough to qualify and quantify them. Voices merge in and out of one another, daring us to label and categorize them. Remember my mistake of labeling the sexual voices as private. I am not omniscient enough to have a clear picture of this web. Therefore, rather than
simply labeling and categorizing voices, I examined the relationships of voices in these webs of words. How do these voices function in the construction zones of our classrooms? What happens in the process of combining and constructing voices?

Events in this 101 class show how students navigated the discourse waters of the academy and decided to bring aspects of their voices of community into the construction zone of the classroom. They asserted their presence and agency by speaking a voice that was part of their discourse system. They positioned their words of sex next to my words of the authoritative discourse to create a hybrid. This contact zone became a construction zone where they took my words stick and parts and juxtaposed them against the words of their sexual innuendos.

Even after I asked them to stop, they continued to move their voices into the construction zone by mimicking me. Meeting the authoritative discourse of the academy in the construction zone, they began to combine their voices with the academic voice. They constructed new voices that combined the voices they brought to class with the voices I asked them to develop. I envision them trying on these new academic voices, seeing if they fit and adjusting for the correct style. A process was beginning. These interactions in the construction zone can best be studied as a series of events—a combination of mergers and intersections—that create a new voice. As a result, I reconceived voice as a process.

My direction to silence their voices stunted this process of voice development. A process of true interaction and construction is not achieved when elements in the process are silenced—not allowed to enter the zone of contact, a zone I reconceive as a construction area in which new voices are made. The voices that students bring to the classroom are as essential to this process as the authoritative voices already in place. How can any kind of construction happen if students don’t bring their own voices into the construction zone to build upon? I realized my attempts to silence the sexual voices and insert an academic voice were actually holding back their process of voice development—stunting their ability to construct voices they could employ in academic discourse. My silencing was not supportive of hybrid voices. My concept of voice as a product was not helping my students to grow. I was not, as Carl Rogers reminds me, supporting my students’ “urge to expand, extend, develop, mature” (1961, 351).

**What I Could Have Done**

After interviewing the students, reading Pratt, and analyzing the discourse patterns from the students’ perspectives, I realized how I could have transformed these conflicts into teaching moments. By examining
with the students how voices operate in social contexts, we could have explored:

1. How they analyzed the rhetorical situation of the lunch room and employed a one-upmanship to talk about sex;
2. How they analyzed the rhetorical situation of our 101 class and decided to use their sexual comments;
3. How asymmetrical power relations operate in the academy;
4. Why some voices are deemed more appropriate than others;
5. Who makes these determinations of appropriateness: the educational, governmental, and political factions that enter the argument about students’ rights to their own language;
6. How they and others who have been silenced attempt to subvert control by the hegemonic structures;
7. How they combined the voices they brought to the classroom with the voices they encountered: a process of voice construction.

In short—I could have created a metadiscourse about their resistance by bringing to the forefront the conflict between the authoritative voices of the academy that I represented and their disruptive voices.

As usual, my hindsight is a perfect 20/20. But this is one of the joys of teaching: another teaching moment will come around. My encounter with these disruptive voices in English 101 began my journey to develop the pedagogies and theoretical underpinnings that support students’ processes of voice development.
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