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Text Appropriation: Spirituality and Pedagogy

W. Keith Duffy

ABSTRACT

Much research in rhetoric and composition has focused on the damage done by teachers who inappropriately control student texts, but little of this research has examined the origins of text appropriation. I believe a spiritually sensitive approach to reading student texts may shed light on the perennial questions surrounding text appropriation. In particular, this essay explores ideas about control presented by Jerry Miller in his book *The Way of Suffering: A Geography of Crisis*. Understanding the spiritual dimensions of control may help some teachers change appropriating behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

A significant amount of research in rhetoric and composition has focused on the myriad ways writing teachers read and respond to student texts (Connors and Lunsford, 1993; Shaughnessy, 1977; Brannon and Knoblauch, 1982; et al.). From the empirical examination of student error to the subjective dimensions of grading, this research is broad and a comprehensive discussion of it would be overwhelming. However, some scholarship focuses explicitly on the ways teachers control student texts: How much control should a teacher exert over a text that is in process? Some? None? What is the material difference between appropriating a text and helping a student to shape a text? In concrete terms, how does teacher control manifest itself in written commentary?

For at least 30 years, these perennial questions have been answered, problematized, re-answered, abandoned, and rediscovered. Because this pedagogical issue is such a familiar one with writing teachers, many are certain they know exactly where "good teaching" devolves into text appropriation. During my career, I've asked a number of teachers exactly where this line exists. Some of them reply confidently, "When I do this, I'm teaching. But if I were to do that, then I'd be crossing the line." In one sense, I admire these teachers because I'm not nearly as certain about issues of control--probably because I've struggled with appropriating students' writing, and I've learned that even my own "good judgment" can be misleading.

On the other hand, I suspect issues of control aren't nearly as black and white as we'd like to admit. Moreover, as I think and read generally about the concept of control from a variety of perspectives (psychological, political, spiritual), I've unwittingly adopted it as a holistic lens through which I view my entire practice--from providing feedback to conducting student conferences, from creating assignments to managing my classroom. I've become hyper-aware that I exert control in a number of different ways; I also realize this is a necessary part of my role as a teacher. However, I feel compelled to become more sensitive to the mechanism of control, its origins, and how my need for control impacts my students, especially when I provide written commentary on their essays.

In "Imperfection: The Will-to-Control and the Struggle of Letting Go" (*Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, volume 7), I explored the issue of text appropriation from a spiritual perspective. As part of my inquiry, I confronted my own penchant for controlling student texts inappropriately and found that the root of my problem was spiritual in nature. I was unwilling...
to accept the imperfections in students' texts because they mirrored and made public my own imperfections as a teacher and human being. Confronted with this, I responded by controlling (co-opting, rewriting, correcting) their texts in order to obliterate the problem and alleviate my discomfort (or dis-ease). In this process of appropriation, everyone was harmed. By exerting my will and denying the reality of imperfection, I was ignoring a spiritual truth that has echoed throughout many cultures and religious traditions for centuries: "The first fact of human beings is that we are flawed" (Kurtz and Ketcham 20). It was a difficult lesson to learn, but I slowly came to understand that my students and their essays were not merely "problems to be fixed." By thinking of them in such reductionist ways, I was acting inhumanely. Instead, our imperfections point us in the direction of our humanity and spirituality, and our shortcomings represent opportunities to learn and to "get better." By embracing (instead of erasing) the imperfections in my students' texts--and by relinquishing my unrealistic demand for perfection--I was delivered, sober, into a real community with my students where we all could learn: "From flawedness flows the need for help" (Kurtz and Ketcham 20).

I do not claim to have conquered my overpowering desire to control student texts. To articulate this compulsion and assist teachers who may struggle with the same issue, I will discuss the ways some scholars in rhetoric and composition have framed issues of control when it comes to written commentary. Although this scholarly conversation is enlightening, it leaves many questions unanswered about the practice of reading and evaluating student texts. To explore these gaps, I'll ponder a spiritual way of reading and responding that involves some extremely challenging—even radical—attitudes: the absolute relinquishing of control, the unconditional welcoming of the Other, the obliteration of the self, and the concomitant willingness to suffer.

CONTROL ON A CONTINUUM: THE GOOD, BAD, AND UGLY

The scholarship about teacher control and text appropriation has become part of our canon. More than 20 years ago, influential scholars and teachers like Maxine Hairston, Robert Connors, Erika Lindemann, and Andrea Lunsford vigorously attacked current-traditional teachers hell-bent on appropriating students’ texts. For the first time, rising figures in the discipline of rhetoric and composition told us that "meticulously marking every error in a paper is probably doing more harm than good" (Hairston 6), and that by using our "sharpened red pencils" and by "spilling innocent blood across the page," we made our students feel "stupid, wrong, trivial, and misunderstood" (Connors, Lunsford 395). Writing instructors were admonished for being paternalistic and were warned about the dangers of “teaching from the vantage point of the Ideal Text" (Brannon, Knoblauch 159). Robert Probst (1989), Rebecca Rule (1993), and Joseph Moxley (1989), among many others, gave us advice about commenting on student essays: Act as a sounding board, not as a drill sergeant! Be careful not to take over! Place the responsibility for revision on the student instead of making pronouncements! Moreover, some writers, like Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels, sought a historical explanation for the phenomenon of text appropriation. They argued that the discipline of composition grew out of a nineteenth century focus on penmanship, spelling, and grammar—each of which was evaluated by stressing the correctness of surface features. Consequently, our desire to appropriate and fix student texts made perfect evolutionary sense. Also our forebears relied on the “red pen of correctness” to help instill in students the hidden curriculum: an “implicit agenda of social values” including “neatness, punctuality, orderliness, obedience, and perhaps most centrally, the willingness to take criticism from adult authorities appropriately (i.e. without protesting)” (215). It is only natural, then, that we might grow up dysfunctional.
Much of this early research--distinguishing between the good, the bad, and the ugly in written commentary--is foundational. Notwithstanding Zemelman and Daniels’ historical perspective, however, it is important to note that very little of this scholarship attempts to get at the root of the problem. Although defining and mediating appropriation is the focus of this early research, none of it explicitly examines the concept of control and its relationship to appropriation. Indeed, what I consider to be the most compelling questions remain to this day: What is control exactly? Can control be defined operationally? Why precisely do teachers feel compelled to control student texts? Where does that impulse come from?

In my search for writers who have had the fortitude to tackle the unwieldy subject of control and its relationship to written commentary, Richard Straub and Lad Tobin rise to the surface. Straub has perhaps conducted the most comprehensive research in an effort to operationally define the term control. In his two pieces, "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of ‘Directive’ and ‘Facilitative’ Commentary" (CCC, 1996) and "Students’ Reactions to Teacher Comments: An Exploratory Study" (RTE, 1997), Straub explicitly discusses the concept of control in relation to written commentary. However, instead of portraying control in polarized terms, he locates it on a continuum. Straub suggests that teachers can never fully relinquish control in the commentary they make--it is omnipresent. Instead, the important question is the degree to which teacher control is exerted. He says that comments that take the form of open-ended questions, praise, and reader responses are least controlling, while "corrections, criticism, and commands" are the most controlling (98). Straub has two primary goals. First he wants to discover if there is a difference, in students’ minds, between "direct criticism and indirect criticism, between comments that tell the student to make a change and those that suggest some change" (96). Secondly, Straub wants to know if students "prefer types of commentary that assert greater or lesser control over their writing" (97). Ultimately, he finds that students don’t like "comments that took control of their writing. They preferred and found most useful comments that...did not insist on a certain path for revision” (103).

Largely because of Straub's work, the issue of control and teacher commentary is no longer a black and white issue. It seems as though this gray reality has always been apparent to Lad Tobin, however. From his 1993 Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Classroom to his most recent Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants (2004), Tobin has wrestled with issues of controlling student texts. Although he advocates "letting go and giving up ego and control" to be truly open and attentive to students (especially during conferences), he also admits to controlling student texts in specific ways (Reading 50-51). Without apology, Tobin discusses the difficult realization that writing teachers are, at times, the co-authors of student essays. Though he confronts this reality, he still says it is an uncomfortable position to occupy. In Writing Relationships, he shares a story about a series of student conferences that resulted in an essay that was clearly a co-production. When he reads the final copy, he suspects that “I might have written the essay, and not the student” (21).

Tobin's frank discussion of this matter is refreshing, and it shows how early research on text appropriation has since been expanded. For these scholars, "To control or not to control" isn’t a salient question. Straub, Tobin, and others argue that control is ubiquitous, and they urge us to learn about the ways--and to what degree--we exert control. But what about the impulse to control? Where does it originate? Can that impulse be confronted and changed? Ultimately, I believe we can answer these questions too, and I suspect the answer lies in spirituality, which can provide a perspective on issues of control that few scholars in the discipline of rhetoric and composition have offered. But understanding
this perspective requires teachers (especially those who tend toward appropriation) to answer some difficult questions: If such a thing is possible, are we willing to relinquish complete control? Are we willing to allow our safe routines to be disrupted?

SUFFERING AND STUDENT TEXTS: WELCOMING THE OTHER

For those of us who do acknowledge our appropriating behaviors, the impulse to control a student text is like an addiction. Because I fall into this category, I've often prayed for a way to read and respond to student texts that didn't ignite my impulse to appropriate. What if there were an attitude or posture I could assume that would help me to fully engage a student text, while simultaneously defusing my overpowering desire to correct it, to co-opt it? What if there were a way for me to unconditionally embrace a student text—to invite it wholly into my life—without willfully imposing my own standards upon it, without wrenching it from the student, without taking it over?

This was the primary question on my mind as I read Jerome Miller's book The Way of Suffering: A Geography of Crisis. Miller's book is an extended meditation on the role of suffering as a spiritual teacher. Considering the extent to which I suffered with my own compulsion when responding to student essays, I thought Miller might have some pearls of wisdom to help me articulate and confront my problem. Before discussing ways I've applied Miller's ideas, however, an exploration of his fundamental beliefs are in order.

Central to his philosophy is the concept of the Other. For Miller, the Other is a person, force, spirit, or circumstance that, wholly separate and different from us, enters our lives for the sole purpose of painfully disrupting our routines, pitching us into crisis, and, ultimately, transforming the way we live, think, and breathe. The Other is "something foreign and strange, an alien reality intruding upon the settled time and bounded space of everyday life" (14). The Other can come in the form of a tragedy or crisis. (Miller writes about a father who opens his son's bedroom door to find him hanging from the rafters). Or it may be experienced religiously in the form of a palpable spiritual presence. More generally, it may come in the form of a revelation, a serendipitous understanding, or a radically new, unbidden perception that cracks our view of the world wide open and leaves us bereft and lost in a new land, without a map or compass to guide us. In essence, the Other is an intruder which bursts into our tightly controlled lives and resists our attempts at taming it. Given this weighty metaphysical description, I realize it might seem a bit overstated to place student essays in the role of the Other. However, for purposes of our immediate discussion, that is precisely what I'd like you to consider. As we ponder Miller's concept of the Other, let's think about it in terms of a typical student text—with all of its imperfections and possibilities.

The Other (again, in the form of student writing) has a singular purpose: to rupture our boundaries, to disrupt the safe routines of our lives, and in that disruption, to transform us. Of course, we are fearful of this transformation. We see this rupture as painful and treacherous, and we willfully question its usefulness and worth. So we do whatever we can to control or avoid it and the resultant suffering. We deny this process of obliteration—and ultimately steel ourselves against radical transformation—in a number of different, interconnected ways. For example, Miller believes we purposely build powerful routines into our lives that act as barriers against suffering and radical transformation. Anything can become a routinized barrier against transformation—the predictable way we spend our leisure time, the familiar way we structure our relationships, and even the way we carry out our endless cycle of work: "(T)he very process of work itself makes it possible for me to impose a
direction, a sequence, and thus a pattern, on my life. It is really the process of work itself which gives me the sense of being in control. To be 'liberated' from work would be to rupture the order which keeps chaos at bay" (11). Needless to say, any safe routine we follow in our teaching practice, or any boilerplate we use when commenting on student essays, would apply.

There are other ways to avoid suffering, of course. For example, we might "domesticate" the disruptions caused by the Other through sheer will. To do this, we safely label the Other as a "problem to be solved" and search for a quick and painless remedy. This is precisely what I've done so many times when confronting student texts that do not adhere to the formal conventions of traditional academic discourse: "(W)e live in dread of being upset. At the basis of our ordinary world is an unwillingness to be disrupted. The very fact that we cannot bear to think of losing control shows how determined we are to avert that possibility" (14). When the Other (read: student text) makes its presence known, however, "We cope with this by defining the Other as a 'problem.' A 'problem' is an interruption which, in principle, can be managed, an intruder which can be disarmed. Even if I never find a solution, even if I spend the rest of my life figuring out how to deal with 'it,' I have already robbed the 'it' of its power to rupture my life by imposing on it the role of a problem" (15). Miller says once the Other is labeled as a problem, we can fool ourselves into thinking that nothing can ever upset our lives again--we are in utter control.

Or we might simply avoid contact with the Other by not welcoming it into our tightly controlled existence in the first place. In other words, we shut the door. Miller says if we choose to deny the Other any entrée into our lives, we become the God of our own, constantly shrinking universe: "Insofar as I want everything to be manageable, I want there to be nothing infinite in my life, nothing that surpasses or exceeds my power to cope and handle. If by the divine is meant something radically Other, infinitely beyond my capacity to control, then I will exclude everything divine from my life" (20). In essence, we become a kind of terrified God who "can let nothing else be unless it is wholly subservient to our control of it. We feel driven to practice control when we cannot bear to expose ourselves in our weakness to an Other who might wound us" (20). In other words, to remain safe and unaffected by student writing, I disengage from the text and position myself so it is subservient to me; I am in complete control.

Considering the disruptive power of the Other--and the sheer terror of being obliterated by it--some of these responses seem pretty reasonable. However, for Miller, avoiding the Other or attempting to make our lives more manageable in the face of the Other is our worst possible response; it is paramount to committing spiritual suicide. Instead, Miller suggests that welcoming the Other (or the student text) into our lives allows us to become fully human; welcoming the Other is an opportunity for us to relinquish our "will-to-control." Usually, it is our tendency to control every aspect of our lives that keeps the Other at bay. However, by relinquishing control, we submit to the obliterating process that the Other visits upon us, and we are transformed. Miller says that this visitation of the Other is an opportunity for us to practice generosity; the author argues that to live and participate fully in the world, we must be willing to welcome the stranger, to welcome the suffering the Other will bring as a shaping force. Most profoundly, Miller argues that there is no guarantee that this shaping process will be necessarily beneficial; assuming a positive outcome would simply be another way of plying our will-to-control. No, Miller argues that the Other is an "emissary from the wilderness" that brings with it an opportunity for us to experience the "true, freeing uncertainty of our very existence" (15).
Now, I realize that few of us have confronted the real danger of being obliterated by a student essay (existentially speaking, of course). While I have known some excellent teachers to engage a text so completely as to lose themselves for a while, few of them could seriously say their life foundations have been shaken by a piece of student writing. So, I grant that equating student writing with Miller's concept of the Other requires some qualification. However, there's no denying that his ideas provide a unique and powerful perspective on the origins of controlling behavior. Miller suggests that controlling behavior in general results from our insistence on keeping chaos at bay; it is a response designed to short circuit any existential suffering that might come our way. To bring this discussion back around to the world of teaching writing, error in student texts (anything from global issues like unconventional research methods or confusing organizational patterns to problematic surface-level features) represents chaos, it represents something contrary to convention, it fights against orderliness. For a teacher who is susceptible to that controlling impulse, the inadequacies or inconsistencies in student writing have the power to obliterate a safe, orderly, utterly controlled world. It creates tension. By appropriating student writing, I can "domesticate" the disruptions and suffering caused by the Other through sheer will. When faced with something that disrupts my routinized life (in this case, the disruption is student writing that defies convention in one way or another), I can domesticate it, render it powerless, by not fully engaging in the text (or the student), by labeling it a "problem to be solved," and by solving it through text appropriation. To avoid any suffering an unconventional student text might visit upon me and my carefully controlled life, I will take charge of the offending manuscript in any way necessary. Before returning the essay to the student for further revision, I correct the text, fix the comma splices and run-ons, rewrite garbled sentences word-for-word, recast humdrum introductions, restructure faulty arguments, and rearrange the text so that it is organizationally sound. Of course, as decades of research in composition have amply shown, when this happens the uniqueness of a student text is obliterated. Its character is transformed into something of MY making; in terms of writing pedagogy, ownership of the text has shifted, and students begin to learn less because they have less at stake.

DIVING INTO CRISIS: A MODEST TECHNIQUE

I suspect that quite a number of writing teachers suffer with this problem at different times and to different degrees. For example, sometimes I am entirely paralyzed by my need to control, and I find writing comments on student essays to be an impossible, gut-wrenching task. My unrealistic demand for perfection--while having to face the imperfections in student texts--represents a crisis I cannot endure. Given the dynamics of this situation, I know my compulsion to appropriate will take over. At other times though, I am able to relax my tightly controlled grip, so I can (in Miller's terms) actually dive into that crisis and welcome the Other in generosity, welcome the student and his or her text into my tightly controlled universe, and welcome the ensuing transformation. In other words, I find that I can sometimes engage a student text more thoughtfully if I welcome the potential suffering caused by my own compulsion, and make a conscious decision to endure it and learn from it. I've developed a modest technique that helps me to keep my controlling nature in check. I call this a modest technique because many of these approaches have been bandied about for so long that their origins are difficult to discern; most of them are part of teaching lore. None of them are groundbreaking at this point in time; in fact, most of them are old chestnuts. But since I've acknowledged, examined, and challenged my own controlling behaviors and attitudes, some of these timeworn techniques have taken on a new meaning. Revisiting them, for me, has been very important.
1. Meditate: Before reading and responding to student texts, take some time to sit quietly in an environment without distractions and enter the right frame of mind. Ponder some questions: First, am I willing to suffer? Because of my demeanor and personality, I know that the error I encounter in student texts often creates a kind of tension that compels me to appropriate the text, to take it over and fix it. But I also believe that this behavior impedes student learning. So, when I encounter this discomfort, am I willing to let it pass? Again, am I willing to suffer? Next, can I envision the student text as Other? Will I allow myself to be disrupted by the text? This disruption might cause pain, but this disruption may reveal something important. Will I allow the student text to teach me something about itself and about myself? Furthermore, remember that this text is not disembodied. It is connected to a person, a life, and what I say in response will have an effect. Lastly, realize that control is ubiquitous. I cannot compartmentalize my will-to-control. This means that if I have a controlling nature, it is a thread that runs throughout my entire life, inside and outside the classroom. What aspects of my life outside the classroom may be negatively affecting the way I respond to student writing?

2. Read without a pen or pencil in hand: When first encountering a text, read it to enjoy it instead of judging it. Don't write anything. Engage the text as it is, not as I would have it be. While reading, monitor my impulse to control the text. Which texts seem to ignite that compulsion more than others? Why?

3. Rearrange essays: After a quick read through, organize essays in a way that will facilitate student-friendly commentary, mixing high- and low-level essays. In the past, I've grouped more problematic essays together at the bottom of the pile because "I just can't deal with them right now." This is almost always a bad move; when I finally reach them, my appropriating behaviors come into full bloom. Liberally shuffling the essays helps me balance the task.

4. Write in complete sentences directed to the student: Text appropriation usually begins with striking lines through a student's writing. From there, it is a short jump to begin rewriting an essay in my own words. So every time I write a comment, I make certain it is a complete statement or question addressed to the student in some way. It is time consuming, but worth it. Also, when needing to correct surface-level errors in student texts, be generous with commentary. Provide the student with context as to why correctness can be important. Try to focus on the most frequent errors--rather than all the errors--and explain in full sentences to the student why learning and practicing the conventions of written prose matters to an audience.

5. Know when to stop: If my desire to control begins to surface, it's time to stop. If I find myself rewriting a student's essay (or if I find myself writing "at" the student instead of "to" the student), it is time to stop. Or if quitting altogether isn't an option, then I might need to put that particular essay away and move on to another one.

I suppose many of these techniques are rather obvious. In fact, I think all of them could be reduced to this: When it comes to providing written commentary to students, acknowledge your own tendencies, understand the effects they have, and monitor yourself. Of course I've learned that unless I make a conscious decision to pay attention, it is easy to slip into unwanted behaviors.
Miller uses the term "heroic" to describe the person who moves from "the will to control, both overbearing and terrified" to the "horrifying experience of having one's life undermined" through welcoming the Other. He says a true hero is the person who was originally "secluded inside the safety of boundaries" but through the transformation of the Other becomes "a traveler without compass or passport." Most simply, the hero welcomes this uncertain journey and "discovers a whole new universe of being whose very existence was not previously suspected" (74-5). This is a grand description to be sure, and most teachers I know would blanch at being called heroes. Nevertheless, I do feel there is something quietly and subtly heroic about being a reflective practitioner; there's something daring and brave about squarely facing my own shortcomings as a teacher and attempting to offer my best self to my students. It is a difficult way of being, but once you've tried it, there's no retreat.

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