Authorial Agency: Investigating Composition Pedagogies Under A New Lens

Tyler Hurst
Utah State University

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AUTHORIAL AGENCY: INVESTIGATING COMPOSITION PEDAGOGIES UNDER
A NEW LENS

by

Tyler Hurst

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of
MASTER OF SCIENCE
in
English

Approved:

Benjamin Gunsberg, Ph.D
Major Professor

Beth Buyserie, Ph.D
Committee Member

Jessica Rivera-Mueller, Ph.D
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah
2021
ABSTRACT

Authorial Agency: Investigating Composition Pedagogies Under a New Lens

by

Tyler Hurst, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Benjamin Gunsberg
Department: English

This essay considers the work of three prominent composition scholars through the lens of *authorial agency*, which I define as a form of agency that focuses on the individual voice and self-determination of students in the writing space. Though the concept of *agency* has been previously considered by composition scholars, this contribution might aid in understanding various pedagogical approaches by analyzing how authorial agency is already being engaged within composition pedagogies and investigating how authorial agency aids teachers in understanding their pedagogy so that students learn to take back control of their own authoritative voice and self-determination. By re-investigating writing pedagogy promoted by Peter Elbow, David Bartholomae, and Geoffrey Sirc, under recent scholarship done on agency, we might discover a new way to engage with the mixed space which is the general education composition classroom.

(37 pages)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to express gratitude and appreciation for my committee chair, Professor Benjamin Gunsberg, who was always patient and kept me on track in my tendencies to explore as many ideas as possible. Without his support, keen eye for detail, and ability to help me streamline my thoughts, helping in revising and framing the context of my work, this undertaking would not have been possible.

Second, I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Jessica Rivera-Mueller and Professor Beth Buyserie, who helped start me on the path of interest in Rhetoric and Composition, encouraged me in the development of my pedagogy, and have now seen this investment through to the end of my thesis. Without their guidance and help I would not have found this field that I’ve come to love nor would I have developed into the invested teacher that I have become today.

Third, I would like to thank my various professors at Utah State University, many of whom played a role in my development within the field of English, both helping me question my preconceived beliefs and introducing me to new modes of thinking as well as providing guidance in my pursuits.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents who always believed in me, taught me to work hard, and pushed me to believe in myself. And, last but not least, I want to thank my wife, who has always been there for me, supported me in times of doubt, and encouraged me when I thought I couldn’t possibly do anymore. Thank you for your support and unmitigated kindness. This could not have been possible without any of you.

Tyler Hurst
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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, some composition scholars have considered the implications of the idea of agency as it applies to the teaching of writing. Agency has become a widely discussed topic as its implications have grown with the field. Clay Walker refers to agency as “discursive action.” He suggests “we practice agency as we actively (re)construct language and contribute to our own sedimentation” (Walker 8). Walker offers a type of agency revolving around the collective understanding found in lived experience, layers piled atop one another to form a foundation of identity. Marilyn Cooper defines agency as “an emergent property of embodied individuals.” In Cooper’s mind, “Agents do reflect on their actions consciously; they do have conscious intentions and goals and plans.” Most importantly, for my purposes, she states that agency “is based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own” (Cooper 421). While Cooper’s and Walker’s different notions of agency reflect similar ideas, they contain subtle differences. Both of these compositionists engage with agency, trying to define it according to how it impacts writing and writing instruction. In the minds of these compositional theorists, agency is a lens, a tool meant to magnify the various properties bound to the individual.

Compositionist Ira J. Allen describes agency as “the fantasies we need.” In this way he suggests that agency can be viewed as essential to self determination:

Indeed, on the view suggested here at the outset, that we become ourselves in inventive negotiation of constraints within and in environments, there would seem to be selves (more or less pregiven insides, oriented out) and
there would be environments (the outsides that surround those selves).

(Allen 173)

Allen’s definition of agency further complicates Walker’s and Cooper’s ideas. Allen’s agency, that of the fantastical self, takes into account the role that an author’s identity plays in the construction of action and understanding. Thus, Allen’s agency demands that an author be familiar with themselves and their beliefs, capable of critically thinking about, and being rhetorically aware of, their various identities. A writer, under Allen’s agency, must know the various nuanced voices with which they are constantly engaging and reengaging. In the writing classroom this looks like a student making rhetorical decisions freely, engaging with and navigating assignments as they, and their figurative identities, can best determine. When a student has the right, the ability, to choose they are more invested and can better navigate the complexities of their own beliefs and ideas. Allen’s agency considers these implications and frames this need as paramount to writing instruction.

With these varied views of agency, it becomes important that I define agency for the purposes of this essay. This will provide not only the lens through which I will investigate various pedagogies but demonstrates also that authorial agency, the term I’ll be using for my particular brand of agency in this paper, does not wholly conform to any of these previous definitions. Authorial agency is a way of viewing and encouraging individual investment in students; it is a concept meant to capture students’ sense of the power of their own voice and their potential for self-determination within the writing classroom. Authorial agency is the sense of ownership, or authorship, that every student deserves to have over their own writing and purpose of learning. It is important that we,
as teachers, provide such a space where students self-determine their own writerly identity and goals. In order to do this, we might begin by reinvestigating our own pedagogical practices under the lens of authorial agency to better understand how we are providing a space for authorial agency to flourish.

Many of the students that cross the threshold of an introductory composition classroom are there by requirement. Most have been taught the model of the five paragraph essay, how to implement their own writing process, and how to cite sources. With all of this focus on writing development, there remains a need for self-determination. Authorial agency is important, because it places this power, this responsibility, back in student hands and gives them the freedom to do what they please with it. In this essay, I engage with varied pedagogical approaches by considering the extent to which authorial agency is promoted or restricted. Authorial agency provides a lens that reframes and illuminates how I think about pedagogical practices which helps me understand how different approaches might encourage or limit a student’s sense of their own agency.

I’ll be using the lens of authorial agency to investigate pedagogical practices espoused by David Bartholomae (social-epistemic pedagogy), Peter Elbow (expressivist pedagogy), and Geoffrey Sirc (Happenings pedagogy). I’ve chosen these pedagogies not only because each reflects a different version of authorial agency, both in how it is applied to teaching in the classroom and how it is intended to be viewed by each pedagogy, but also because they are each prominent pedagogical viewpoints in the field. These ideas are outlined in each of the pedagogical sections below.
The rest of this essay will seek to make sense of these varied pedagogies under the lens of authorial agency, investigating three different pedagogical practices and describing how they relate to authorial agency. By considering the way authorial agency manifests in different pedagogical approaches, we might be able to structure composition classrooms in a way that provides students with the freedom they need in order to self-determine their own writing engagement and growth.

**Authorship and Agency**

Authorial agency, and what it means for student ownership and freedom of expression, is best experienced in the writings of Johannah Rodgers who focuses on agency and ownership in a study that she did where random students from a university volunteered to answer questions about themselves as writers. Over the course of this article Rodgers shows how students feel that they can’t define themselves as authors, as they believe that there is some list of requirements present in being able to assume the identity. Rodgers states “The idea that a set of external conditions must be in place for an individual to consider him or herself an author was one that many students expressed” (Rodgers 140). This raises the question as to why students feel this way. Rodgers found that students were uncomfortable assuming identities with which they felt they weren’t accomplished enough to claim. Rodgers states that “One of the hypotheses of the study was that the two terms—author and writer—might be defined and used by students in distinct ways depending on a student's sense of authority in the rhetorical context of academic writing” (Rodgers 141). Students, apparently, can feel as if they don’t have authority over their own writing, that they can’t own it if it doesn’t reach a standard for
academic writing that is preconceived and predefined in their own heads. They can feel, according to Rodgers, that they don’t have the right to make authorial choices in determining their own identity when they are writing.

This feeling of a lacking authority over one's own writing could be interpreted as lacking a voice. A voice, in this case, being the students present self in their own writing. In *Writing With Power*, Peter Elbow describes “voice” as “what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing” (Elbow 288). Elbow is expressing here that most people do not feel comfortable enough in their writing to express their true selves let alone explore their identity. He cautions further that “Writing with voice is writing into which someone has breathed…writing without voice is wooden or dead because it lacks sounds, rhythm, energy, and individuality” (Elbow 299). In this case, according to Elbow, voice is something that most people struggle to place in their writing. Voice is writing that breathes, or has life, and that sounds like speech. More than this, it’s individualistic and free, owned only by the speaker who puts it down on the page and gives it life. It is, then, part of authorship, or ownership, over one’s own writing. Students can often write in a way that feels blocky and stiff, traits that are perpetuated by a fear of stepping beyond the already-learned genre conventions that they’ve received and had drilled into their writing.

Authorship, as an act of agency, is an experience that not only shapes rhetorical contexts but interacts with agential figures. In “Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition,” Bruce Horner finds that a framework of the author/student binary is also being upheld and sustained in composition courses. He states that “The institutionalization of composition courses in the academy has in turn been critiqued for its complicity in marginalizing students and teachers through maintaining the
Author/student writer binary” (Horner 505). This binary, which could be simplified to that of an institutional wall, has created a lack of agency for students to find and define their own writerly identity. Horner suggests that, often, the desire to be an author is one that is socially produced by institutions, creating a forced desire in students to be academic writers. In other words, the student’s agential self is prevented from further development if they choose to remain a student rather than become an academic. There remains, however, a push for students to accept and maintain the academic writer’s role, rather than discover their own role. While communal growth and participation is a worthy endeavor, a necessary one too for a field to develop, it all begins with individual investment, or authorial agency and ownership.

Horner acknowledges, however, that “students do want to learn to produce what schools or society demand whether it be research papers, Edited American English, or a smiling face. But it has to be recognized that those desires are socially produced” (Horner 510). The students Horner refers to feel that in order to fit into the academic setting they must conform to structural guidelines, forgoing the opportunities inherent in writing to discover voice Some students do want to be academics, others simply wish to get passing marks, and they may choose to embrace an academic authorship should this be the case. Others, however, simply wish to explore themselves from many angles and own their writing in the process. Horner suggests that “Efforts to get students to see their work in writing courses as "social" (rather than as, say, preparation for accommodation to the social) more commonly aim at student exploration of their reading and writing practices in relation to the social” (Horner 524). Students must have the space to explore their
writing self, whether it be in ownership of their writing or in granting it the title of “academic,” the choice must be their own.

Ira J. Allen blends the lines between composition and rhetoric and creative writing as it pertains to agency and identity. In his article, “Composition is the ethical negotiation of fantastical selves,” Allen discusses the idea of agential identities, each unique in operation and function within the singular agent of ourselves. He discusses negotiating these identities and how to account for each of them. He says, “We negotiate our own fantasies of selfhood as we compose, and, as a field, we are charged with aiding and understanding others’ negotiations of their fantastical selves” (Allen 173). These “fantasies of selfhood” are determined by many external, and internal factors. Most importantly, Allen charges teachers with aiding others in their own negotiations of self.

Allen suggests that this self-identity is one that is constantly in flux, changing and adapting to unique circumstances and developing new selves in order to negotiate new opportunities or challenges. Here, Allen blends agency with identity, suggesting that the self is an actor, while it is still determined by and for the individual who owns it. Students, or writers in general, must decide not if they subscribe to a particular field such as composition and rhetoric (academic) or creative writing (creative), but instead must decide how their own fantastical selves interact with, or relate to, both identities. This applies doubly so to self-identification as a writer or author. This distinction is not one to be decided by academic institutions, but instead by the writer or author in question. This choice, however, cannot be made without the opportunity presented to a student to make such a decision. Allen goes on to discuss further these fantastical selves by saying,
I am not making an argument about what selves and agency are, but rather about what sorts of things they are for us. They are fantasies that we need. Indeed, on the view suggested here at the outset, that we become ourselves in inventive negotiation of constraints within and in environments, there would seem to be selves (more or less pregiven insides, oriented out) and there would be environments (the outsides that surround those selves).

(Allen 173)

Instead of arguing agency as a rhetorical device, like Cooper, Allen considers agency as a framework of self. Agency is merely a framework we use to understand and define the world around us. Our own identified self is merely an identity we don and doff when we wish to engage with new topics or ideas, ideas and topics that the new self might be able to present new evidence for. But more than that, Allen suggests that it is an adaptation we make for unique circumstances. These fantastical selves are agents unto themselves, yes, but they are also frameworks that we take upon ourselves to see, hear, feel, and think about the world. They are both identities and agents, voice and reason. In this shared environment the two must come together in order to navigate an increasingly difficult framework of interaction.

Identities, and agency, must be allowed to undergo the transformative process of self-predication. Agential spaces are not meant to be controlled by anyone other than the self and should be acknowledged not only as agents unto themselves, but agents for themselves. Space must be provided for identity discovery, where individuals may decide for themselves exactly what kind of writer they wish to be. Their agency must be their
own, just as they must also acknowledge that their self is composed of their experiences obtained from all who surround them and interact with them.

To be a self with agency is like being rhetorical in that we are these things all the time. But to say ‘we are these things’ is not equivalent to saying ‘these concepts describe reality.’ In articulating self and agency as fantasies, I am presenting these as framing ideas that we want, need, and use, irrespective of whether they adequately nominate reality. (Allen 176)

Identity is inherently a part of Allen’s framework, the structure of the class, within which concepts such as these are presented and received. Without the proper framework, the proper classroom, for engaging with these concepts, the budding writer cannot hope to be given the opportunity to engage with fantastical, agential selves. In other words, there is no self-predication without the opportunity, taken or given, to do so. Students might, given the opportunity to navigate this self-predication, find and determine their own sense of value for academic writing, or any kind of writing really. This, however, will be far more valuable than having an academic identity forced upon them. With the ability to self-predicate, self-determine their own writing values they might find a desire greater than any they’ve experienced before to write, to create, to express themselves beyond that which is simply required of them. Allen’s work suggests that a student, given the opportunity to choose, will discover not only their own voice, but a desire to share that voice.
Agency in Bartholomae’s Composition Pedagogy

In February of 1995, David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow engaged in an online dialogue regarding the pedagogical differences between two styles of composition instruction. This debate began at a turning point in the field of composition, when many compositionists were looking for the next big pedagogical movement to explore and study. Bartholomae and Elbow, leaders in distinct pedagogical practices, opened a dialogue where they discussed various ideas in composition instruction. In response to Elbow’s suggestion that students learn to write “without teachers,” Bartholomae argued that:

there is no writing that is writing without teachers. I think I would state this as a general truth, but for today let me say that there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing. To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing (present in allusions to previous work, in necessary work with sources, in collaboration with powerful theories and figures, in footnotes and quotations and the messy business of doing your work in the shadow of others). (Bartholomae 63)

Bartholomae seems to suggest here that writing is a practice that must have teachers, must have authority as a means of navigating complex ideas and registers. Without a teacher to teach, “traces of power, tradition and authority” cannot be navigated. This conflicts directly with Elbow’s ideas on voice, as he seems to believe that the best writing work than can be done is by an individual for an individual. He reflects upon this in his
own goals when he states “I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing-figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words” (Elbow 72). He is not suggesting academic research or critical thinking, but rather the very act of writing itself as a means of drawing conclusions and realizing desires. In this fashion, Elbow and Bartholomae’s ideas contrast with one another. One argues for classroom authority while the other argues for the individuals those classrooms are meant to support. Both reflect an agency of their own, encouraging different voices but similar goals.

Bartholomae’s compositional approach could be argued as “the real work of the academy” (Bartholomae 63). Composition is a place of academic spaces, a “pure and open space, the frontier classroom” “a figure central to composition as it is currently constructed” (Bartholomae 64). Bartholomae seems to be suggesting that a compositionist’s context is most valuable in the academic setting where truths are meant to be discovered through “power, tradition, and authority present at the scene of writing” (Bartholomae 63). Among these goals, the social-epistemic pedagogy also emphasizes collaboration and social epistemology, or socially constructed knowledge. Central to the tenants of composition is the classroom space, the traditional space where instruction happens and writing is learned. The field of composition and rhetoric, however, is large and varied and has undergone many dynamic shifts in pedagogical expression and theory over the course of its existence. These shifts can mostly be attributed to the fact that composition is a highly social field, where communal ideas and socially constructed knowledge is paramount. Douglas Hesse explains this constantly shifting situation well when he states that:
composition studies is now large and complex. The field bobs and weaves between analysis (knowledge about) and performance (knowledge how), rhetoric and writing, concept and craft, critique and complicity, ends academic and ends civic, composing as an instrumental activity and composing as a socially ludic one, (Hesse 34)

With these constant changes in values, goals, and pedagogical methods, it should come as no surprise that the field itself is pedagogically diverse. Bartholomae’s pedagogical approach, as a teaching practice, focuses on method and process; it emphasizes community rather than the individual, head over heart, genre conventions over voice. While such a method works for many, it can also alienate the student as it has a tendency to ignore the individual by failing to address the writer’s inherent freedom and self-determination in the writing process. Bartholomae’s pedagogy doesn’t address individual self-determination, or authorial agency, ideas adjacent to voice, a concept that Bartholomae generally disparages as narrow and ineffective in the larger work of academia or academic writing.

While Bartholomae often fails to address the individual, specifically the value of individual voice, he encourages student engagement with authorial agency in his own way. Bartholomae’s focus on social epistemology provides a strong backbone to composition instruction. This allows for a different connection to voice to be established, albeit one that does not privilege the individual but instead acknowledges them as a part of the knowledge construction process. In Bartholomae’s assertions, students must learn registers in order to successfully compose in various fields and to critically examine hegemonic cultural beliefs. He does this by helping students learn to “appropriate (or be
appropriated by) a specialized discourse” and to “do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience” (Bartholomae 22). This appropriation suggests that Bartholomae is concerned with how a writer relates to the larger context and navigates waters that are traditionally focused on gatekeeping structures such as grammar and assessment. Bartholomae goes on to suggest that being comfortable with the registers of your audience, and engaging with those tonal shifts, is the work of the academy and is ultimately a necessary sacrifice for future independence. This is the type of authorial agency that Bartholomae’s pedagogy encourages.

While learning registers is useful, it still overlooks the empowerment of students to freely engage with their own authorial agency in the present, instead providing students with resources to navigate the sea of voices and registers that surround them so that they can be individual writers once they’ve established themselves. Bartholomae’s method teaches its own culture of resistance. Looking at a pedagogy like Bartholomae’s under the lens of agency, we must ask whether or not authority and agency are the same thing? I don’t have the answers to this, but I believe that some measure of how authorial agency can be applied might be construed from further investigation.

Bartholomae’s pedagogy questions how writing is to be done and taught most effectively while encouraging students to understand the social requirements of knowledge construction. Bartholomae acknowledges this question at the end of his first response to Elbow by stating, “Why should I or a program I stand for be charged to tell this lie,” the lie being that students and their voices exist beyond being mere products of their own time. Bartholomae then turns his eye toward American Individualism: “...[E]ven if it is a pleasant, and as they say, empowering one for certain writers or
writers at a certain stage of their education? Why am I in charge of the reproduction of this myth of American life?” (Bartholomae 70). Bartholomae’s critique, here, of American life, or American individuality, expresses the concerns stated above. Voice is, by Bartholomae’s standards, a distracting thing in a larger academic context where the more important concern is being able to navigate gatekeeping structures. Bartholomae’s pedagogy sketches out blueprints, lays foundations, teaches fundamentals, all so that a student may freely apply it to their future discourse, so that they can enact change. Bartholomae hopes to teach students to apply registers so that they can be both individually adept, independent, and also involved in the communal and social goals of the field.

In the introduction to Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Waite’s book, *Ways of Reading*, they investigate various methods of engagement with reading material in the classroom. In this book, they engage with concepts of authorial agency when they state,

> When you stop to talk or write about what you’ve read, the author is silent; you take over—it is your turn to write, to begin to respond to what the author said. At that point this author and his or her text become something you construct out of what you remember or what you notice as you go back through the text a second time, working from passages or examples but filtering them through your own predisposition to see or read in particular ways. (Bartholomae et al. 1)

This language suggests that Bartholomae’s pedagogy has an awareness for the value of individual expression and privileging the reader’s voice not only for critical thinking and analysis, but for interpretation and creation as well. This displays an attentiveness to
authorial agency, which privileges the individual and engages with authorial ownership over one’s own work and the right to interpretation. Furthermore, Bartholomae adds, “Each of us will come to his or her own sense of what is significant, of what the point is, and the odds are good that what each of us makes of the essay will vary from one to another” (Bartholomae et al. 2). Here, again, Bartholomae engages with concepts of individuality, respecting the individual right to ownership and identifying the fact that each person engages with ideas differently. Bartholomae’s focus on teaching registers, as a means of accessing various audiences through traditional expectations, encourages a kind of voice that sacrifices individuality in the present for independence and freedom in the future. At the very core of authorial agency rests an acknowledgment of the individual’s right to self-determination and freedom in expression.

**Agency in Elbow’s Composition Pedagogy**

Peter Elbow, leader in the expressivist pedagogical approach, suggests what a writer’s goals should be when he reflects how own goals as he states that “I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing-figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words” (Elbow 72). Here, Elbow suggests that the provenance of composition lies in writing for self or, rather, writing for the individual. This suggestion aligns itself with authorial agency, wherein the idea of creating a space for discovery of voice is paramount.

In Elbow’s article, “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals,” he states that “it seems crucial to avoid coming at key texts (or at student texts) as models. That is, I must fight the tradition of treating these readings as monuments in a
museum, pieces under glass” (Elbow 74). Elbow is engaging with the question of whether or not he should teach his students to self-determine meaning, reading a piece of literature for critical thinking purposes as “models” or to use readings as stepping stones. He goes on to say that he thinks we should have such writings “around to wrestle with, to bounce off of, to talk about and talk from, to write about and write from” rather than to hold up as these models of “key texts” (Elbow 74). These ideas connect strongly to authorial agency, as authorial agency also values self-determination and development of individual ownership and voice over the practiced replication of models. Authorial agency does not represent what has already been done, instead the concept signifies individuality and the navigation of self.

Elbow’s suggestion for a compositionist’s most valuable application of writing is in the discovery of self, the exploration of new meanings, and the communication with others through writing. This is best represented when he states, within the context of navigating the individual roles of academic and writer, that “I naturally turn to writing when I am perplexed—even when I am just sad or happy; I love to explore and communicate with others through writing; writing is an important part of my life” (Elbow 72). Here we see how Elbow’s pedagogy encourages individual voice and personal investment in the writing process. In his explanation of his view of writing, he suggests that the true value in writing comes from being able to navigate these highs and lows of self, being able to find meaning through writing in these identity milestones. This suggests a self-determination, a freedom, that can be found in writing to navigate these boundaries. Authorial agency suggests the same, inviting students to navigate their own ownership of the writing that they do, encouraging an engagement with these ideas for
the purposes of discovering voice. By discovering their voice and learning to navigate its various facets a writer becomes stronger and more capable of engaging with difficult topics and ideas as they know themselves better.

In “Decolonizing the Classroom: An Essay in Two Parts,” Elbow discusses the ways in which he might open up a classroom to marginalized voices. One of the things he discusses is guilt, but specifically how to navigate it in a healthy way. He states that “I would make space for private freewriting where people can freely vent their feelings” (Elbow et al. 27). While this is a relatively small detail in the larger article, what we see here is an attachment to authorial agency. Freewriting is a method that is being used here to navigate “feelings.” freewriting is being used to navigate voice and identity. Elbow is doing as Allen suggests when he states that “We negotiate our own fantasies of selfhood as we compose” (Allen 173). Elbow’s pedagogical ideas demonstrate an awareness of how composition could be used to navigate self, to discover the hidden voice that is inherently present, just secreted away, in one’s own writing. Additionally, in learning to navigate these spaces Elbow is granting rhetorical freedom to his students, helping them know where they land on important ideas and issues so that they may be able to speak about them should the opportunity arise.

Elbow further discusses the need for voice in his article “Reconsiderations: Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries.” In this article, Elbow actually discusses agency to a small degree, engaging with it less as a means of ownership and more as a means of action. He suggests that “the skeptical line of thought seemed to go so far as to deprive individual persons of any agency to make a difference in the world (we cannot write, we can only reproduce larger more powerful forces around us), there were various and
continuing attempts to rescue agency” (Elbow 168-169). Here, on this topic, both skeptics and critics of voice agreed on the need to do something. He goes on to suggest that “This conflict about voice in our field echoes a much older conflict about self in language” (Elbow 169). He moves the conversation to a current perspective by stating that “voice is alive in our classrooms. Students at all levels instinctively talk and think about voice, or their voice in their writing, and tend to believe they have a real or true self” (Elbow 170). Elbow’s beliefs here encourage a re-examination of authorial agency and voice in the classroom setting. As demonstrated earlier, Elbow identifies voice as the ability to place one’s individual self on the page, to write as an individual rather than a piece of a machine. Meanwhile agency is a means of ownership for Elbow, the right of self-determination that every writer/student deserves. Elbow seems to believe that students resist the belief that their “self” in their writing cannot exist in academic spaces. Elbow’s pedagogy here encourages authorial agency as a means of investigating self through writing, of engaging with identity navigation and self-expression, and seeing them as still worthwhile endeavors.

While Elbow’s theories and ideas encourage voice and individuality, they can fail to acknowledge the need and purpose of being a part of a field of fellow thinkers, compositionists, doing similar work. Under the lens of authorial agency these contrasting viewpoints can instead begin to overlap. As I stated earlier, community begins with the individual. If an individual is encouraged to find themselves, to discover their own voice, and then find that they like that voice, that they enjoy engaging with this suddenly new and wonderful writer identity, they might be persuaded to participate communally as well, later joining the other social-epistemics as they delve into communal research and
socially constructed goals. Caring about a field’s goals begins with becoming invested in those goals at a personal level, not at an instructed one, but growth and development begins when personal investment reaches its peak.

Elbow navigates the idea of personal investment and growth in his book *Writing Without Teachers*. Elbow states that “Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive” (Elbow 15). I believe that Elbow is suggesting a navigation of writing akin to Ira J. Allen’s navigation of agency. Allen states that “Something like agency and something like self predicate a world that rhetoric and composition needs” (Allen 185). Alongside Elbow, Allen identifies that self and agency, the individual and the individual’s voice, walk the path of composition together. Elbow’s pedagogy unites these ideas, fashioning a bridge to the classroom where students understand not only their own individual power in enacting change, the power that their voice holds, but that they also understand that they play a much bigger role in the grand scope of social epistemology.

Allen adds more wood to the fire when he states, “In its broadest sense, then, composition is the negotiation of constraints on being. Hence, as a teaching discipline, composition involves inviting students to wiggle their senses of self to adapt (to) a wide variety of desires in writing and other compositional media” (Allen 182). While Allen’s ideas suggest both social-epistemic implications and expressivist desires, they specifically navigate the concept of “being.” This is what an analysis of authorial agency uncovers about Elbow’s pedagogy. While Elbow argues for voice, he values it over the communal classroom as it relates to the larger field in general. This isn’t to say that
knowledge making is not the goal of an expressivist classroom, because it certainly is. This merely suggests that individual voices, no matter how original or powerful, need a field within which they can work. Alongside Allen’s ideas, authorial agency encompasses how an individual can maintain the “self” while still participating in social knowledge construction. After all, no voice was meant to be constrained to the bubble of self, true liberation being found in open dialogue and discourse with other similar thinkers. While expressivist pedagogy focuses on the individual, it could learn much from, and potentially overlap with, Bartholomae’s pedagogy under the lens of agency. Allen’s theories further confirm this when he states “Composition, in all its activity, centers and orients toward negotiation between senses of self, constraints internal and external to those (fantastical) selves, and the possibilities of enacting creative capacity in a shared world” (Allen 190). Allen echoes my thoughts, showing that agency is both internal and external, individual and epistemic, delving into the realm of possibilities between both self predication and social construction.

**Agency and Sirc’s Happenings Composition Pedagogy**

In *English Composition as a Happening*, Geoffrey Sirc details several artistic movements and ideas in order to make composition into a happening, rather than a repetition of academic expectations. Primarily, Sirc cites Jackson Pollock as one of these paragons of “happening.” The Happenings were a time in history, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when what was happening on stage was tangential, abstract, complicated. The Happenings were a matter of expression for the sake of expression,
where art was a playground. This expression of artistic exuberance is one that closely aligns with authorial agency, which has the goals of encouraging not only student ownership over their authorial voice but also the freedom of self-determination. Sirc goes on to detail several “Happenings” performances and discusses their relevance to art, but he also suggests that this period of creativity opened doors, offered new vistas, and excited people previously unexcited about art. Additionally, the Happenings were a time when conventions went out the window and the stage was a playground.

From my point of view, Happenings Composition pedagogy, is all about the happening itself; it’s about exploring new ideas, engaging with identities and expressive freedom, as a community and as individuals by entertaining the broad strokes that writing, as art, can make. A Happenings Composition pedagogy encourages, inspires, supports the individual voice and values the same voice for its uniqueness and its personal discovery. Additionally, a Happenings Composition pedagogy completely opens classroom spaces, tossing convention and structure to the four corners, allowing for students’ authorial agency to dominate the classroom space. Sirc discusses these happenings at length, defining them by stating that,

Happenings were, as Allan Kaprow defined them, ‘events which, put simply, happen’ (‘Happenings’ 39). They were environments, situations, any kind of non-theatre—created, most often, from piling on poetic images, but occasionally out of a kind of Zen minimalism, (e.g., George Brecht’s event-scores, mentioned earlier) or simply from a heightened reappreciation of spaces already there. (Sirc 124)
Happenings Composition is, also, a radical disassemblage of the current composition classroom. When Sirc suggests a “Zen minimalism” he is also suggesting grand changes in how we approach the teaching of composition, deploying rhetoric for radical change and the paramount privileging of the individual voice. Sirc suggests that in composition, “we continue to let our composition be governed not by mythic figures, or even real lives, but by critical terms, academic English Composition as a Happening forms” (Sirc 116-117). Sirc, here, is arguing directly against Bartholomae’s composition, stating that critical terms, critical thinking, should not govern the composition classroom. Indeed, Sirc is identifying a large flaw in Bartholomae’s approach when he states that “real lives” are being ignored in favor of critical analysis. The individual is key to Happenings Composition, as is the individual’s right to act, to be an agent of their own fate. Happenings Composition privileges individuality above all else, taking Elbow’s expressivist pedagogy and turning it up to two-hundred percent by encouraging a reconstruction of the classroom rather than a restructuring.

Happenings Composition pedagogies are methods of accessing experience, uniqueness, voice. This allies itself with Elbow, who emphasizes the same things in his writing courses. While Bartholomae’s pedagogy may value socially constructed knowledge and learned registers now for freedom of expression later, Happening composition celebrates the present experience of the individual. A Happenings classroom is a place wherein authority, or ownership, is shared. While a teacher may guide the class, the student determines exactly how they engage with the writing assignments. This design is that of “bounded openness,” a structured freedom. While Sirc’s suggestions of how to integrate this method into a composition classroom are radical, suggesting a
complete restructuring, his methods evoke an attentiveness to authorial agency itself wherein students own their writing, voices, and individuality.

Sirc suggests that “The classroom as presently structured does not provide the environment in which anything creative can be taught. Physically the room insists on order and authoritarianism, the enemies of creativity: the teacher as ultimate authority in front of the room and the students as passive receptacles” (Sirc 5-6). While creativity and individuality might not be the goal of Bartholomae’s composition classroom so much as the teaching of learned registers and social knowledge construction, Sirc goes on to suggest that “There’s no vision. Education’s just a branch of industry and commerce. It’s about scores, scores, scores—and all of this is designed to supply a workforce” (Sirc 89). This focus on assessment is an issue that plagues the modern classroom. When the goal of such a space is to “supply a workforce” it should come as no surprise that what students want is often overlooked, their authorial agency ignored. Sirc’s engagement with authorial agency suggests, due to his own choice of words and focus here, that he would do away with this supply-and-demand approach and instead focus on the student as individual rather than as a product. He is promoting authorial agency by putting student ownership back in their hands.

Happenings Composition pedagogy suggests to me a kind of sublime investigation of self, allying itself with Allen’s navigation of fantastical identities, not only in the context of discovery but also in the ascription of ownership. This pedagogy conveys a willingness to:

work not on righting the writing, but on digging the writing, to perceive it as omen, as change, and see what it gives you, what it offers you, what it
teaches you. The rest is fetish for aficionados. Conventions are not only beside the point, they’re to be actively avoided. In French, Happenings were called décollages, and the artists were décollageurs. Colle meant glue or paste, so Happenings implied unsticking. (Sirc 154)

Here, Sirc is suggesting that Happenings Composition represents change, change in authority, change in ownership, change in academic context, change in goals. This change is one that Sirc asks for on behalf of students, an unsticking of past expectations for re-engagement in the present. Sirc states that “Composition as a Happening unsticks writing then, (de)defining it as anything one reads” (Sirc 154). Thus Happenings pedagogy declares itself as a new way of viewing the writing process, amplifying the value of experimentation and personal voice. Sirc hopes to use Happenings Composition to pull apart the compositional ideas that we have heretofore accepted as doctrine.

Sirc’s pedagogy offers a new way of interpreting voice and individuality. He hopes to take these ideas and pull them up onto the stage for examination so that their performance may be valued too. Perhaps, instead of viewing voice and individuality as unnecessary we might consider instead what it can offer the composition student. Not only might said student find encouragement in pursuing writing for the sake of writing, they might also discover that they have opinions they want to express, words that need to be put on a page. Sirc further expounds upon this idea when he states “The proper genre exists in Composition . . . it’s the essay, because historically that is the key genre of “the exemplary culture within which our students live . . . academic culture, with its powerful ways of representing the world” (Sirc 91). This reveals that Sirc is concerned with how students engage with “historical” genres. In particular, he points towards the essay as a
traditional method of expression. In Sirc’s pedagogy, traditional structures have no place, and thus he suggests that the essay is limiting the freedom of students to express themselves. This is how Happenings Composition pedagogy might benefit a prospective writer who simply hasn’t found their voice yet. By allowing a movement away from tradition into a location of self-determination students might find their individual voices and a personal engagement, rather than a forced one.

While Sirc’s Happenings pedagogy would allow for the individual voice to flourish, it seems that it also trims off too much of the fat, leaving a lean piece of tenderized meat without enough there for a meal. Sirc places this trimming under a context when he states

Bartholomae and I have different projects. He wants to entrench, I want to dissolve. He wants the specific, I want the generic. He teaches making, I prefer choosing. He wants a writer to write like Mary Louise Pratt or Richard Rodriguez; I want writers who write like anyone whoever, who need only be interesting. He’s concerned with how one works with the space on the page, but I work on glass, already-inscribed glass behind which I can see the world pass by. He starts with the readymade and moves to the retrograde. (Page 65)

At a glance, what Sirc suggests stands in direct opposition to Bartholomae. He is claiming that he wants to specifically move away from what Bartholomae is doing. If Bartholomae wants to dig in his heels and “entrench” then Sirc wants to do away with the previously privileged ideas that have gotten us where we are. While Bartholomae wants students to replicate registers, Sirc wants students to choose for themselves in all things.
While Bartholomae and his pedagogy focus on what's on the page and how its context relates to other institutions, Sirc wants transparency and freedom, the ability to see beyond convention. In short, Sirc wants to encourage students to write for the sake of writing not to be like anyone else or to meet a societal expectation.

This is best characterized when Sirc discusses a need to do away with old materials. He states that “Our composition must change materially. Jackson’s use of new materials, like aluminum fence paint, ensured that the work would represent a profoundly different reality, heretofore unseen” (Sirc 115). I believe that Sirc is suggesting here that we need to move away from the canvas that students expect to work with, that canvas being academic essays and learned registers. Sirc believes that the only way to move towards a new future of student writing is by deconstructing the classroom institutions that students are expecting, which could begin with a moving away from essays and genre conventions. He further argues that “Genres need blurring, collapsing, because Composition as a Happening demands new syntaxes for essayist prose” (Sirc 152). Students need to not be limited by expectations but instead encouraged by opportunity. For this purpose, Sirc suggests a deconstruction of what can be expected in a writing classroom. Sirc’s suggestion, to do away with classroom convention and reconstruct expectation, is a radical one. A classroom designed this way, one where spontaneity and individual voice are the soul tenets of success, would be one of anarchy, lacking any structure like constructing a home with no plans or blueprints to follow.

Happenings Composition highly privileges authorial agency, placing it on a pedestal where every individual voice can see it. While authorial agency should be privileged or, at least, acknowledged, such radical deconstructions of the composition
space could create undue stress on both the teacher and the students. Composition does well in its goals to provide a space where voice and identity can be explored freely. It also invites change, which could encourage individual growth among students with expectations of the contemporary composition classroom. This Happenings space is one where some students would undoubtedly flourish. However, Happenings Composition stands in direct opposition to Bartholomae’s pedagogy. While Happenings Composition ticks many of the boxes for what authorial agency needs, it fails to acknowledge that just because one classroom is open and free doesn’t mean that the world and other traditional structures won’t maintain their previous requirements. For this reason, a structure of some kind remains necessary. Key concepts and theories must still be taught and teachers must still have some position to enact this teaching.

**Places of Pedagogical Overlap in Composition Classrooms**

Agency, as a lens, shifts the ways we frame our understanding of the classroom. In Allen’s words, “composition is the negotiation of constraints on being. Hence, as a teaching discipline, composition involves inviting students to wiggle their senses of self to adapt (to) a wide variety of desires in writing and other compositional media” (Allen 189). In making this claim, Allen has framed agency as not only crucial to the success of composition by noting that “composition is the negotiation of constraints on being” but he has also identified that agency invites students to “wiggle their senses of self to adapt.” That is what an awareness of authorial agency offers various compositional pedagogies, an opportunity to adapt and re-examine previously erected barriers and assumptions
regarding our understanding of voice and ownership. Perhaps, it might even invite pedagogies to overlap.

This encouragement of student agency might look like the following. In Soliday and Trainor’s article, “Rethinking regulation in the age of the literacy machine,” the authors describe a method of delivering an assignment they label the “Sketch Design.” Essentially, the “sketch” assignment style was one in which students were placed within a structured environment that set expectations, but did not impose process. The student was expected, then, to navigate not the complex requirements of an assignment, but their own interpretation and authorial connection with the assignment itself. These students had authorial agency, as the assignment’s parameters became not simply the boundaries set by a teacher, but the connection they established with their own pursuits and intentions. Soliday and Trainor found that “Students who received the sketch design embraced complexity, often because they could connect technical skill to a project” (Soliday and Trainor 137). These students “embraced their teachers’ feedback” and “believed their teachers were authentic readers, these students did not focus on format to describe their writing” (Soliday and Trainor 137). These teachers were embracing a “Happenings” style of composition, valuing student voice and expression over genre conventions. This design allows for freedom within structure, a set of guidelines rather than determining criteria for academic success or other pursuits. This structure also encourages authorial agency leading to social composition, where students engage with epistemic beliefs because they want to, not because they are required to.

In addition to operating as a conceptual lens to examine different writing pedagogies, the idea of authorial agency can be facilitated in a number of ways within the
classroom. The goal of these facilitations are focused on giving students a sense of their own autonomy and self-determination within the classroom. Authorial agency can be applied when instructors invest in their students and learn who they are. By knowing a student, greater opportunities can be given in alignment with that student’s needs that inherently encourage authorial agency, placing the power of self-determination and investment back in a student’s hands. Authorial agency can also be encouraged through the presentation of syllabic materials. By reframing how assignments are described and assigned, students might understand that they have control over the way they write. This kind of language may be an invitation for students to approach the instructor with new ideas of achieving a writing assignment’s goals, whether by blending genres or changing assignment requirements. Authorial agency can also be facilitated by an instructor who creates a classroom space that is open to questions and resistance. By encouraging such critical thinking, an instructor helps realize the goal of students defining their own wants and goals within the writing space.

Agency, however, remains a choice that students must make, an opportunity they must seize in retrieving their authorial freedom. Attention to agency could provide common ground, fair cause, creating a space where the social-epistemic, with its emphasis on community and social goals, expressivism, with its emphasis on the individual and voice, and, happenings, with its radical restructuring of the classroom power dynamic, might be able to function together to create a more accessible, diverse, and successful whole.

All of this came to pass because of my own personal engagement with composition. Agency here matters because with personal choice, personal desire to
engage and self-determine one's own authorial investment and motivation, students begin to recognize their control over their writing and the power their voice holds. This is why authorial agency, as a concept, holds the potential as an analytical lens to affect change in the way that pedagogies overlap and interact. Soliday and Trainor outline this when they state “Our field has long struggled to balance multiple institutional pressures and legitimate pedagogical need for regulation with more liberatory and rhetorical aims for student writing” (Soliday and Trainor 144). Alongside Elbow, Soliday and Trainor seem to be echoing my own thoughts in that they believe that student writing is not yet liberating in the sense that it encourages student motivation of self. This motivation is one that could propel student writing forward and out of academic drudgery and into individual desire.

Focusing my attention on authorial agency helps me understand how my own pedagogy has developed. My first pedagogical engagement began with Elbow, discovering a love for writing and a desire to make my writing my own. By attending to the ways Elbow encouraged authorial agency, I was able to see writing as more than just essays. My second pedagogical engagement was with Bartholomae. As I engaged with a world of traditions and gates, it became crucial that I understand how to navigate them. Through social connection, and epistemic creation, I was able to find my voice and pedagogical stance in my Master’s program, leading to a better understanding of not only myself but also how I fit into the larger picture. Finally, upon reading Sirc’s work, I have found a desire to open up my pedagogy towards the future. I must be unafraid to take leaps, to explore boundaries, to test limits. I must test these limits for my students. If I hope to be as pedagogically capable as possible for them, I must be willing to deconstruct
my traditional expectations and seek out new understandings. All of this, I have done and must do for the sake of my students.
REFERENCES


