Lisa Stine

Introduction to Research Methods

Dr. Joanne Matson

Annotated Bibliography on Voice in Composition

Introduction

When teaching students how to write, there are several factors that teachers feel they can control. Teaching students to use commas correctly, write effective thesis statements, and create clear transitions between topics can be difficult, but there are strategies that all but ensure success if students are willing to learn. However, one area of writing that is more abstract and difficult to teach is voice, and it seems that this vital aspect of composition is often overlooked in education in favor of aspects that are easier to define. While it may be true that some students just "have it" and others don't when it comes to voice, I want to learn whether there are proven strategies to help students develop this vital part of their writing ability. I believe that helping students develop authorial voice gives them ownership of their writing, possibly changing their perspective on the nature of composition as a whole.

In my search for sources on voice, I looked for a variety of perspectives. Since it tends to be a hotly contested topic in composition, I looked for sources on voice that both embrace it and criticize the way it is typically discussed and taught. I wanted to incorporate more theoretical pieces that explore the nature of voice, such as Elbow's "What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voice in Texts?", as well as writing that provides specific strategies to help students develop voice, such as Margaret Woodworth's "Teaching Voice." I also included a quantitative

study, Cecilia Zhao's "Measuring Authorial Voice Strength In L2 Argumentative Writing: The Development And Validation Of An Analytic Rubric," which assessed whether voice in writing can be accurately measured. All sources are documented using MLA 8th edition. I believe the information included in this bibliography presents a broad overview of the concept of voice in composition.

Bowden, Darsie. "The Rise of a Metaphor: 'Voice' in Composition Pedagogy." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 173–188. www.jstor.org/stable/465667.

Bowden's article examines the history of the concept of "voice" and assesses its usefulness in composition pedagogy. Her examination reaches as far back as Quintilian, who encouraged "students of rhetoric to interconnect spoken and written language" (175). She also mentions Walt Whitman, who attempted to "break down the boundaries between the high art of writing and the low art of speaking" (177). Following her explanation of the rise of voice as a metaphor in writing, Bowden criticizes the idea that writers and composition instructors should value literary, dramatic narratives over academic prose (since it is easier to identify strong "voice" in more creative works). In a section titled "The Problem with Voice," Bowden notes that there is no inherent reason to value the spoken voice over the written word, and she questions why the ability to locate "voice" in writing has become a marker of strong composition.

I was glad to find this article in my research, since it does not take for granted that voice is a valuable aspect of composition. That is something I assumed when I started researching, and Bowden makes an excellent point that perhaps the metaphor of voice is not necessarily useful as a marker of strong writing. While I still believe that some of the best writing I have read

from students includes what I would call “strong voice,” and I still want to find strategies to help my students write with strong voice more easily, it was refreshing to read Bowden’s perspective and think about the value of voice in composition pedagogy.

Elbow, Peter. "Reconsiderations: Voice in Writing again: Embracing Contraries." *College English*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2007, pp. 168-188. http://74.217.196.173/docview/236936553?accountid=14482.

Peter Elbow revisits the idea of voice in this 2007 article, noting that while it was previously a hotly debated topic, it has not been widely addressed in some time. Elbow reviews some of the previous writing about voice, including some criticism directed at him, which he refutes. He goes on to explain that while some argue that the concept of voice is useless in writing and some insist that it is essential, he believes in a “both/and” approach that acknowledges the complexity of voice. “Attending to” voice in text can lead students to improve their writing, enjoy writing, and find themselves through writing, among other benefits. However, Elbow argues that it is just as important at some point in the writing process to ignore voice, since this can allow students to identify underlying meanings in text that are obscured when voice is emphasized over the written word. Downplaying the importance of voice can also help students avoid the notion that they have a “one true self” that can be expressed in writing, if they can only discover it--students can instead focus on intertextuality and the idea that their “selves” are constantly being shaped and changed through their interactions with others (including interaction with writing).

Elbow's "both/and" approach is a refreshing take on voice in student writing. Reality is always more complicated than "either/or," and Elbow articulates very well the reasons why it is beneficial in writing to both focus on voice and discard it entirely.

Elbow, Peter. "What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voice in Texts?" *Voices on Voice: Perspectives, Definition, Inquiry*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey, National Council of Teachers of English, 1994, pp. 1-35.

Kathleen Blake Yancey begins her collection of writing on voice with this article by Peter Elbow, and with good reason--it establishes a foundation for discussing voice that will be applicable throughout the text. Elbow first identifies elements of physical voice in order to distinguish it from the metaphorical voice discussed in writing. He then examines five facets of voice in writing: audible, dramatic, recognizable (or distinctive), authoritative, and resonant. He argues that the first four facets are easily identifiable and do not get into sticky issues of "identity," but the final element, "resonance" or "presence," forces us to wade into "the swamp" (16). Writing teachers must be careful to acknowledge multiple theories of identity--is there a true "self" that can emerge in writing, or are we always playing a role? Who are we, really? However, regardless of these questions, Elbow argues that teachers can still help students develop a sense of when their words seem like "theirs."

Elbow caused me to do some serious self-reflection when he wrote that voice has "become a kind of warm fuzzy word: people say that writing has voice if they like it or think it is good or has some virtue that is hard to pin down." What do I mean when I tell a student that their writing has (or lacks) voice? Is it just that I like the way it sounds, or is there something else at

play? I appreciate Elbow's delineation of identifiable elements of voice in writing, since it gives me a place to start when trying to help students develop a stronger voice.

Humphrey, Regan C., Marsha D. Walton, and Alice J. Davidson. "'I'm Gonna Tell You All About It': Authorial Voice and Conventional Skills in Writing Assessment and Educational Practice." *Journal of Educational Research,* vol. 107, no. 2, 2014, pp. 111-122.

In this mixed-methods study, the authors prove that voice can be accurately assessed as an element of student writing, and it has been woefully underemphasized in the classroom. As the authors put it, "There is more to good writing... than getting the commas in the right place" (111). First, the authors make the case that voice is a real element of good writing, and that the school system suppresses the creativity that leads to voice in favor of mechanics, which are easier to teach. They describe their study in which they identified markers of strong voice in the writing of 661 children in 3rd-6th grade. The features they looked for were expressive language, metanarrative awareness, emphasis markers, and language of cultural communities. They also measured whether there is a correlation between students with strong voice and proficiency in the mechanics of writing. In their findings, they noted that strong voice in student writing did not necessarily indicate high grades in English and Writing classes, since academic performance was tied more strongly to knowledge of conventions. They conclude that if voice were as highly emphasized on standardized tests as conventions and mechanics are, then educators might be more likely to focus on it as an aspect of good writing.

While this study addressed voice in the writing of younger students, they provided several criteria for measuring voice in student writing that could be adapted for older students as well.

Their addition of “language of cultural communities” as a feature of strong voice is encouraging, since I believe that students should be invited to embrace their own cultures and not be influenced to think that formal, “standard English” is the only appropriate way to communicate. It also connects to Charles Keil’s idea of intermediate prose as an expression of a writer’s home language.

Keil, Charles, John Trimbur, and Peter Elbow. "Making Choices about Voices." Composition Studies, vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, pp. 61. http://74.217.196.173/docview/213785658?accountid=14482.

John Trimbur introduces Charles Keil’s memo “Making Choices about Voices” by noting that Keil is an award-winning ethnomusicologist and rhetorician who has a “palpable sense of empathy and frustration” as he describes book reports written by two students. In Kiel’s description, he bemoans the “hidden, smothered” poetry present in the book reports and the fact that they come “across as long, unpunctuated sentences filled with annoying ‘grammar mistakes’ suspended somewhere between the ‘white world’ and the ‘black world’” (62). He then explains that there are three types of writing that students should master: “King’s English,” poetry, and “intermediate prose.” King’s English is important since students need to know it in the professional world, poetry is important since it helps students express and know themselves, and the intermediate prose is important because it is a bridge between a writer and his or her community. Keil writes that in this voice, students should be “saying it the way the people closest to [them] would like to hear it” (63). In Peter Elbow’s reflection that follows Keil’s piece, Elbow expresses his appreciation for Keil’s view and addresses the common assumption that students don’t need to be taught how to write in their home language, just in

"King's English." Students need help practicing all forms of writing, including how to write "for and from [their] home culture" (64).

Keil makes some important points in this memo that are not often addressed in composition pedagogy. Like Elbow mentions, it is frequently assumed that students already know how to write in a manner that "comes naturally to them" and that they just need to be taught how to write professionally, but this is not the case--just because students can speak does not mean that they know how to write. Keil also identifies an important distinction--"King's English" is not necessarily "correct English"--it is just one version of writing that happens to be useful because of its storied history. Other forms of writing (poetry and intermediate prose) have just as much value, but for different reasons.

Kesler, Ted. "Writing With Voice." *Reading Teacher*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 25-29.

In "Writing With Voice," Ted Kesler explains that voice in student writing can be developed by giving students authentic audiences to write to. While some have argued that voice is intrinsic, a "monologue a writer has as she composes," Kesler subscribes instead to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that voice is dialogic--that it emerges as an interaction with the thoughts and writing of others (1). This concept is also referred to as "addressivity," since a writer is always addressing someone when composing. Kesler demonstrates this point by providing examples of two pieces of writing by his daughter, which differ significantly in tone and voice since they address two different audiences, her peers and her father. He also includes suggestions for classroom activities that will provide students with "dialogic interaction," helping them develop voice as they address others in their writing.

While Kesler's article is geared toward elementary and middle school teachers, the suggestions he provides on how to help students develop voice in the writing classroom are transferable across all grade levels. The consideration that voice is dialogic rather than monologic is an important consideration, since voice is often referred to as a writer's "inner monologue." It is more beneficial to think of voice as the writer in dialogue with his or her audience, speaking to them through writing in the way that is most appropriate to the task.

Leggo, Carl. "Questions I Need to Ask Before I Advise My Students to Write In Their Own Voices." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1991, pp. 143-152.

In this article, Carl Leggo explains that he does not quite have a handle on the nature of voice, but that he wishes to invite his reader to explore the idea with him through a series of questions. He then poses 99 questions on voice, exploring everything from the nature of voice itself (#2: "As a writer do I have a single and consistent voice or multiple and variable voices?"), privilege in voice (#25: "How are voices suppressed?"), originality (#64: "As a writer am I an echo of others' voices, or do I have a voice of my own?"), and feminism (#96: "Is a woman's voice historically/socially constructed or genetically constructed?"). His playful conclusion notes that this conversation about voice has been happening for a long time, and it should by no means be concluded with the end of his essay. He invites the reader to ponder the multiple-choice question, "What is Voice?" with 30 different answer options.

Carl Leggo's exploration of what voice really is also, perhaps ironically, clearly exemplifies the nature of voice. His poet's personality is tangible throughout the piece, from his wordplay in

describing the nature of voice in the introduction to the clever construction of the questions he asks. Besides being an enjoyable read, his questions are worthy of contemplation, and should be considered by all educators before they advise their students to “write in their own voices.”

Romano, Tom. "Writing with Voice." *Voices From the Middle*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 50-55. http://74.217.196.173/docview/213931620?accountid=14482.

In this article, Romano explains that he has two ways of thinking about voice in writing. The first is to “trust the gush,” by which he means that when the desire to write hits, writers should embrace it and get thoughts onto the page as directly as possible. However, he also values reflecting on the writing process after getting the words onto the page and crafting them into something that feels “authentic.” He offers some direct suggestions on how to help students develop strong voice. Teachers of writing should help students appreciate the power of words, which includes helping them learn to eliminate “clutter from their writing” (54). He acknowledges that written voice can express a writer’s individuality, but that voice is also a tool that can enable us to “wear a mask and write in a voice not our own” (56).

I appreciate Romano’s specific suggestions in this article for how to help students develop stronger voice. He encourages teachers to allow students to get their words on the page first (trust the gush), then show them how to make their writing more powerful by eliminating unnecessary words and phrases. While Romano makes good points about voice and how it can be a factor of strong writing, some of what he writes in the article begs for a more concrete definition of what voice is. He writes, “I loathe wasted words, except when I am drafting; I try

to trust the gush and be profligate then. But when I'm crafting my authentic voice, I want language that's lean and pointed and clear" (53). It seems obvious to ask why the voice that emerges when writers "trust the gush" is not considered an "authentic" voice--if voice must be crafted by the writer, when does it lose its authenticity?

Thomsen, Jessi. "Making Voice Visible: Using Graphic Narrative in the Composition Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2014, pp. 27-40. http://74.217.196.173/docview/1562783076?accountid=14482.

Thomsen argues in this article that including Graphic Narrative in the study of writing can help students develop a stronger sense of voice. She defines voice as a "writer's portrayed presence within the text that provides the reader with both an audial and visual reflection of a particular slice of the writer and persona" (27-28). However, she acknowledges that while voice is inherent to a writer, it can also be tailored to certain writing situations. She argues that utilizing graphics when teaching writing will especially help students who are visual learners. She offers three exercises for teachers to use: asking students to draw themselves as writers, describe quotes from texts only by drawing lines of varying shape and weight, and organize their writing visually after analyzing a graphic novel writer's use of frames.

While most conversations about voice center on the text itself, Thomsen makes a good point that by engaging students visually, they may be able to master the concept of voice more easily. However, like many other writers on voice, Thomsen has difficulty explaining exactly what she means by the term. Without naming specific qualities of strong voice in writing, she simply describes it as "the kind of writing that we all actually like to read" (28). While the

suggestions she offers about incorporating Graphic Narrative in writing instruction may help students understand themselves as writers and analyze writing more easily, the activities do not necessarily make it clear what students can do in their writing in order to improve the strength of their authorial voice.

Whitney, Anne Elrod. "'I Just Turned In What I Thought': Authority and Voice in Student Writing." *Teaching English In The Two-Year College*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2011, pp. 184-193.

Whitney reflects in this article on a student she had in her first year teaching composition at a university. "Keith" comes in for a writing conference over his first essay, which has earned an F since he did not include any textual evidence. Whitney wonders if this will upset Keith, but is surprised when he knows exactly what went wrong and explains that he did not include evidence since it would have taken away from what he had to say. Whitney then explores the nature of voice, admitting that her previous view which considered voice a personal expression of a writer's self was inaccurate. She now sees voice as something which must be constructed by a writer, a tool that must be used by the writer to situate himself or herself in context when writing about a certain topic.

I agree with Whitney's premise that voice is not simply a writer's "self" emerging, but a constructed element of writing that is specific to the task and audience. Her explanation connects to Peter Elbow's "Embracing Contraries" piece (which she mentions), since she discusses the damage that can actually arise from overemphasizing the self in student writing. Helping students understand that they can craft a voice that allows them a place at the table when discussing issues they are not experts in will help them gain confidence and improve

their writing more than encouraging them to use slang and idioms to "be themselves" in composition.

Woodworth, Margaret. "Teaching Voice." *Voices on Voice: Perspectives, Definition, Inquiry*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey, National Council of Teachers of English, 1994, pp. 145-158.

In "Teaching Voice," Margaret Woodworth provides a unit of study that will allow students to develop their sense and mastery of authorial voice. She writes that the exercises will lead "students to a fuller awareness of the repertoire of voices they already own; to an understanding and control over the stylistic techniques that allow a broadening of that repertoire; and to... self-confidence" (145). In the unit, she first asks students to write a brief autobiographical paragraph to introduce themselves. This piece will be revisited later. She then has students write to three different people regarding a hypothetical situation (either that a neighbor's dog has been killed by a car, or that the student needs to borrow a car for an important event). This exercise enables them to see the rhetorical choices they make which alter their voices. Next, Woodworth talks to students about levels of abstraction--how the more specific the writer is, the more he or she connects to the reader. She then gives students two passages (she uses the first paragraphs of Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*) and helps students deeply analyze the difference in diction and syntax, which she argues demonstrate the differences in voice. Students next analyze a piece of writing they like in the same way they analyzed Dickens and Salinger to practice the skill further. Finally, they revisit the autobiographical essay from the beginning of class and rewrite it in the style of Dickens and Salinger to try on different voices in their own writing.

Woodworth offers her own attempt at this exercise, demonstrating various “starts” to the story of her life that change voice each time. She ends with student examples of the same exercise, demonstrating that they were able to adapt their writing to create distinctly different voices after the exercises she provided them in class. In her course evaluations, she says that “every student mentioned this assignment as one that really made them feel the control that they had lacked before; that had made them understand why some writing was "better," or more appropriate and/or effective, than other writing” (157).

Of all the writing on teaching voice that I have read, Woodworth offers the most practical, concrete explanation for how to help students develop a stronger sense of voice and ownership over it in their writing. Her definition of voice, that it is “a composite of all the rhetorical and stylistic techniques a writer chooses, consciously or unconsciously, to use to present his or her self to an audience,” resonates with me, since it does not assume that a student has one “authentic” voice through which his or her identity is expressed--voice is a rhetorical tool that students can learn to use to their advantage (146). The classroom strategies she offers are specific enough to be easily replicable, and she provides evidence that they are effective in helping students understand voice and demonstrate it in their own writing.

Zhao, Cecilia Guanfang. "Measuring Authorial Voice Strength In L2 Argumentative Writing: The Development And Validation Of An Analytic Rubric." *Language Testing*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2013, pp. 201-230.

In this article, which reflects the work of her thesis, Cecilia Zhao examines whether it is possible to measure the strength of authorial voice in writing. She has six Ph.D. students rate voice in argumentative writing responses on 400 TOEFL tests, which students learning English as a second language take as a measure of their progress. The study is mixed-method and includes quantitative data (the ratings which the Ph.D students assigned) and qualitative (follow-up interview information from four of the raters). Zhao determines that there are three factors which impact perception of voice strength in writing: "the presence and clarity of ideas in the content; the manner of the presentation of ideas; and the writer and reader presence" (201).

Of all the articles I encountered in my research, this one hits the closest to my essential question: Can voice be taught and measured? According to Zhao, the answer is, at least partly, yes. The rubric she developed based on Hyland's (2008) model allowed for consistency, and the raters involved had a high level of both intra and inter-rater reliability, lending credence to Zhao's findings. The provided rubric in the appendix allows teachers and researchers to experiment further, perhaps determining whether providing specific benchmarks can help students improve voice strength in their writing. I agree with her conclusion that use of a rubric can "demystify, even if only to some extent, the seemingly unlearnable concept of voice" (219-220).