

PRIVATE WRITING, PUBLIC DELIVERY, AND SPEAKING CENTERS: TOWARD PRODUCTIVE SYNERGIES

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From 1951 to 1955, Edward R. Murrow hosted *This I Believe*, a daily radio program that reached 39 million listeners. On this broadcast, Americans—both well known and unknown—read five-minute essays about their personal philosophies of life, sharing insights about individual values that shaped their daily actions. The first printed collection of *This I Believe* essays, published in 1952, sold 300,000 copies—more than any other book in the U. S. during that year except the Bible. These Murrow broadcasts were so popular that a curriculum was developed to encourage American high school students to compose essays about their most significant personal beliefs (Bennett and Dickson 1). The present-day *This I Believe* website elaborates on the effort, having recently experienced a rebirth, as

an international project engaging people in writing and sharing essays describing the core values that guide their daily lives. Some 100,000 of these essays, written by people from all walks of life, are archived here on our website, heard on public radio, chronicled through our books, and featured in weekly podcasts. (1)

In 2007, one of my colleagues at Abilene Christian University and I published a curriculum for university writing teachers, available online at ThisIBelieve.org,¹ intended to yield such essays at the post-secondary level. Compositionists will immediately recognize its pedagogical underpinnings as emanating from expressivist or “personal writing” proponents, but with pointed emphases on audience, universal relevance, suitability for oral performance, and scope (many students will learn for the first time how to reduce their essays to a 500-word maximum, often giving rise to productive discussions of pith and word economy). Many students will also make careful choices regarding the degree to which any religious rhetoric—which often informs closely held creeds—appears in their drafts.

My overarching goal in this essay is to join the emerging call to return the canon of delivery to rhetorical education, specifically within the composition classroom. To do so, I wish to call attention to three items related to the *This I Believe* (TIB) curriculum as it was employed at Abilene Christian University: the complexity of the final product, which is an oral reading of an essay broadcast over our local NPR affiliate; the expanding community role of the Writing Center in the process of completing these essays; and emerging symbiotic relationships with the Speaking Center, a partner in our “Learning Commons” structure, which helps students develop speeches and presentations. I will also, along the way, discuss what I see as the theoretical and civic significance of such symbiosis. It is my contention that this curriculum responds to and illustrates the benefits to be had by appropriate attention to rhetorical delivery.

One of the more recent arguments exhorting our field to reconsider delivery is Cynthia Selfe’s “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aural and Multimodal Composing,” wherein she argues for wider inclusion of aural literate practices (among others) within rhetorical education. Against a rich backdrop of contemporary scholarship extolling the use of digital media in university classrooms, Selfe emphasizes the value of the aural component and laments its demise in 20th-century English education. She argues that teachers should “encourage students to deploy *multiple* modalities in skillful ways—written, aural, visual—and that they model a respect for and understanding of the various roles each modality can play in human expression” (626, emphasis original). Of particular interest to my present claim is Selfe’s continual gesturing toward “the importance of aural and other composing modalities for making meaning and understanding the world” (618), as well as for the “formation of individual and group identity”

(626). The TIB curriculum contends that a student's final essay will be suitable as both a written and spoken public product, pedagogical goals that I find immediately valuable for precisely the reasons that Selfe has articulated. Giving students real-world consumers of their texts is virtually always a boon to writing instruction, documented copiously in, for example, the scholarship of service-learning and professional writing-for-community models. What's more, this assignment sequence brings into sharp relief the complicated relationship between the public and private identities of the writing student as it adroitly emphasizes delivery as an important facet of writing. Aside from the opportunity to explore—and challenge—one's identity (individual and communal), and to both textually and orally present an essay, I believe this attention to delivery inheres certain ethical and civic consequences, which I will discuss near the conclusion of this essay. First, however, I will explain the way this curriculum unfolded on our campus.

When the *This I Believe* national project began cultivating renewed interest on NPR, our campus affiliate, KACU, regularly broadcast the essays as part of its weekly programming. This led my colleague, Kyle Dickson, and me to begin exploring ways we could enrich our first-year composition sequence, especially the essays that draw on first-person experience. We developed a writing prompt, based on ideas of creed and belief, whose formal parameters fit those of the national TIB project. Here is an excerpt from that prompt:

In the 1950s, journalist Edward R. Murrow hosted a weekly radio series inviting listeners "to write about the core beliefs that guide your daily life." At a time of political and cultural anxiety, the show asked Nobel laureates and everyday citizens to articulate their personal articles of faith even as it called them to listen carefully to the beliefs of others. Tens of thousands of Americans have written in to join Colin Powell, Gloria Steinem, and Tony Hawk in returning the dialogue of beliefs to American broadcasting.

For this essay you will write a 3–4 page personal essay describing an idea or principle you believe

in. Your final essay should attempt to add your voice to this discussion.

For this exercise to be meaningful, you must make it wholly your own. This short statement isn't all you believe; it's simply a way to introduce others to some things you value. In spite of the name, your belief need not be religious or even public. You may decide to focus on commitments to family, service, political action, or the arts. As you look for a focus, try to choose concrete language and to find something that helps others understand your past, present, and future choices.

After a small pilot group of writing faculty adopted the prompt for their classrooms, we approached the KACU program director, who agreed to record and broadcast our best results as a local version of the national TIB segment. With this infrastructure in place, we decided then to invite the community at large to participate; I volunteered for the Writing Center, which I direct, to initiate the marketing of such efforts.

Our Writing Center's attempt to serve the citizens beyond our university walls has been challenging at ACU. Abilene is a quiet, conservative, west-Texas city where three universities tend to be seen as entities unto themselves, separate from the "townsfolk." Repeated invitations via our website, flyers, and newspaper ads "to help any writer with any text" have resulted only in occasional non-student clients writing memoirs, updating resumes, and starting amateur novels. But in tandem with this renewed interest in the national TIB radio program, we initiated a public service announcement on KACU that solicited brief essays of personal belief from all listeners, directing them to email them or bring them physically to the ACU Writing Center. This effort not only generated TIB essays from the community for my tutors and me to vet and move toward broadcast radio, but it also provided a free PSA every morning to advertise the Writing Center's broader mission to Abilene at large. Our facility is located in a Learning Commons environment, one floor away from the Speaking Center, an entity staffed with tutors from the Communication department whose goal is to help students work on speeches, PowerPoint slides, group

presentations, and any other assignment that involves disseminating information via public performance. Their consultants will even sit and listen in a private room while a speaker delivers an oration in order to give feedback on diction and effectiveness to an audience. As the campus became more familiar with the Speaking Center's services, I began imagining the ways it could join the Writing Center to serve citizens outside the university; the "TIB Abilene" assignment provided the perfect foray.

Here is the procedure we initiated: an Abilenian in the public radio listening audience hears the PSA invitation to email an essay of belief to the ACU Writing Center, then submits one. I make copies and give them to a couple of my tutors. They email their comments to me, I synthesize them, then send them back to the writer. The revised essay comes back, I offer additional suggestions, and the process repeats. When the writer sends in a final draft—appropriate in both content and scope—I send his or her name to the Speaking Center, whose consultants coach the writer on the best way to deliver a personal manuscript reading over broadcast radio. The director of the Speaking Center was careful to inform me that this step could easily require further revision. For instance, some sentences might be fine for silent reading but too long for oration as the reader will run out of breath before the end; or, for another example, lengthy textual chunks that carry complex thoughts and are usually aided visually by paragraphing may need shortening or splitting for oral presentation. This additional cycle of revision initially seemed daunting, since my tutors, the essayist, and I would have worked so hard already. But I believe precisely such matters were attended to by the ancients, and I (along with scholars like Selfe) am buoyed by a return of attention toward classical delivery in this rhetorical task.

Over the two years of focused solicitation, our writing center received dozens of entries, mostly from college students whose teachers had employed the TIB curriculum as a major essay in the first-semester composition course—at both Abilene Christian University, as well as the nearby Cisco College. However, we also received submissions from several local townspeople, some of which were remarkable,

and which, after proceeding through the process outlined above on our campus, were recorded and broadcast on KACU (the final version of one such essay can be read on the official *This I Believe* website, at www.thisibelieve.org/essay/47979). These essays covered a wide array of subjects: participants wrote about somewhat expected topics (diversity, travel, love) but also of atypical ones (flat soda pop, lost socks, death, and anti-depressant medication). In what might be described as a closing of the rhetorical loop, selected broadcasts from this effort have been archived on iTunes U for permanent audio availability.

As stated above, one of the most valuable consequences arising from the TIB curriculum is that it refocuses the composer toward delivery as an indispensable consideration of the rhetorical process. In an edited collection entitled *Delivering College Composition*, Kathleen Blake Yancey discusses the importance of our reviewing this forgotten canon, both as a productive metaphor for routes toward university credits as well as an important consideration for contemporary and ever-emerging rhetorical tasks. She writes:

While the nature of composition . . . is contested, faculty continue to introduce new tasks, to be created in new genres, composed not only on the screen, which suggests a kind of planar approach, but also within new environments, which suggests a place for composing that in its three-dimensionality is like the classroom that they seek to extend, expand, and complicate. (7)

And a bit later, she ends her introduction by asking salient heuristic questions, including, "How does *a particular physical* space position teacher, learner, materials, and composing?" (10, emphasis mine). I would argue that the TIB university curriculum introduces new tasks that come to fruition within new environments, adding new dimensions to our rhetorical milieu and to our entire composing process. These essays, based on a student's successful navigation of private and public orientations, do indeed position the elements of rhetorical instruction within a new space—not just the literal site of a radio station's broadcast booth, but the new plane of public delivery, the agora, where elements of speaker, writer,

and world turn out to be more than abstract points on a rhetorical triangle. In Yancey's terms, these elements combine to produce extra dimensions to the writing classroom and the textual artifacts themselves. I would maintain that such dimensions were not considered "extra" by traditional rhetors, nor should we consider them such. And here, I want to touch on two important emphases of returning delivery to the writing classroom—voice and ethics—as additional evidence of this assignment's benefit.

It would be nearly impossible to discuss oral delivery of texts in a composition arena without attending to voice. In a November 2007 article from the "Reconsiderations" section of *College English*, Peter Elbow writes, "The concept of voice (without quotation marks) keeps not going away. [. . .] Students at all levels instinctively talk and think about their voice, or their voice in their writing, and tend to believe they have a real or true self—despite the best efforts of some of their teachers" (170). Elbow's article goes on to highlight the poignant difficulty of discussing voice in writing, an element fraught with contradictory opinions and schools of criticism; yet, he argues, the "slumbering" subject must be awakened because the yield to our work is so productive. Later, in the February 2008 edition of *College Composition and Communication*, Elbow addresses delivery directly as he publishes his Exemplar Award acceptance speech. He writes,

Virtually every human child masters the essential elements of a rich, intricate, and complex language by age four; but somehow it turns out. . . that this language is not considered acceptable for serious important writing. [I work toward a goal] to show that even for "correct" edited written English, speaking and spoken language are full of virtues that are badly needed. (522)

Elbow's lifelong attempt to reify and celebrate the connections between spoken and written language crafts a larger argument that moving from spoken to written and then back to spoken word can recover a certain rhetorical sophistication and aesthetic authenticity. Such attributes are, in fact, what I would argue to be the ideal outcomes of a writing center's intentional partnering with a speaking center for the

TIB project. As a result of their coordinated efforts, a writer finishes with both a polished written text and a spoken audio file, memorialized as both a radio broadcast and a podcast stored on a permanent medium. These particular end products of the writing process capture the importance of voice that Elbow emphasizes—both in its internal use as a tool to more deftly compose texts as well as the manifestation of felt sense.

Thus, returning auditory delivery to the composition classroom (in this case, auditory delivery) helps solidify the often nebulous subject of voice in writing, and it is here that I believe the contrasts between public and private performances are most valuable. Theresa Enos argues, in "Voice as Echo of Delivery," for a pedagogical return to classical delivery to illustrate the important ties between voice and ethos. Harkening back to ancient Greece and Rome, Enos reminds us that "ethos in rhetorical theory is paramount; the speaker in a text needs to project the three qualities of good sense, moral character, and goodwill in order to achieve credibility and thereby effect persuasion" (184). However, Enos is quick to bring her point to a contemporary context, reminding us that much 20th-century rhetoric asks speakers and writers to *identify* with their audiences, not win arguments against them, to create assent rather than objective Truth. Here, Enos argues that writers' stylistic choices must be valued as much as the elocutionary choices of old, and contemporary rhetoric must value the interactive performances of all actors involved to truly analyze voice and ethos. Drawing on the work of William Kennedy, Enos writes,

Writers shape their personal voices by lexical choices, syntactic combinations, figurative language, and devices of rhythm, pacing, and tone. Voice functions to highlight linguistic traits that establish the writer's character. (188)

In other words, Enos argues that delivery remains an important factor in the rhetoric of identification, but in text, the writer's stylistic choices provide her voice. Since voice is so closely tied to ethos and is normally associated with oral delivery, Enos syllogistically concludes that a *writer's style effectively*

delivers her ethos. Hence, when students write essays that will, in the end, be read to listeners and then permanently archived, they must contend with words that not only match a felt sense toward their core beliefs but that also create an ethos that will successfully identify them with their audience (in the Burkean sense) to create assent. The intricacy of this task seems as sophisticated as any I've imagined in a writing classroom, not least because it requires students to grapple simultaneously with both their foundational beliefs and their exacting, nuanced articulation. What's more, along the journey of this composition assignment with its prewriting and peer review activities, students' beliefs are undoubtedly challenged—both by their classmates and themselves (as a result of having deliberately and objectively articulated such beliefs). Ultimately, both essays and ideologies get revised, updated, or even replaced.²

Requiring a radio broadcast as a final product in a composition class thrusts the writing student onto the public rostrum, a position of undeniable and self-conscious ethical consequence. Martin Jacobi explicitly argues that “delivery [is] a sorely neglected canon, at least among . . . postsecondary required and general education courses” (21), and that ending this neglect can produce students who become more participatory and virtuous citizens (23-26). Pointing to the writings on virtue by classical Greek and Roman rhetors, Jacobi builds the thesis that a student who becomes accustomed to repeatedly constructing a persuasive delivery ethos, especially toward honorable causes, begins to think and behave more virtuously herself. Thus, his argument concludes, a return to rhetorical delivery in general education can actually yield students possessing higher moral ethics.

With Jacobi's point in mind, I want to briefly make explicit the complex positions simultaneously occupied by student writers at Abilene Christian University. In the first place, they are enrolled in a private Christian university whose very existence is based on creating a place apart from the public scene of higher education. Yet, ACU's mission statement is very public: “Educating students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world.” Thus, in enrolling in an English course that includes the TIB

sequence, these students simultaneously inhabit a course within a private curriculum that asks them to address the public citizenry, but in a manner that places heavy emphasis on their personal stake in writing that will eventually bypass their professor and be publicly disseminated via broadcast radio. While some students capably navigate this strange journey quite seamlessly, I believe that the pressure of simultaneously completing an accurate, entertaining, mature, formally accurate spoken essay with a sophisticated, instructive, yet delightful narrative payoff opens new doors for discussions about ethics and virtue. How and to what end, after all, is the student attempting to persuade her audience? How does her essay reflect—or not—the typical (or even desirable) ACU student? To what degree does our mission statement bear on her writing processes?

Here, I wish to remind us of our field's resurgence of interest in personal writing, not merely because the TIB essays can be regarded as fitting that genre, but also because such interest has led to productive conversations regarding the position of the writer that begin to address the questions above. Thomas Newkirk and Russell Durst, for example, called attention in the mid 1990s to the blurred lines and political realities associated with the concept of “self” in composition pedagogy. Newkirk's *The Performance of Self* has been especially fruitful to my own pedagogy at a faith-based institution, as have articles by Lizabeth A. Rand, Amy Goodburn, Lorraine D. Higgins, and Lisa D. Brush, and a 2005 “Special Focus” edition of *College English*. While all articulate claims urging a sophisticated regard of the personal, some of these scholars directly address the need to value the positions of evangelical students whose religious zeal can manifest across their academic writing. This stance is increasingly important in the face of an academy that remains “openly hostile to their faith-based ways of knowing, being and expressing themselves” (Carter 573), and composition scholarship that tends to vilify them or render them one-dimensional (see, for example, Sharon Crowley's recent *Toward a Civil Discourse*). In short, while many vociferous critics have decried the existence of a self at all, seeking instead mostly to rescue a writer's socially constructed subject

position, compositionists are now more willing to reconsider the possibility that the path to critical thinking and de-emphasis of oneself can actually be accomplished through personal writing, written by an *actual* self—admittedly fraught with cultural trappings and even performances—but real nonetheless. The TIB curriculum asks students not only to tap into closely valued individual creeds and beliefs and to articulate them, but also to ultimately present them to a listening radio audience, using illustrations from their own lives. These multidimensional tasks move students away from the penchant to invoke grand narratives to the more subtle undertaking of choosing representative, inductive vignettes. In the process, I would argue that writers are forced to examine their core beliefs, religious and otherwise, from multiple angles, simultaneously private and public, envisioning the reading and aural audiences to whom such beliefs will be parlayed. Through such examinations, these writers are given multiple opportunities to construct and reconstruct their own narratives and creeds, an intricate negotiation of public and private spheres yielding a rich rhetorical endeavor.

However, these considerations are important in all types of colleges and universities, not just faith-based ones. These are conversations about positionality and the troubling pseudo-distinctions between the terms “public” and “private,” and I believe we should continually strive to see them as so, especially in light of ever-increasing related scholarship (cf. Ellen Cushman, Susan Wells, Linda Flower, Newkirk, and Jane Danielewicz, for example). We are called to re-believe that a student’s writing reflects her agency in forming an opinion, then engaging text to advance that opinion—whether in a researched argument designed to overtly persuade a single reader or an essay of personal creed to be read aloud to the world.

To conclude, then, I would argue that the TIB curriculum, which should include a productive relationship with both writing center and speaking center resources (as well as a radio station, when available), necessarily presents rhetorical tasks that cause students—as citizen writers at large—to occupy a variety of private and public stances as they move toward the final canon of delivery, ultimately

providing them with skills and critical abilities that go beyond the traditional understandings of composing paradigms. It seeks to value private writing (or personal writing, or authentic writing, or even expressive writing) as a particular manifestation of an ethical social position of the writer—an authorial performance that, whether intentional or subconscious, reifies a self-image that the academy often seeks to dismantle.

Notes

¹ Neither the author of this article, the co-author of the TIB curriculum, This I Believe©, nor any of the related universities profits in any way from the downloading or dissemination of these materials.

² This strikes me as a ripe subject for further phenomenological research. How would students writing TIB essays describe changes in their belief systems (particularly religious beliefs) before and after the writing process?

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