

Self-Writing, Sex Ed and the Creation of Adolescent Identity

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In the fall of 2003 I was invited by the editors of ORBIT magazine's upcoming issue on *Girls, Boys, and Schooling* (2004) to contribute an article on Anne Frank's writing on sexuality and identity. I wanted to explore Anne's views on the relationship between these two hallmarks of adolescence in part because they have rarely been examined in the scholarship around her Diary but also because these critical connections are given short shrift in the broader spectrum of secondary English teaching.

As I was about to begin writing, I noticed a brief column in the morning paper about the findings of the recently-published Health Canada-funded (2003) study on adolescent sexual health (Sokoloff, 2003, p. A1). For all their bravado and sexual posturing, Canadian teens actually knew less about their sexual health in 2002 than they had in 1989 when the last such survey was conducted. I needed to consider what Anne had written alongside what Canadian teens didn't know about safe sex. How could English teachers use the diaries and memoirs of adolescent writers as a model for the articulation of identity and at the same time, open a safe space for discussions about sexuality and sexual health?

The struggle for self-creation has historically been a focus of the secondary English classroom through the study of iconic texts like Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Anne Frank's *Diary*. While these texts respect the centrality of sexuality to identity as a defining feature of the passage from childhood to adulthood, I suspect that few English teachers have deliberately sought to

emphasize the sexual messages of these works. Today's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth, writing in informal print and electronic media, offer eloquent articulations of the way identity formation is bound up with sexual identity as they describe coming to terms with their sexualities in order to become themselves. Articulating the process of becoming sexual through writing helps them understand and become themselves.

How have we, as English educators, honoured the interweaving of sexuality and voice in the process of self-creation? Do our curricula inform and contribute to healthy psychological development by addressing the body and sexuality? Though we often explore the metaphysical aspects of romantic love in the English classroom, how comfortable are we discussing the bodily consequences of being in love? What might help us push past our own inhibitions? What support can we expect from our administration? We read the College of Teachers' Blue Pages; this is dangerous territory for teachers too. But what if we don't open up these conversations?

According to the Health Canada-funded (2003) survey, one third of grade nines have had oral sex; 65% of these grade 9 students believe there is a vaccine to prevent AIDS; half of grade 11 students do not know that someone with a sexually transmitted disease may have no visible symptoms; about the same number of them think that there are no serious complications resulting from chlamydia; 20 percent of Grade 9s and 46 percent of Grade 11s are having sex; and 30 percent of Grade 11 girls report having sex often. The study's conclusion that Canadian students in 2002 knew less about their sexual health than did their counterparts in Health Canada's 1989 study is particularly alarming considered against the ubiquitous and relentless cultural imperative to become sexually active in adolescence.

"Students are not getting enough sex education," says Dr. Paul Cappon, executive director of the Council of Education Ministers of Canada, the body that administered the surveys for Health Canada (Sokoloff, 2003, p. A10). Schools devote less time to AIDS and STD awareness than they did in the late 1980s. It is hard not to see this as fallout from the ideological right turn that has emphasized rigorous curriculum and relentless testing at the expense of subject areas like music, art, gym and sexuality education which are necessarily less quantifiable than subjects like English and Math. Changes like this are often enacted very subtly, with little public fanfare. Most teachers don't realize that there is no longer any high school sex ed in the Ontario Curriculum Guidelines. I had to drop this topic from the preservice psychology course I used to teach because concerns about the Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test prompted the department to standardize the textbook and be more directive about the core topics that all instructors were expected to cover. Naturally, I didn't want my students to be unprepared for the test. It comes as no surprise then that "the average Canadian

high school student receives less than two hours of education about HIV/AIDS throughout (his/her) entire academic career" (p. A10) and that 14 percent of grade elevens reported never having received any information at all about AIDS.

According to Dr. Michael John (2003), at the University of Western Ontario's medical school, 15-to-19-year-olds are at the greatest risk for STDs because they engage in unprotected intercourse, have limited duration partners, are biologically more susceptible and experience multiple obstacles in seeking appropriate health care. Forty-two thousand young women between 15 and 19 become pregnant in Canada each year.

Studies also alert us to the fact that adolescents need more than the straight facts about sexual health; they need and want safe spaces to discuss the multiple contexts of their sexuality and the belief systems that inform their decisions. Talking about sex isn't easy for them. No matter how raunchy the sex is on TV, it remains difficult to ask a partner to use a condom, to turn to even the closest friends for frank advice. Moreover, "kids don't want to know the seven signs of gonorrhea but...how do I know I'm in love and let me tell you what happened at the party" (Goodman, 2002, p. A18). School, according to the students in the Health Canada-funded (2003) study, remains their major source of information about sexuality and sexual health. Further, those students who report feeling "connected" to their teachers and their schools are also better informed about sexual health practices than their more disaffected peers. In my view, the English classroom affords rich possibilities to forge the connections needed to entertain discussion of such difficult but critical literacies.

Last year when we developed unit plans for teaching *Romeo and Juliet* in my preservice classes, my teacher candidates insisted that the findings of the Health Canada-funded survey would merit a place in their future classrooms—even if that place began with a simple listing of facts on a bulletin board. As a student of curriculum, it is important to me that I consider what I call the larger "curriculum of life." Anne Frank helps me do that as an English teacher. She alerts me to the potential a diary can provide.

I believe that adolescents construct and express the "self" through writing, that adolescent self-writing serves as a vehicle for healthy psychic, physical and sexual development and the creation of identity. Adolescent diaries/memoirs provide an entry-point into the psychological, philosophical, moral and sexual concerns of adolescence and their identity formation, as they are excellent vehicles for contemplating the range of 'literacies' that best serve adolescents.

The Diary of Anne Frank provides a useful case study on a number of levels. The text itself models the "dangerous passage" (Nathanson, 1991) of adolescence as it chronicles the writer's personal journey in all its ups and

downs, embraces and refusals. The complex publication history of Anne's text is another roller-coaster ride in public tolerance for both the recognition and discussion of (female) sexuality. In addition, close reading of selected passages of the Diary illuminates the interweaving of sexual identity with intellectual growth and self-confidence.

Whenever anyone used to speak of sexual problems at home or at school, it was something either mysterious or revolting. Words which had any bearing on the subject were whispered, and if someone didn't understand he was laughed at. This always struck me as crazy and I thought: "Why are people so secretive and tiresome all the time whenever they talk about these things?" But as it didn't seem that I could change things, I kept my mouth shut as much as possible or only spoke on the subject when I was alone with Jacque or she [with me]. (Frank 1989, p. 463, version a)¹

The circumstances of Anne's life in hiding—as a Jew hoping to escape the Nazis—allowed her to go deep within herself to map her own development. The connections between sexuality, identity, psychic survival and female voice that weave through the Diary's pages provide the most profound testament to Anne's precocity. Katherine Dalsimer (1986) calls it "the record not simply of normal, but of healthy female development" (p. 45).

In an early entry, written a month after the family goes into hiding, Anne writes: "I can't write down everything that goes on inside me and that I'm accused of, because it's so bad" (Frank, 1989, p. 226, version a). Two years later, about two weeks before she is arrested, Anne, taking umbrage at a book she has read that offers a derogatory portrait of "the young girl of today," charts the measure of her now more mature self:

I have one outstanding trait in my character, which must strike anyone who knows me for any length of time, and that is my self-knowledge. I can watch myself and my actions, just like an outsider. The Anne of every day I can face entirely without prejudice, without being full of excuses for her, and watch what's good and bad about her. (p. 689, versions a and c)

Such powers of self-observation surely accrue from the combined processes of writing and editing her Diary.

"A girl's education hinges on the strength of her knowledge and the fate of her resistance," (pp. 3-4) wrote Carol Gilligan (1990). No wonder Anne kept her mouth shut and her pen filled. Working with her colleagues, Gilligan (1990, 1992, 1995) extended Erikson's (1968) classic work on identity formation as the hallmark event of adolescence by introducing a model of female adolescence characterized by a splitting of the girl's psyche into a public and a private self.

In a final diary entry, written three days before she is arrested, Anne Frank (1989) describes this dynamic; self-knowledge notwithstanding, she remains a "little bundle of contradictions" (p. 697, version a and c) preoccu-

pieced with balancing the two sides of herself:

I have already told (said) you before that I have, as it were, a dual personality. One half embodies my exuberant cheerfulness, making fun of everything, vivacity, and above all the way I take everything lightly. This includes not minding flirtation, a kiss, an embrace, a dirty joke. This side is usually lying in wait and pushes away the other, which is much better, deeper and purer. You must realize that no one knows Anne's better side and that's why most people find me so insufferable. (p. 697, versions a and c) ... I am guided by the pure Anne within, but outside I'm a frolicsome little goat who's breaking loose. (p. 698, versions a and c)

The "I don't know" and "you know" that often enter girls' speech at adolescence is the password to the repression of self-knowledge. The struggle of female adolescence, as these researchers judged it, was perhaps a struggle with and of too much insight. Some girls, understanding that writing was a way to save themselves, turned to the page. I did. All through my troubled adolescence I wrote poems that I stuffed under the white paper lining of my drawer and shared my concerns with no one. Who would have understood? With the hindsight of maturity I understand that there were many who would have understood, had there been any safe space to open the discussion.

We are perhaps more familiar with the concept of reading for one's life than we are with writing for it. I would submit that there are many teenagers (and some who have grown into adults), both male and female, who have both read and written for their lives.

Have you ever written poetry? Interviewer Deborah Solomon asks Elizabeth Edwards (wife of John, Democratic vice-presidential candidate). Edwards replies: I was a 16-year-old girl at one point, so of course I wrote poetry. I have written a few things since that have stayed in a drawer. I consider it a sign of great things to come. (Solomon, 2004, p. 16)

As a corrective to romanticizing the liberating and transformative potential of reading and writing the self, I turn to Barbara Kamler's (2001) critical writing pedagogy. Kamler asks "what might it mean to relocate the personal when issues of writing and self are so closely entwined" (p. 1). She wants to engage more critically with accounts of personal experience, "to spatialise the conventional narrative and to locate the autobiographical in its social and cultural landscape" (p. 2). Doing so she aims to "understand the discursive practices that construct the sense of self—which in turn offer possibilities for social change" (p. 3).

Bringing to writing the critical perspective that language is not a transparent medium, but a political artifact, never neutral, Kamler's stance is reminiscent for me of the "feeling, power and location" problems of the always "situated" reader, as explained by Deanne Bogdan (1992):

awareness of the political context of the engaged reader is a logically and psychologically prior question in respecting readers' individual, collective, and imaginative identities....If literary literacy is to be truly emancipatory, it must acknowledge patterns of dominance and control of the culture and provide for recognition of those patterns as part of its educational mandate. (p. 153)

Moving forward from Judith Fetterley's (1978) construct of the "resisting reader" (p. xxii), Kamler (2001) describes a "resisting writer" (though she does not use these terms) who examines the breaks, fissures, *aporias* and absences in his/her text to probe more deeply into the culturally mediated themes and implications of the initial presentation of experience; this deeper understanding gestures toward seeing the personal in terms of a shared experience with potential implications for social justice.

Maintaining respect for the transformational possibilities of self-writing, Kamler (2001) traces the roots of this discourse to the ancient Greek dictum to 'know thyself.' Following Foucault, she insists that this kind of work is "not simply to be understood as a kind of liberation" (p. 49) but as an enactment of personal freedom, a way "of acting and behaving ethically through a caring for the self" (p. 49). Foucault (cited in Kamler, 2001) explains:

For the Greeks it is not because it is care for others that it is ethical. Care for self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this ethos of freedom is always a way of caring for others. (p. 49)

Kamler (2001) favours a multiplicity of approaches to and interpretations of her critical writing pedagogy and encourages her teachers/readers to borrow and reshape the writing conference questions she has created by opening a feminist poststructuralist lens on more traditional approaches to such questions. Here are some of hers:

- What is powerful in the writing? Identify an image, line, metaphor, or representation of person that is powerful.
- What is omitted? Who/what is absent and/or hinted at or overgeneralised?
- What clichés are used to gloss over experience, facts, feelings?
- What doesn't fit? What contradictions, if any, emerge?
- What common issues, experiences, storylines do the texts have in common? (p. 62)

I am particularly drawn to Kamler's decision to prioritize "story" over the perhaps overemphasized "voice." She maintains, and I agree, that it is easier to create the necessary distance from a text by seeing it as an artifact, produced by its creator on the basis of his/her experience but not as unmediated experience in itself. The recognition that this is not "life" but a creation thereof makes it easier for both students and teacher to discuss what has

been written. As teacher, I cannot critique a “life” but I can question a text that approximates, and to a certain extent “fictionalizes” a lived experience.

Considering “story” rather than “voice” also draws attention to the craft of creation. It implies that writing is labour; like the lump of clay in the sculptor’s hand, the text, too, is infinitely malleable. Writers work at their craft; they make arduous and meticulous choices. Anne’s Diary, as we will see, offers ample evidence of this process.

At the end of March, 1944, Anne heard an official announcement on the Dutch radio broadcast from London that after the War the Dutch government would be looking for wartime diaries and letters to publish. For two months she wrestled with the notion of editing her diary with a view to future publication, a reflection perhaps of her struggle with revealing what was intensely personal to public scrutiny. She was keenly aware of her duty to behave appropriately:

Oh, I’m becoming so sensible! One must apply one’s reason to everything here, learning to obey, to hold your tongue, to help, to be good, to give in, and I don’t know what else! I’m afraid I shall use up all my brains too quickly, and I haven’t got so very many. (Frank, p. 330, version b)

The writer in her won the battle. Working assiduously, she began a process of intense, feverish editing. When the family was arrested on August 4, she had two drafts of her Diary: the original version, which would come to be known as version ‘a’ and her own carefully edited version ‘b’. Gilligan (2002) identifies the cultural forces at work inside Anne that prompted such a reworking: “because she rewrites her diary...we can see the process of initiation as a process of self-editing, an eclipse of a self that has come into full light” (p. 79).

After the war, the Diary, miraculously saved by Miep Gies at great personal risk, is indeed accepted for publication. Her father, Otto Frank (the only of the eight in hiding to survive), and his Dutch publishers pour over the two versions of the Diary that Anne wrote (‘a’ and ‘b’) to choose which sections of each to include. This results in yet a third version (‘c’) of the Diary from which the following have been purged: all sexual references and explorations of Anne’s developing body, references to battles with her mother, comments about the intimacy of her parents’ marriage, many of the descriptions of the time she spends with her boyfriend Peter, all of her writing about the second-class status of women and the lack of public acknowledgment for the critical social role they play. Some of these edits mirror Anne’s own (in version ‘b’) but curiously, some of the most vituperous passages which Anne has herself removed, have now been reinstated by her father to be published in version ‘c,’ which remains substantially unaltered until the *Critical Edition* is published in 1989. Consideration of this

complex but fascinating editing process would be time well spent in a high school English classroom.

Through the 1960s and 70s, Holocaust deniers attack the authenticity of the Diary. There are too many versions of it. A play and a movie have been made. Hollywood screenwriters and American authors engage in pitched battles over the right to coopt Anne's words. In 1989, The Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, after years of painstaking research and analysis, publishes the *Critical Edition* of the Diary. On each page of this edition, the entries from the three versions ('a,' 'b' and 'c') are printed. Most illuminating is the kind of editing Anne has performed herself. Gilligan (2002) explains: "Ironically, the edited diary reads like a young girl's diary; it was Anne's way of protecting herself. The voice she mutes or takes out completely is the voice of pleasure" (p. 83).

Wanting to be the "good" Anne she knows how she must behave in public so as not to disgrace her family. Those passages in the original diary that seethe with venom towards her mother and her sister Margot are scrupulously removed from her second version. She includes, however, all those which deal with their rapprochement. Margot, it seems, has the "good girl" role all sewn up. Family systems theory would explain that the only role available to Anne, as the second daughter, is that of naughty girl. The pages of Anne's revised diary are nonetheless haunted by her longing to bypass these dichotomies and be known as her complete self—a lively body and a questing mind—a passionate seeker of both knowledge and pleasure.

An exploration of the deeper cultural and social landscapes that situated both the writing and publication history of Anne's Diary opens up possibilities for the kind of large scale social change that Kamler (2001) anticipates. Engaged in such an exploration in a graduate course I taught several years ago, the teachers who were my students asked in their journals: Would I have risked my family to save another? Who could I have asked to hide my family?

Tim Cole writes (1999):

It may be comforting to think that by encouraging school children to read *The Diary Of Anne Frank* and learn about the 'Holocaust', we can put an end to intolerance and discrimination. Yet if we ask ourselves 'had Anne Frank—an ordinary young Jewish girl—lived next door, could she have counted on us for help during the Nazi occupation?' and simply answer 'yes,' we betray a lack of humility which confrontation with the Holocaust demands. When faced with what 'ordinary' men and women did to other 'ordinary' men and women because of their Jewishness, what other response is there but 'I just don't know.' It is too easy to say 'yes' and thereby set up self-righteous categories of 'us' and 'them,' meaning 'we' would have helped, but 'they,' the 'racists,' the 'intolerant,' the 'prejudiced,' the 'nationalists,' would not have done so. (p. 43)

Eschewing a conclusive “one right way” approach to a critical writing pedagogy, Kamler (2001) affirms the value of border-crossing across multiple frameworks: “process, genre, linguistic, critical discourse analytic, poststructuralist feminist” (p. 172). It is the close textual analysis she has performed on the critical moments in her own personal history that has proven the validity of each of these individual frameworks.

I am grateful to the editors of this issue, Rachel Heydon and Luigi Iannacci (and their anonymous reviewers) for being my writing teachers through the first-draft process by asking me for “more.” I interpreted this as more about where my text was coming from—more depth, more background. What was I hiding? Remembering Shoshana Felman’s (1987) notion of “self-subversive self-reflection”(p. 90) and mirroring Kamler’s (2001) process again, I returned to the writing relocating myself as my own analyst in relation to my text, in order to excavate the real story beneath the one I told. The story was Anne’s. I had been reluctant to tell it too boldly, intimidated by the “been there, done that” approach many English teachers take to this text.

Arguing for the inclusion of self-writing in the language classroom Kamler (2001) ends by warning that if English educators focus too narrowly on method and the specific kinds of achievements addressed in the clamour for standards and accountability, we will neglect an “understanding of the relationship between literacy and broader social and cultural change” (p. 182). She insists that “critical spaces can make a difference to the lives of students and that without teacher intervention, stories which relocate the personal may never be told” (p. 183). I maintain that Anne’s Diary provides just such a critical space.

Against the overwhelming tide of sexual imagery and messaging that flood contemporary culture, where do teens turn to ask their questions? They tell us that they want to ask them at school. TV shows like *Sex and the City* have cracked open the old silences around discussing sexuality. The climate is ripe for continuing the conversation in the English classroom, for inquiring into love and sex and the borders between them, for illuminating vulnerabilities of the body and the soul, for considering what it means to be gendered in Western society.

Anne offers many places to begin:

Love, what is love? I believe love is something that can’t really be put into words. Love is understanding someone, caring for someone, sharing their ups and downs. And in the long run that also means physical love, you have shared something, given something away and received something, no matter whether you are married or unmarried, or whether you are with child or not. It doesn’t matter in the least if you’ve lost your honor, as long as you know that someone will stand by you, will understand you for the

rest of you life, someone you won't have to share with anyone else! (Frank, p. 506, version a)

We can no longer assume that by not teaching about sexuality we can discourage or prevent adolescent sexual behaviour. Michelle Fine (1988) writes:

A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators. (p. 33)

Writing offers a safe and private space where students can take apart the culture and come to know themselves. The concept of self-writing argued for here works to expose power relations and disrupt the apparent seamlessness of autobiographical narratives. Kamler's (2001) teacher education students suggest re-positioning the high school students in their classrooms as language researchers, empowering them to "linguistically [examine] the text for the particular ways in which characters and ideas were constructed" (p. 131) with a view to understanding the broad social justice issues that background a particular text.

And still there are questions: How does school, a public and social space, become a more hospitable place for self-writing? Where can students talk to each other about the ways in which they use writing as a support through the struggle of adolescence? Beyond the catharsis of moving emotions onto the pristine page, do our adolescent students honour the wisdom of their own words? How do we introduce these projects and collaborate with our students in their construction? Must we have access to everything that students write? How will we negotiate the different religions and cultures represented by the students in our classrooms in this project? And perhaps, most importantly, will we be brave enough as teachers to break the silences?

Endnote

1. All further quotations from Anne's Diary are taken from *The diary of Anne Frank: Critical edition* (1989) and will be identified according to which of the three versions (a, b or c) they represent.

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