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Considering Social Media and Mental Health in Critical Expressivism

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CONSIDERING SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH IN CRITICAL EXPRESSIVISM

by

SARAH GEIL

Under the Direction of Ashley Holmes, PhD

ABSTRACT

During the same time period social media increased in popularity and regularity of use, mental health challenges for first-year college students reached an unprecedented high. Both of these variables, individually and together, connect emotion and thought to writing and the first-year student's daily understandings. During these transformative decades, composition studies experienced a pedagogical shift. By drawing connections among pedagogies, this thesis argues for the re-addressing of expressive elements within critical pedagogy as a means for more effectively engaging socially tethered students who might be experiencing (directly or indirectly) anxiety and/or depression. Critical expressive pedagogy builds on emerging theories to help students better navigate the blurring line between private and public audiences for healthy processing and disclosing of written words. To best demonstrate these complex theories, a webtext synthesizing the variables is presented.

Keywords: Expressivism, Critical Pedagogy, Critical Expressivism, Social Media, Mental Health, Public Sphere, Emotion, Peter Elbow, Anxiety, Depression

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2018

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dad who inspired a love of words, to my mom who inspired a love of learning, to my sisters who taught me so much about friendship, to my fiancé who reminds me of purpose, to my teachers who have encouraged my growth, and finally, to my students who face a changing but exciting world.

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1 INTRODUCTION:

A foundational connection between emotion and the expression of thought through writing has been long established and recognized in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. As the dominant field of focus has transitioned from expressivist to civic/public and critical pedagogy, the conversation on emotion's role in writing has changed as well (Goldblatt, Fields, Kamler).

One positive side effect from this shift in pedagogical focus was a successful transition away from the student's inappropriate vulnerable disclosure of personal trauma in academic papers. Vulnerable disclosure, as generally discussed by Valentino, Tobin, Morgan, and many others, can be defined as the student's sharing of personal, traumatic, and/or potentially concerning details in an academic setting. While vulnerable disclosure is not as currently a topic of concern and conversation within the field as it was in the 1990s, students are still processing the same emotions that first roused discussion.

At the same time this shift occurred in the focus of pedagogy within composition courses, the mental health of first-year college students became a topic of rising conversation. Expression, communication, and interaction with peers regularly occurs on social media. This is true for many age demographics, but it is especially true for college students experiencing increasingly alarming mental health concerns. Thus, the line between what is public and private, in many categories of life within and outside of their academic studies, is blurred for the first-year student. Given our rhetorical knowledge that writing and emotion are connected, renewed research in expressivist pedagogy (along the lines of Goldblatt, Burnham, and Powell) blends well with current critical pedagogies to help students better process emotions and effectively engage with composition (both personal and academic, private and public).

While I was working toward a Bachelor of Arts in psychology, the rise of the mental health concerns among college students played an important role in discussion and purpose. At the same time, I have, in many ways, grown up *with* social media. As it emerged as a force in the world, my identity was also formed, middle school to college. When I was in fifth grade, Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook. When I was in tenth grade, Instagram appeared as another option for sharing details about life through the composition of photographs and words. Even as I noticed that these increasingly common venues for communication shaped my generation, I still opted for the personal journals rather than writing that would be shared with friends. Writing, for me, has always had a therapeutic element. While social media was excellent and I still enjoy it, I was grateful for writing teachers that indirectly guided me towards personal writing that only I would read. Perhaps these instructors knew the potential value of writing to understand emotion. Or, they, like anyone who has used social media for long enough, recalled posts from peers that were too emotionally laden for a venue such as Facebook. These teachers (again perhaps unintentionally) taught me to disclose vulnerable information through writing in genres that were better suited for the type of personal writing I wanted, needed, to produce.

A critically expressive pedagogy offers a theoretical framework capable of acknowledging the important variables of mental health and social media for the composition of students like me (and those of the next generation who have never known life without social media). The new intersection of social media, mental health, and composition for the first-year student raises questions that influence theory. As the line between the public and the personal is continually blurred and given the rhetorical knowledge that writing and emotion are connected, what elements of composition studies pedagogy address 1) emotions of students with regard to the developing mental health concerns, and 2) emotional dynamics of composing for and on

social media? Could incorporating expressivist elements into critical pedagogies help students process turbulent emotions without vulnerably disclosing inappropriate levels of trauma to their instructors? What possible models might be available to help scholars theorize the intersections among expressivist pedagogy and critical pedagogy?

To answer these questions, chapter one examines the first-year writing student. With particular attention to typical social media usage and mental health concerns a first-year student might face, chapter one seeks to give a broad overview. The convergence of social media and mental health is an important, developing conversation, but one that cannot be directly and initially addressed effectively with this type of psychological empirical research. The many confounding variables, the newness of social media, and the dangers of studying mental health among students call instead for a theoretical focus of research. By reviewing and analyzing literature from psychological and composition studies, chapter one gives an overview of two common variables (mental health concerns and the development of social media) that impact a student's writing.

With the student's writing as the focus, chapter two moves more explicitly to histories, purposes, and implications of pedagogy. Paying particular attention to the variables presented in chapter one, chapter two briefly examines the history of expressivism with the purpose of examining how expressivism developed to address the emotions of college students but also contributed to a composition culture in which vulnerable disclosure of emotion caused problems. Critical pedagogy provided a different style of prompts that encouraged less personal language, so a brief history of critical pedagogy is provided. This sets up a review of current arguments for expressivist theories and the research included in Roeder and Gatto's collection of essays

helpfully titled *Critical Expressivism*. Interpreting these pedagogies demonstrates the theoretical value in connecting current research to the variables of mental health and social media.

Finally, chapter three works to synthesize the elements in chapters one and two by offering a webtext model. The many variables presented in each chapter make understanding the subject complicated. Synthesis is key in moving the theoretical understandings to practical application. Furthermore, because social media is an important component of the project, a foundational understanding of the rhetoric of digital media influences both chapters one and three. Thus, chapter three both presents the rationale for the theoretical and rhetorical choices made in the design of the webtext and offers links to (and pictures of) the webtext itself.

2 CHAPTER ONE: THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC LIFE OF THE FIRST YEAR STUDENT'S EMOTIONS

The line between the public sphere and the private sphere continues to be blurred, especially for first-year students. This blurring, in part, can be attributed to the variables of social media and mental health concerns. This chapter examines first-year students' writing processes through discussing three components of their emotional experience: the role of emotion in mental health and mental health's impacts on emotion, the expression of emotional composition on social media, and the bigger context of entering and already operating in a public sphere that incorporates emotion. The three-part discussion on emotion sets a framework for better understanding how composition pedagogies must meet the changing needs of first-year students.

In the introduction to the second edition of *Rhetorical Tradition*, Bizzell called for “more discussion on the part played in the setting of scholarly research agendas and the constructing of scholarly arguments by our emotions about our research topics—or subjects—and our imagined readers” (12). In a discussion about mental health, emotions play an important role. Both mental health concerns and the effects of social media are not always easy to discuss because of the layers of misunderstanding, misuse, and mistreatment. From the beginning, this scholarly argument hopes to answer Bizzell's charge by intentionally setting emotion as a crucial element while understanding that the topics and imagined readers naturally bring their own reactions to the conversation.

2.1 The State of the First-Year College Student's Mental Health

Today's typical freshman in college faces the same concerns that college students have always faced: financial aid worries, romantic difficulties, and academic achievement goals (Ketchen Lipson et al. 388). The transition to college is also a time of significant development

(for the traditional college student). For the typical 17 to 19-year-old—psychologically, biologically, and socially—developmental transitions affect the cognitive, affective, moral, and physiological developments of the student (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 2-6).

These developmental shifts have often been linked with mental health concerns, and college counseling centers are equipped to help students manage the mental illnesses that the developmental and life transitions might trigger. Many college counselors regularly help students cope by treating eating disorders, navigating freedom from substance abuse, working with depression, treating anxiety disorders, understanding self-injury, and intervening when a student is suicidal (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey viii).

Within the last twenty years, anxiety disorders and depression have become major concerns for university systems because, for so many students, academic abilities and achievements are negatively impacted by these mental health concerns. Out of the concern, national reports have sought to offer colleges necessary resources by first understanding the “crisis.”

The American College Health Association (ACHA) surveyed 80,139 undergraduate students from 137 colleges in the United States. Their 2015 survey indicated that 51.2% of college students surveyed felt things were hopeless, 86% felt overwhelmed, 82.1% felt exhausted (not from physical activity), 60.8% felt very lonely, 66% felt very sad, and 59.1% felt overwhelming anxiety within the last twelve months (ACHA 12-13). Of mental health concerns that were diagnosed or treated by a professional, 14% of students were treated for Depression, and 17% received professional intervention for Anxiety. For a combination of both Depression and Anxiety, 10.7% of students reported diagnosis/treatment.

Looking at trends and changes rather than specific diagnoses, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health studied the change in mental health of college students over the last five years. The average need and enrollment in counseling services on campuses grew at least five times faster than the average enrollment in colleges (Locke 3). In 2010, 23.8% of students seriously considered attempting suicide; in 2015, 32.9% seriously considered attempting suicide (Locke 5). These startling statistics reveal that the emotions the current first-year student experiences are turbulent. The demand for counseling in colleges often outnumbers the availability of counseling centers (Locke 3). With college counseling centers understaffed and the reports of anxiety and depression continuing to grow, the student taking a first-year writing course might vulnerably disclose trauma in their academic writing, making a general understanding of current mental health challenges relevant and crucial.

While historically, mental health among college students has been a concern, many factors have arisen more in recent generations that present unique trials for the first-year college student. These challenges include self-esteem issues raised by the competitive culture and more intense relationships of all types (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 1). Mental health is becoming less taboo, thanks, in part, to the role of social media (Berry, Natalie et al. e107). The result is this unprecedented rise in reports of depression and anxiety.

Depression is a commonly acknowledged mental health problem for all ages, but college students are particularly prone to experience depression (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 219). Bell, Barclay, and Stoltz show that for the 30% of college students that have admitted to having depression, the mental health disorder of depression directly affects self-esteem, academic achievement, stress levels, sleep, and social interaction (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 220). While it is an increasingly common and accepted concern, many crises

are unreported or unnoticed and thus, left untreated (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 220). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires students in higher education to report their invisible disabilities (i.e. anxiety and depression) in order to receive protection by law (Barger).

Anxiety disorders are often linked with comorbid depression; somewhere between 31%-50% of those who suffer with depression are also likely to have an anxiety concern (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 220). Tony Michael points out that while the transitions to college provide plenty of stressors for the average student, the event-related stress does not necessarily cause an anxiety disorder. However, the significant changes can worsen symptoms and trigger an anxiety disorder in someone predisposed to the particular mental health crisis (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 239). Anxiety disorder, different from isolated anxiousness, can be defined as an inability to cope with overwhelming feelings of fear and worry that inhibit normal, everyday activities (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 237). Michael cites the Association for University and College Counseling Directors saying that “41% of all college students who visit counseling centers struggle with anxiety, making it the most common presenting problem for college counselors” (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 237). Writing has been used and cited as an effective method for helping students process the events/emotions that trigger their anxiety and depression and reduce stress (Veskler and Floyd 35). The studied implications of the connection between writing and emotion will be further discussed in chapter two.

Even for the student who is not directly facing diagnosed mental health trauma, the transition to college naturally encourages students to ask questions and analyze their own lives, beliefs, and personalities (Sommers and Saltz 125). Furthermore, students who might not be fighting their own mental health battles are likely to encounter friends who are struggling with

mental health illnesses because of the increased prevalence of anxiety, depression, and other concerns.

Whether online or in face-to-face interactions, mental health has become an unavoidable topic for nearly all college students. For students directly facing depression and/or anxiety, simply attending class presents a myriad of struggles. Even online, oftentimes students cannot escape their triggers. From a composition studies viewpoint, these online interactions in which students grapple with mental health concerns are worth noting; students process their emotions (often through writing) on social media.

2.2 Social Media and the First-Year Student's Composition Experience

Where do students turn to for help and identity in their times of crisis, loneliness, extreme anxiety, and overwhelming sadness? During the same time period that these mental health concerns have gained more attention, social media changed the dynamics of interactions among students (Miller et al. 70). Social networking sites have changed communication for billions. Because the phenomenon of social media is still relatively new, definitive studies declaring the mental effects and ethics of social media are controversial (Golder et al. e195). At the same time that social media is new, its widespread use has naturally garnered the attention of researchers from a variety of fields (marketing, psychology, education, and rhetoric and composition studies are of particular importance to this project). Several studies have connected computer-mediated communication with symptoms of depression and low self-esteem (Pantic). This does not seem to deter students from continued use of social media. According to the Pew Research Center, in November of 2016, 86% of 18-29-year-old Americans used at least one social media site. In 2005, only 7% of 18-29 year-olds used social media. On average, young adults use social media with more increased regularity than any other age category.

The modern student is inseparable from the many, often still untold, effects (positive and negative) of social media. The many existing and developing types of social media impact the relationships the students will make (Miller et al. 70). Earhart and Randick discuss the reality that most young adults navigate relationships through technology (Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey 113). Whether initiating a relationship with someone the young adult first met online or simply sending a message to arrange a time for meeting, writing through technology touches most social interactions for first-year college students.

Miller and others looked at the impact of social media on the relationships specific to schools: the teacher-student, the student-student, and the teacher-parent relationships and dynamics (73). Since past studies were primarily focused in the United States and Europe, these researchers performed their ethnographic study in Brazil, China, and South India (Miller et al. 74). Their findings are consistent with the vague quality of the debate; some participants feared that social media distracts from learning and causes increased negative interaction among school peers, while others agree that social media is the perfect platform to address inadequacies in the opportunities for formal education. With greater opportunities, social media allows education to be extended to a wider range of people and incomes (Miller et al. 75). In all cases, the student-student dynamic showed that social media enabled relationships that were more persistent, continuous, and personal. In some instances, this led to greater intimacy among students, but it invariably also increased bullying across the field sites (Miller et al. 76-77).

To express thoughts on any form of social media, an aspect of writing/visual composition is usually involved. The first-year college student (who, on average, faces a deeper intensity and commonality of mental challenges than ever before) is familiar with composing on social media. These compositions, while they might not reflect the behavior of the student's face-to-face

interactions, play a role in establishing the student's community and identity. Students bring the rules of composition learned by years of writing on social media platforms with them to their new university. When they enter college, freshmen are often required to take a first-year composition course with the objective that they will learn to compose for academic papers and on/in a variety of other mediums.

The first year student's use of social media in regard to rhetoric has been well-studied. Analyses of individual social medias as they relate to writing, composition, and/or rhetoric have been performed with focus on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. This section briefly references these relevant, landmark studies to point out that the research is well-documented and that this is a valid point of connection to be more widely considered in analysis with the variables of mental health and emotion.

Grabill, in an edutopia article from 2012, argued that writing instruction is more important for students of this generation because writing is so pervasive through technologies. The digital platforms of writing are the most frequently used genres for writing. This includes text message composition and writing for blogs or social media. Students of this technology/social media age write more than students of other generations.

In Pigg's "Emplacing Mobile Composing Habits: A Study of Academic Writing in Networked Social Spaces," questions about the student experience in a networked world are introduced. She powerfully examines the focus on the screens of mobile technologies that make it easy to forget the connections the technologies have to concrete realities (Pigg 252). Arguing that composing is an embodied experience, Pigg offers a background for locating writing processes within the networked technologies culture (252). Acknowledging that the impact of new technologies on social spaces and writing cultures is an ancient phenomenon, Pigg calls for

a greater understanding of these historic processes in modern, mobile culture. Smartphones, laptops, and other mobile devices add new tensions to the intersections between extracurricular sites and academic learning. Pigg cites new media theorist Sherry Turkle's term "a fully tethered life" to describe students who are connected, at all times, to people and information (253).

I would add that students are also connected at all times to emotions and the emotional experiences triggered by people and information. Students writing within the background of networked devices must locate their learning and emotions in physical spaces and on screens (Pigg 253). In the same way Pigg describes that "while instructors often observe students bringing the extracurriculum into classrooms (e.g., texting or using social networking sites), students also locate academic literacy practices in nonclassroom locations," emotion operates in multiple directions, impacting the tethered lives of students (Pigg 269).

Looking at a different aspect of the relationship flow, McNely investigates the transition between short-form to long-form writing practices as researchers compose for social media. In his discussion on whether or not social media is a negative distraction, McNely borrows on fifty years of rhetoric and composition research to show that writing is "explicitly epistemic" (2). In regards to social media, the short-form writing can help create meaning through writing for longer-form writing. Like Grabill (and citing Grabill's study with Hart-Davidson), McNely argues that crucial, everyday writing has increased and that the "literacy revolution" of this connected age rivals the growth of Greek civilization.

The power of writing in an age of social media means that students, via writing for social media, are enabled "to think out loud and be immediately heard by others" (McNely 4). Because social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter especially) are about production and consumption, social-media use has been shown to be epistemologically productive. Where there

is the creation of meaning, there is also the necessary creation and understanding of emotion. With important relationships developing on semi-public sites, college students are consistently forced to address the blurred line between that which is public and that which is private. The immediacy of the epistemic writing raises questions about whether emotions should be reserved for private or shared in the public sphere.

2.3 Combining Social Media and Mental Health in Broader Examination of The Blurred

Line: Emotion's Place

Does social media occur in the private or public realm? Is the experience of the realms different for students than for all users of social media? Understanding the answers to these questions inform the broader discussion on the impact of mental health and social media for the writing and pedagogy process. Because of its historic roots, understanding the role and aspect of emotion is, in many ways, inseparable from the conversation about what is private vs. public.

Privacy has often been constructed along the lines of emotional disclosure; traditionally, “private” emotions have not been privileged as a component of conversation within publics. Along with many other social and economic shifts that have occurred along with and because of the invention and widespread use of the Internet, social media has changed the dynamics with which public sphere theory is understood and applied. The common use of blogs and social media have contributed to the creation of a “culture of confession,” making spaces online that are (or are nearly) public feel private. Thus, what is shared in the current concept of publics is more emotional than what was traditionally deemed acceptable in publics. Understanding the historic theories (and shift in the concept) of publics is crucial in exploring the blurred boundary line between what is private and public today. The understanding is important because of the effects

the boundary has on education (particularly composition) for students facing unprecedented anxiety and depression.

Even in Habermas's capture of the historic rise of the concept of a public, the very emergence of a "public" blurred the lines between that which was socially acceptable to be shared within public and in private. With publications like the *Tattler*, the *Spectator*, and the *Guardian*, social circles were expanded and these journals and circulations, much like the Web has done more recently, condensed time and space (Habermas 43). The changes in dynamics of interactions affected the social customs for creating, processing, and sharing emotions.

Within the *Tischgesellschaften*, *salons*, and coffee houses of these early publics identified by Habermas, the commonality between each version of emerging publics was that "they all organized discussion among private people that tended to be ongoing" (Habermas 36). The publics were celebrated and valuable because they were made up of private citizens rather than those in a position of government power. In similar fashion, social media opens ongoing discussion.

Of course, the definition has been critiqued and has grown in complexity. Fraser calls for a critical examination of the concepts "private" and "public," on the grounds that "these terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. In political discourse, they are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others" (Fraser 73). The concepts "private" and "public" are difficult to contain in a working rhetorical definition because they are determined by unspoken rules and norms rather than fixed principles that apply equally to everyone and (among other reasons) they are in constant flux (partially because they are determined by ever changing conversations). The Internet, and social media in

particular, emphasizes this constant change while calling attention to the difficulty in consistently understanding the distinction between private and public.

Publics and counterpublics change as the social space changes. As much as the Internet collapses time and space to an even greater degree than was achieved by journals and circulations, there is still an element of interaction tied to the material. As Pigg explained, humans still live in places and their interactions, online and in person, are based on social rules and norms that dictate relationships. Hauser examined the impact of the changing dynamics of the public sphere to show that the shared network is necessary for communication:

“The contemporary Public Sphere has become a web of discursive arenas, spread across society and even, in some cases, across national boundaries... collectively these web-like structures of a particular public sphere, such as a political party or a social movement or even a metropolitan area’s conversation on local issues, are joined to others in the reticulate Public Sphere, where their collective rhetorical practices produce society” (35).

Hauser also points out that publics and discussions within the publics that lead to civil discourse are constructed based on the differences between people and ideas rather than the unity (36).

Like Habermas suggested, there is a plurality based on conflicts rather than consensus, and conflicts, by very nature, tend to stir emotions that conjure specific social guidelines and norms for what can be appropriately discussed in publics.

The web-like structure of the public space that Hauser described has grown, arguably, even more complex than when he described it in 1994. The conflicts, it would seem, have also changed in intensity. As social media has created new possibilities for conversation, conflict, and consensus, it has complicated the public sphere.

Even within the freedom of production and consumption on social media, there are still limitations. Ideas are certainly shared in the public of these spaces, but social media is not the utopia of the public sphere: “the idealized public sphere doesn’t function much better online, because many of the same constraints exist there as exist in other contexts” (Ryder 209). One of the largest constraints of any public is mediation, and arbitration is an area that is less obvious and therefore more complex online than in face-to-face deliberations.

While administrators intercede and take down some “inappropriate” posts, most writing for social media is mediated largely by the users’ understanding of what is socially acceptable. This seems very similar to the earlier publics, but what is considered socially acceptable sharing today does not seem to adhere to as strict of rules about discussions and consensus as the conversational customs in operation in the *salons* and coffee house publics. The emotional component that used to be reserved for private realms is now nearly unavoidable in composition and conversation on social media. As discussed in the previous section (1.2), students use social media to form and navigate relationships, to write epistemologically, to bully, and to create deeper intimacy with peers. These emotionally charged activities are debatably able to be categorized as “oversharing.”

Part of this debate on “oversharing” could be attributed to the argument that social media increases disinhibition. Joinson examined research that reasons that the anonymity of the Internet allows for greater self-disclosure and different actions than someone might take if they were communicating or interacting face-to-face (76). People behave differently in person than they do on the Internet (Joinson 81).

The 1990s contributed to this weakening of the divide between what was private and public as culture, particularly in America, became preoccupied with reality television and

mediated voyeurism (Miller and Shepherd 4). With cell phones contributing to the convenience that led people to value ease of communication over privacy, “oversharing” online became a natural outcome of the technological developments, until we have reached a point where: “people are sharing unprecedented amounts of personal information with total strangers, potentially millions of them” (Miller and Shepherd 6). The results of the self-disclosure to a public audience that intentionally feels private demonstrates a change in acceptable composition that continues to raise questions about the boundary line between the public and private.

Looking at YouTube as a site of social media, Lange analyzed videos to show the dichotomy between “publicly private” and “privately public” sharing (362). In the same manner as blogging and even short-form composition on other social media sites (Twitter), YouTube creates opportunities for participants to share private details to a public audience. Participants can also choose a different route of sharing on YouTube; they might make many connections with a wide array of people without sharing any private details (Lange 370). Citing Weintraub and Kumar, Lange suggests “communication technologies may be ‘eroding boundaries between ‘publicity’ and ‘privacy’ in fundamental ways’” (364). One of these fundamental changes relates to self-actualization. Nissembaum and Lange argue that privacy is a critical element in self-actualization and integrity of relationships (376). Self-actualization directly contributes to mental health but can also be poorly impacted by depression and anxiety.

But what private information and emotional elements are actually shared on social media? Stephen and Verocchi Coleman analyzed the “prevalence, stability, and evolution of specific emotions” in over 100,000 social media posts. They found that some emotions, like guilt and shame, are more predictably and likely shared than other emotions such as happiness and anger (Weingarten and Berger 41). Their conclusion is similar to Lange’s: expressing emotion is

a necessary and vital aspect of human communication. Because of this necessity and the vast disclosure of emotions online, there is a fear that privacy is disappearing and with it, self-actualization also fades. Understanding expressed emotion is a key element in understanding and organizing social systems (Weingarten and Berger 41). Applied, this disclosure of emotions and eroding of the private sphere complicates the world in which students suffering from anxiety and depression share their emotions. Can the erosion of privacy further the mental health crisis?

Interpersonal communication contributes to collective understanding of social systems, and emotions, by definition, are inseparable from *interpersonal* communication. In the same series of presentations about research connecting emotion and social media as Stephen and Verocchi Coleman, Weber and others examined the intensity of emotions shared. They found that the levels of emotional disclosure change depending on the individual's public self-consciousness and the size of the audience (Weingarten and Berger 44). This could be true in any public.

Emotions were just as important to building social connections in Habermas's publics. Their consensus relied on conflicts; the topics they discussed roused passion and feelings. Because of the value placed on privacy and the more obvious mediators, these emotions were shared in a formulated manner. Social media provides a new outlet for sharing emotions while also calling for a new rhetorical outline for studying the rules that change material publics as well as Internet publics.

Warner questions the name "public" as he theorizes on the ways the Internet and other new media change the public sphere through temporality and the concept of personal identity (97). He argues that publics are not like nations, races, occupations, or other groups because they saturate identity and require participation (73). We enter into conversations knowing that social

media allows people to present a form of identity that may not reflect their true character. In a face-to-face public, this subterfuge is slightly more difficult to achieve. The acceptable shades of identity perhaps lend to the feeling of privacy that enables others to present thoughts and emotions that would have, historically, been acceptable only in a true private and not a public.

As Grabill and Pigg point out, the Internet (and by extension, social media) makes rhetoric messy. Do these changes in privacy imply that the concept of public is waning? The very ideas presented by Habermas celebrate publics in which private citizens could create norms for conversation. Is sharing emotion, and perhaps vulnerable emotions, on the Internet simply an extension of this? Has the (very) general public of the Internet changed the rules so that consensus and conversation requires a level of emotional disclosure?

If the Internet has simply changed the rules so that publics are expected to discuss what was once private, then the erosion of privacy might not be a bad thing. As Miller and Shepherd point out, the last two decades have already seen unprecedented sacrifices in privacy and celebrations of sharing within public spaces. Fraser gives examples of the concept of privacy being used to keep those marginalized from the publics less dominant than those in the publics. Publics have condensed time and space since their beginning, so is the major condensing offered by the Internet a natural next step in the progression of humanity? Or must privacy still exist for the successful operation of publics? And again, where does this leave those who are battling mental health concerns where emotion is heightened by disorder? This must be questioned particularly in regards to students who must overcome mental health challenges just to make it to class, let alone engage in the emotionally taxing task of composing for an academic world when the majority of their writing experience is negotiated on the privately public forums of social media.

These are not easy questions to address. In fact, as is evidenced by the conflicting scholarship about the role of publics and their purposes/existence, part of the intrigue of these questions is that their answers are not easily contained. The defining characteristics of a public make it difficult to quantify. With the added complexity of social media, containing understanding about a fluctuating topic seems nearly impossible. However, understanding the socially constructed rules of emotion that further blur the line between what is public and private is crucial to understanding the importance of pedagogy.

A generation of students has grown up learning to tread the ever-blurring line between what is private and public. In publics online, many students have internalized and even contributed to the rules that dictate the level of emotional sharing that is acceptable and expected. Emotional sharing and epistemologically writing for a public to figure out emotion can often lead to the student revealing too much about mental health to the public that feels private. This writing, or abstinence from writing because of the uncomfortable broadcast, can contribute to a student's depression or anxiety rather than helping abate it because the student has a more limited set of processing tools. Then, the student enters a composition class where the rules for composing are different, yet they are still being asked to write more than they likely ever have before (Sommers and Saltz 125). At the same time the rules for writing and processing change, the topics often continue to be emotional triggers. When first-year students enter the composition class, a public in which there are (necessarily) different rules for composition and expressing emotions than the rules that they have learned work in other publics such as social media, the line between the concept of a private sphere and a general public has direct implications.

To best equip students, the pedagogy within which college writing is taught must consider the aspects of social media and mental health. As demonstrated, the rapid rise of social

media has changed the way students interact with writing, publics, and emotion. Through conversations and rhetoric delivered through the platform of social media, mental health concerns are becoming more acceptable forms of conversation. At the same time, the feelings of anxiety and depression are perhaps heightened by the ability to broadcast thoughts, the opportunity for comparison, and the easy access to triggers found on social media. Among other influences (as is true with any generation of students), these factors of social media and mental health daily impact the writing that students produce in a way that can be analyzed and addressed by writing pedagogy. This ability to identify the factors and their connection to pedagogy differentiates social media and mental health from other large scale generational influencers such as economics, politics, global interactions, etc. Thus, having explained the importance of the factors in the lives of students, chapter two addresses the possibilities presented through pedagogy.

3 CHAPTER TWO: PEDAGOGY'S RESPONSE

Composition studies has seen decades of theories and research that present valuable groundwork for establishing a pedagogy that can balance the connection between emotion and writing while teaching students how to best write for an academic audience. Continuing the conversation on the role of emotion in public and private spheres, the first section of chapter two connects emotion's influence to particular writing studies with emphasis on the concept of "vulnerable disclosure." This naturally blends into the theory on pedagogy that, perhaps better than any other, celebrates the connection between writing and emotion. A brief history of expressivism and its impact in the field concludes section 2.1.

In a continuing outline of history and emotion's role in pedagogical approaches, section 2.2 moves through the timeline of composition studies by focusing on critical pedagogy. Section 2.2 also highlights current research on expressivism. This provides the theoretical groundwork to demonstrate how critical pedagogy blends with today's developed expressive pedagogy to best meet the needs of current students.

The scope of this thesis necessitates these sections be briefer than the rich histories of these pedagogies deserve. Beautiful books have been dedicated to these concepts, including the recent publication edited by Roeder and Gatto, *Critical Expressivism*. Section 2.3 references chapters from this book that pertain especially well to emotion, social media, and mental health. This section includes other references to what some scholars term "new expressivism" in order to present a pedagogy option that fittingly allows for emotion while dissuading inappropriate vulnerable disclosure so that students can process turbulent thoughts and write engaging, persuasive, and relevant essays for the fitting public.

3.1 Expressivism and Vulnerable Disclosure

Not only are students producing more writing (on average) than students of other generations, once they enter college, the average first-year university experience requires students to write intensively in the academic setting. Sommers and Saltz's landmark study, "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year," shows just how significant the writing process is for first-year students. In four years of research, Sommers and Saltz collected more than 600 pounds of student writing. They conducted interviews (over 520 hours) and asked students to complete surveys (Sommers and Saltz 126). While they tell the story of freshman writers at Harvard, they argue that their research transfers well because writing plays a central role to all students who transition to college. Students from all majors found freshman year to be the most writing intensive year because of the general, overview nature of the introductory courses (Sommers and Saltz 127). Many students in their case studies reported that writing, in all classes regardless of discipline, helped give them the confidence to process ideas and speak back. One student responded, "writing lets you think and shows you how you think about thinking" (Sommers and Saltz 130). Students, through both composition knowledge gleaned from social media and first-year courses, understand that there is a fundamental connection between writing and emotion.

It is that connection, recognized by first-year students and renowned scholars alike, that builds the argument that writing pedagogy, if purposefully designed, can greatly benefit students who struggle with thoughts (mental health concern) and the expression of thought to an audience (composing in a social media age and writing for academics). But for this argument to be made, background on the way separate pedagogies have viewed and encouraged emotional release is necessary. Expressivist practice and prompts allowed students free range to let lose their

emotions through writing. This is, perhaps, why essays (such as Valentino's) that offered teachers ideas on how to respond to students who share too much emotion were so often quoted in the 1990s.

Through the pedagogy that, in many ways properly celebrated the release of all feelings, teachers assigned writing prompts that encouraged students to vulnerably disclose. That release of emotion often bled into inappropriate vulnerable disclosure as students shared traumatic information and put the instructor in a vulnerable spot. Articles like those offered by Valentino and Tobin with specific, directed advice became less mainstream. I theorize that this is not because students stopped experiencing emotion. Rather, these advice articles were not as necessary because, for many in the field, the prompts changed. But to understand the shift that occurred in the way emotion and thought were connected, viewing writing through the importance of emotion must show how expressivism, for decades, became such a valued pedagogy and created complicated conversations about vulnerable disclosure.

Writing triggers and illuminates emotions. Expressivists were certainly not the first to notice this connection. In Book Two of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, emotion forms the foundational subject as Aristotle discusses "propositions about the emotions useful to a speaker in all species of rhetoric" (Aristotle and Kennedy 113). Aristotle's systematic discussion of psychological human principles connects emotion to persuasion, and the connection has persevered through the generations of Western rhetoric. Sternberg analyzed a series of emotional tropes, dating back from Aristotle to the emotional-intelligence factor important to large corporations today (351). She uses this analysis to show that emotion is inseparable from the creation of theory (Stenberg 365). Indeed, the early discussions on persuasion certainly emphasized emotion.

Kathleen Kerr is one of many scholars echoing aspects of Aristotle's argument in analysis of today's students. She states that language itself is inherently personal. A student, or any individual for that matter, cannot escape their social, political, and individual aspects when they write. For inexperienced writers with a background in composing for social media, vulnerable disclosure is a possibility. Vulnerable disclosure can often transfer (or originate) in the student's academic writing.

Vulnerable disclosure, as termed for this paper, can be defined as a student's relaying of overly emotional, personal, or susceptible information as they write. With those social, political, and individual aspects surfacing through writing (perhaps for the first time for students who are enduring the psychological changes brought on by entering college), understanding how to reign in the release of emotion can be complex. If vulnerable disclosure includes information that is particularly traumatic (especially in response to an academic prompt), the inappropriate disclosure of a sensitive subject places the instructor in a difficult position.

Though not directly termed as such, vulnerable disclosure has been associated as a side effect of personal writing by several scholars in writing studies. As Newkirk states: "There are many plausible reasons to dislike the personal autobiographical essay—and to refuse to teach it in a writing course. There is the sameness of the topics: eating disorders, deaths and traumas, challenges and successes..." (Roeder, 33). Newkirk defends the personal autobiographical essay's psychological utility and extension of agency to students (Roeder, 36). Still, Newkirk's 2015 statement shows that this vulnerable disclosure about mental health challenges and victories can be a current area of trial for writing teachers.

Naturally, the teacher's response to a student's vulnerable disclosure is important. Case studies tragically offer examples of how a student's disclosure can be a very real and rare cry for

help. Francis Thumm's high school student wrote an emotionally loaded poem and, two weeks later, committed suicide (Valentino 2). Valentino, in 1996, offered direct guidelines for response. Her logical steps for the instructor of writing include: assume nothing, do not keep the disclosure a secret, keep a professional distance, set limits, make a contract for schoolwork for the troubled student with outlined responsibilities, use reflective statements when responding to papers, and make no assumptions that the student has accepted a referral to counseling or that the services they are seeking are adequate (Valentino 6-12). Many first-year writing classes are taught by first-time instructors completing their own studies. The weight of knowing how to respond in potential life-or-death situations can add to the instructor's anxiety and emotions.

Newkirk offers a slightly different response in regard to the vulnerable disclosure of students and the anxieties this raises in teachers. He cites his own experience that the fear of being a therapist for the students discussing traumatic issues is unjustified: "students who choose to write about traumatic issues are, almost without exception, not asking us to be therapists. They want us to be sensitive and curious readers who help them elaborate and explore topics they have chosen to write about" (Newkirk, Roeder and Gatto, 49-50). Writing and receiving feedback, in this manner, is especially able to psychologically assist students through trauma, because it is normal school work rather than explicit therapy work.

Valentino's landmark essay, while important in a time when so much of this emotional writing was encouraged, cites primarily case studies within her examples for response. The audience of her advice is unapologetically the individual teacher. Newkirk's method encourages less action rather than providing applicable steps. These sources, while valuable in offering temporary solutions for the teacher who, in the moment, receives a paper with inappropriate vulnerable disclosure, do little to address the concept as a whole. Valentino also wrote to the

field of composition as they were leaving the legacy of expressivism, so her claims necessitate awareness of the way writing was taught in context of her advice before understanding how the immediate solutions relate to today's students who are, in some ways, just as likely to vulnerably disclose information as those who were taught by Valentino's audience.

Rising in popularity in the 1970s and influencing the field through the early 1990s, expressivism informed the teaching of first-year composition. Expressivism views emotion as a vital aspect of rhetoric. If emotion is indeed inseparable from the writing process (as Kerr and several other researchers have suggested), then emotion should be used for the student's benefit (Kerr 199). This concept is particularly promising in an age when students encounter such turbulent emotion through mental health challenges and writing about emotion so commonly occurs (and is even expected thanks to the rules dictated by the privately feeling public) on social media.

Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* emphasizes student-centered pedagogy that focuses on the individual. Freewriting and building confidence are central to Elbow's arguments that (other researchers have declared) feed expressivism (Enos 208). Elbow's theories, like much of expressivism, finds roots in romantic theories. The focus is on the author rather than the audience (Enos 46).

Even Elbow's introductory note to his readers in his book *Writing with Power* displays the emotional power he attributed to words: "But writing with power also means getting power over yourself and over the writing process; knowing what you are doing as you write; being in charge; having control; not feeling stuck or helpless or intimidated" (Elbow intro). In a discussion on the three categories of voice (writing without voice, writing with voice, and writing with real voice), Elbow concentrates on the power of real voice: "Perhaps it would be

more accurate to say that words contain not just an explicit message..., but also some kind of implicit message about the condition of the writer” (Elbow 299). The awareness and cultivation of the condition of the writer feeds personal writing and contributes to vulnerable disclosure. This vulnerable disclosure, importantly, is not always a negative thing for teachers to fear. Just like social media has positive features, emotional sharing is often good. Some students do not write with their full potential for fear of vulnerably disclosing appropriate or inappropriate information built by their real experiences.

Elbow theorizes that one of the reasons why writers are afraid to and do not regularly employ their real voice in writing is because “it makes them feel exposed and vulnerable” and “it means having feelings and memories they would rather not have” (309). In a discussion about the impact of real voice when the subject matter overflows with anger, grief, love for the wrong-people, and self-pity, Elbow boldly claims: “When we are hushed up from those expressions, we lose real voice” (309). The concepts that came to be associated as expressivism, then, provide an outlet and a focused method of teaching and encouraging real voice.

Even so, Elbow notes the difficulty that arises in finding the distinction between feelings and experiences (333). He urges writers to fill their works with experiences rather than feelings, stating that oftentimes, writing fails, because it focuses too much on feelings (334). His advice to direct attention towards the experiences of the emotion include remembering the moment, revising carefully, reading aloud, coaching with pep talks, using memories, and focusing on what is personally important (Elbow 336). This, Elbow suggests, is a step towards returning the magic to words. In many ways, it is also a step towards overcoming the fear of being known in order to develop the vulnerability needed for good writing *and* psychological well-being (thus connecting

Elbow's earlier thoughts to the scope of the argument that these theories retain relevance for today's students).

While Elbow defends himself as recently as 2015 as not being an expressivist, Berlin and many in the field continue to associate Elbow with Macrorie, Britton, Murray, and other expressivist scholars (Roeder 27). In many ways, the different scholars associated with expressivism offer decidedly different approaches and rationale than Elbow. Some, like Elbow, would not have chosen to be identified as an expressivist (Wendy Bishop, for example, insisted that she was a social-expressivist ("Remembering Wendy" 3)). These many theories presented by the scholars who have been, by history, largely sorted into the same pedagogical school center their theories around the idea that writing is personal, emotional, and that these connections are powerful. For example, Murray, in his second edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing* states, "we write to think – to be surprised by what appears on the page; to explore our world with language; to discover meaning that teaches us and that may be worth sharing with others. We do *not* know what we want to say before we say it; we write to know what we want to say" (3-4). The different ways the scholars answer the questions "how is writing connected to thought and emotion? How are thought and emotion connected to each other, and what should we do about it?" relate to this research and the fundamental question that I claim needs to be revisited for today's students. In many ways, the fact that these scholars address the common concerns unites the "expressivists" (even the reluctant expressivists) under one umbrella. It also creates an oft underappreciated connection between expressivism and critical pedagogy.

Before exploring the connection between expressivism and critical pedagogy, I would be remiss if I did not permit my own personal, real voice the opportunity to emerge as a valid part of the argument. Distance, in many ways, makes discussion of these difficult concepts like

anxiety, depression, suicide, and other mental health challenges almost easier. Personal writing on the tragedy and fear does not necessarily fit the genre of a thesis, but when enabling real voice to have power is the very subject of the argument, some inclusion is necessary. As an instructor and graduate student, I, along with my students, am experiencing the challenges so readily present in this burdened age of social media and mental health concerns. I deeply want to help my students process their turbulent emotions, but my fear of guiding them incorrectly draws me to Valentino's step-by-step list. Even so, the 'what if' scenarios sparked by research such as this make me long for a broader approach. So while I argue that these concepts should be broadly applied for the benefit of students, in doing so, I connect my own emotions to practical solutions as I draw on the social-connections prompted through critical pedagogy.

3.2 Critical Pedagogy and New Expressivism

After years of expressivism's influence in the field of composition studies, other pedagogical options naturally emerged with different options of focus as the central teaching philosophy (just as expressivism rose as a response to traditionalism). One of these popular (but even still controversial) pedagogies that emerged in writing studies and broader educational perspectives, critical pedagogy, prioritizes egalitarian learning and community-benefiting writing.

Recognition of the civic responsibilities of students, like the emotional connection to writing, also date back to Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle who argued that students must be taught to be citizens capable of eloquently expressing thought (Parks 33). Without completely ignoring the importance of the personal, Barbra Kamler argues that writing should not be employed for therapy or empowerment because this gives too much supremacy to the writer's voice (Kamler 3). Instead, critical pedagogy creates distance that can view the personal as more realistically

changeable. Students grapple with larger issues, that might still have personal connections, but are not (necessarily) obviously inviting of traumatic information or inappropriate vulnerable disclosure (Kamler 128).

Critical pedagogy is inseparable from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Broadly, "critical pedagogy seeks to understand and is concerned with the ways that schools and the educational process sustain and reproduce systems and relations of oppression" (Porfilio and Ford, xvi). The first wave of critical pedagogy centered around the works of Freire, Ira Short, and others and built upon the centrality of class through the 1970s and early 1980s. Claims made by Freire such as "a revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people) co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge" (69) were taken up and put to practice. The very subject matter of oppression, power, and civic engagement is emotional, especially when it comes from those who are without agency, but the systematic approach to emotion is different, especially as it relates to composition pedagogy.

Into the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ideas presented by the first wave of critical pedagogy were complicated through poststructural, postmodern, and feminist theories (Porfilio and Ford, xvii). Scholars such as bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux developed the foundation inspired by Freire (though Giroux claims that to call particular people founders of critical pedagogy devalues the collective struggles and resists the point the pedagogy makes) (Tristan). Giroux employed and argued for a critical pedagogy that valued dynamics of power, agency, politically aware pedagogy, and empowering students to shape the world (Tristan). Kirkland connected this critical pedagogy to the composition classroom, stating "writing

pedagogies are extremely influential upon how one acts, thinks, believes, and behaves. That is, learning to write is tantamount to learning to think. Hence, those who control the teaching of writing also help train our minds and therefore our actions” (87). Herein lies the powerful, foundational connection to expressivism and the power of thought.

Though these pedagogies seem to offer seemingly disparate answers to how best teach, guide, and healthfully cultivate emotion, thought, and writing, they do not dispute that a connection exists between thought and writing. Critical pedagogy centers personal thought in the context of social action and widespread solution. In responses to critical pedagogy writing prompts, inappropriate vulnerable disclosure is perhaps less of a concern as in responses to writing prompts based on the theoretical guidelines of what has been termed expressivism. The pendulum of how to handle this connection between thought and writing, for many scholars and teachers in the field, swung to the other end of the spectrum. From personal writing to political action, the transition (like any other), answered problematic challenges (such as inappropriate vulnerable disclosure) while naturally raising more questions.

At the same time these theories developed in composition studies, mental health became more of a concern among first-year college students and the Internet (and then social media) began to rise in regularity of use and influence. As discussed in chapter one, students write along the blurred the lines of what is private and public. The relationship between emotion and writing has been consistent since Aristotle, but now, the students asked to write under this lineage of pedagogies are experiencing greater, and possibly more concerning, ranges of potentially destructive emotions. So where does that leave composition studies, pedagogically speaking? New questions must be asked about vulnerable disclosure.

While not directly mentioning the concepts of social media, mental health, or vulnerable disclosure, some theorize that expressivism has matured to meet the needs of the modern classroom. Their research provides a pathway into answering the newly risen questions that do include these complex variables. The concept of what is occasionally termed “new expressivism,” has actually been developing for many years: “In 2005 Fulkerson offered his ‘metatheory’ of composition scholarship in which he discerns that expressivism is alive and well ‘despite numerous poundings by the canons of postmodernism and resulting eulogies’ (655)” (Roeder 5). Many, such as Christopher Burnham and Rebecca Powell, are incorporating new expressivism into their pedagogy, arguing that the current application of this seasoned expressivism looks like “helping students become morally aware citizens through self-reflective, expressivist writing” (112). Bringing together multiple resources, expressivism is concerned for the entire person and can thus integrate well with social and rhetorical theories. Tracing a history of expressivist theory, Burnham and Powell cite Britton’s expressive function in language, Kinneavy’s expressive discourse, and those who critique the theories (115-118). Expressivism allows individuals to create connections based on their personal experiences that can enable better understanding of the public and private knowledge boundaries.

Within digital spaces, expressivism also experiences a revival. Traditional expressivist practices such as journaling and group work now often occur in blogs and wikishares (Burnham and Powell 122). Self-expression is encouraged through many mediums online as a student’s identity is constructed. For the sake of sharing emotion, thought, and writing, many post what would often have been termed “free write” responses on social media. For example, when celebrating a birthday, one ‘free-writes’ about how grateful they are for personal relationships. In beginning or ending a season of life (such as recognizing a graduation or starting a new job) it is

not unusual to see comments appear on social media that include reflections about the change. As will be further discussed in chapter three through the demonstration of incorporating the digital in the synthesis of these concepts, digital spaces present opportunities for the writing championed by expressivist theories to be shared widely.

Eli Goldblatt argues that while few modern instructors define their teaching as expressivist, the movement still impacts contemporary research and theories in the field (438). Goldblatt studies the threads of expression in pedagogy without seeking to explicitly describe or defend the movement (441). Succinctly pointing to the importance of emotion in an age when boundary lines are blurry, he states:

“What I am suggesting is that when we focus so much on professional and theoretical understandings of writing instruction—especially in the context of higher education budget cuts, larger class sizes, and more calls for standardized quantitative assessments—we can forget the importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of your most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need.” (Goldblatt 442)

Goldblatt’s argument unfolds from this connection on the basis that the writer must connect to the world in order to write and that teaching composition requires a personal commitment and connection (Goldblatt 443). While expertly showing the currency of expressivism as well as its connectivity to community pedagogies, Goldblatt self-admittedly avoids focusing on the theoretical understandings (Goldblatt 455). Others, however, have discussed the theory. In the discussions, there is a helpful focus on the connection Goldblatt draws between personal writing and the community.

3.3 Critical Expressivism

Many theorists see the value in finding the overlapping connections between critical pedagogy and expressivist pedagogy. In the 2015 publication *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*, editors Roeder and Gatto argue that expressive ideals are inherently “critical.” Rather than opposing each other, there is great value in the merging of personal experience into social-constructive theories. The collection of arguments displays the current landscape of composition and addresses some of the formerly mentioned praxis of “new expressionism.” In Fodrey’s review of the book, she argues: “this collection has the potential to inspire a new generation of writing studies scholars, especially those concerned with genre studies, public rhetorics, and/or social justice, to incorporate critical expressivist practices into their first-year, multimodal/digital, community-based, and even creative writing courses” (Fodrey 486). As a student among this new generation who notices the variables that have changed writing for the first-year-student, even in the three years since the publication of this book, I agree with Fodrey’s claim and call for renewed appreciation and application of the theories presented in this collection of essays. Though the claim is powerful, the inspiration posited by the theory has true potential because of the variables (social media, mental health, vulnerable disclosure), that impact the new generation of writing students *and* scholars.

Valuably, this collection of essays about critical expressivism begins with an essay by Elbow. He begins with a discussion on the line between personal and nonpersonal language (a similar application to the terminology of “private” and “public” that was employed in chapter one). Rather than viewing the divide as separated by a set line, Elbow theorizes that there is a continuum for personal and nonpersonal language (Roeder 17). As students straddle the emotional divide between public and private writing, helping students recognize their place on

the continuum can assist in guiding the paper's genre and limiting inappropriate vulnerable disclosure.

Elbow acknowledges the difficulty that writing using personal language can pose for both students and teachers. If, directed by the demands for 'academic writing,' the student pushes a topic towards the impersonal, the paper is likely to be too general or abstract for effective persuasion. But, as Elbow states, "by the same token, an essay might be almost embarrassingly self-disclosing in topic—but not in language or thinking" (Roeder 21). Elbow's nod to what I've termed vulnerable disclosure is crucial to this argument. While this is not the focus of Elbow's essay, in light of the changed dynamics in mental health and social media that have occurred even in the three years since his essay in *Critical Expressivism* was published, perhaps it should be. As Elbow points out, the thinking or language is less the problem than the topic. The power in aware critical pedagogy prompts appropriate vulnerable disclosure that can be expressed through personal language.

Of course, for Elbow, the entire conversation is, to a large degree, personal. Elbow examines *Writing Without Teachers* to question why he was connected, by Berlin, to personal writing and expressivism. He powerfully concludes that "that Berlin's characterization of expressionism was harmful for the field" (Roeder 27).

While this bold (and personal) statement would make it seem like the two sides of pedagogy and thought are still at odds, the book *Critical Expressivism* as a whole highlights the areas in which the theories do overlap and enhance one another in a way that is helpful to the field of composition. As Roeder and Gatto state in the introduction, "the best expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the 'public'/'private' binary that still seems to too often haunt our conversations

about writing and pedagogy” (8). Individually, these pedagogies are already adept at negotiating differences and thus, can blend well. Practically, the compilation of essays conceptualizes expressivist values in a changing education system.

While the authors of the various essays offer vital theory, the variables of mental health and social media are not mentioned. I will briefly examine the theories postulated in *Critical Expressivism* to demonstrate that their findings echo the argument of this thesis, and, because of the scholars’ experienced and seasoned positionality, the foundation for my research is valid. Furthermore, the lack of mention of the variables discussed in the chapter add validity to their theories and show the urgent need for greater research and wider application of their concepts.

Most of the essays in *Critical Expressivism* focus on the need to resurrect elements of expressivism. The connection to critical pedagogy provides important balance that can address the variables including, but not limited to, social media and mental health concerns. As Boyd argues,

“In the early twenty-first century, we face a new set of horrors based in a sense of imminent threats from both domestic and global forces along with strident concerns about the influence that our government is having on individual lives... As compositionists have taken up these postmodern goals, they have, as Diane Freedman points out, eschewed expressivism...” (Roeder 107)

The horrors for students entering college in the twenty-first century are not limited to imminent threats from domestic and global forces. The imminent threats are also internal. Boyd’s solution that critical expressivism pedagogy teaches students to apply individual experiences and stances to a subject that is not subjective is also applicable as a defense against these largely internal threats. Personal writing encouraged by expressivism is the foundation of this pedagogical

defense against what is internally and emotionally dangerous. The connection to the community transforms the feeling that personal ideas and emotions are detached from others. Teaching students to view personal communication as social action helps students learn to embrace the positive powers of social media while processing their own vulnerable emotions in a fitting genre.

Wager agrees that a critical expressive pedagogy importantly asks students to analyze the tensions and dialogues between their tensions and the cultural conversations/texts (Roeder 141). These tensions are so readily readable on social media, so students are well-practiced at understanding the unease present in social media debate that does not display strong rhetoric. Applying a learned technique to the analysis of the tensions might aid the student's psychological well-being.

Leake shows the psychological roots (including critical empathy) that must be present in critical expressionism, even as they are already present individually in both critical pedagogy and expressive pedagogy (Roeder 150). The reliance on psychology (that is already foundational to the workings of these pedagogies) should encourage writing instructors that they are equipped to help direct students who vulnerably disclose towards successful integration of real voice and emotion (as will be discussed further in chapter three).

This tension treading and psychological strength helps address some of the questions and dangers raised by inappropriate vulnerable disclosure. Collins discusses the demand certain prompts can place on students:

“By making actual feelings, thoughts, and experiences significant to the ways in which students and teachers engage each other in the classroom, vulnerability becomes an important ingredient in the construction of knowledge. This is a vulnerability not based

on fear and weakness— which would be simply another form of trampling on students (which is probably worse than simply ignoring them)—but a way of exercising their power as thinkers, writers, and people.” (Roeder 129)

Balancing elements of critical pedagogy with the personal and updated sides of expressivism can shift the vulnerable disclosure from inappropriate to empowering. Owens offers a promising conclusion: “right now ‘critical expressivism’ seems to me about as exciting a new concept as any surfacing within our field, opening up strange and startling new landscapes for composing” (Roeder 76-77). These new landscapes must address social media and mental health concerns.

Of course, as with any pedagogy, it can be difficult to name a practice that will stretch so wide and have such a varied application. Naming a new pedagogical shift “critical expressivism” bears consequences. Just as it is difficult to, as Warnick states, “determine the exact pedagogical practices that emerge from expressivist theory— or any theory, for that matter,” the field understands the importance of language (Roeder 198). The blending of pedagogies that have seemed to be at odds with one another for decades also raises a host of potential problems. But blending the terms and theories that have been used to capture so much of the main pedagogical strength in composition of the last half-century also provides exciting potential.

The approaches described in the calling for such a pedagogical shift and understanding demand attention to the variables of social media and mental health. The theories presented in *Critical Expressivism* provide a greater depth and breadth of foundational history and theoretical strength than a research project of this size and scope can address. At the same time, the variables that have changed writing for the first-year-student, even in the three years since the publication of Roeder’s and Gatto’s compilation of essays, call for an updating of the application

even as they justify the claims. That updating of the application builds to the synthesis of ideas presented in chapter three.

As the very systems Goldblatt indicated call for greater standardization of writing instruction and question the use and role of composition, the relevancy of writing and emotion is crucial. Furthermore, with nearly one-third of college students admitting they considered suicide, any opportunity to help students process emotion seems necessary. Celebrating the power of personal voice applied for social construction creates a balance that needs to move beyond the theoretical and be put into practice. For this to occur, chapter three focuses on a demonstration of these concepts presented in chapters one and two. This synthesis hopefully helps transition the problems that are large scale but also inherently personal and potentially traumatic to a format that, like those celebrated and encouraged by critical pedagogy, can practically help students process emotions through healthy personal voice.

An expressive step back becomes once again necessary as I again reflect on the need for the continued conversation between pedagogies. This rather critical discussion of ideas and ways to blend pedagogies is never separable from the emotional triggers that demand personal writing and attention. In providing the distanced details and brief histories of the pedagogies, I aim for a call that can be socially applied to a population of students that to me, have individual names. This is a broad topic, as demonstrated through statistics in chapter one, but this topic remains importantly personal as I allow appropriate uses of personal writing and real voice into the very places where this writing instruction occurs.

4 CHAPTER THREE: SYNTHESIS WITH A WEBTEXT

These pedagogies are not easy to conceptualize. They represent decades of composition theories and strategies. Critical pedagogy, expressivist pedagogy, and even new interpretations of both of these pedagogies have helped students learn to write well. Still, changes in generations of students demand updates to the complicated pedagogies (thus further obscuring the conversation). Individually, the concepts of mental health challenges and social media are also complex. When analyzed together, the sweeping realities become even more difficult to understand. Part of this challenge comes from the relative newness of the phenomenon of social media. Beyond this, these variables relate to the human mind. Like writing, the human mind cannot be easily contained and explained. But for effective learning, growth, and communication, attempts to understand must be made.

As various scholars researching writing, social media, and the overall influence of the Internet suggest (outlined in 3.1), the Internet provides a host of tools that make this attempt at understanding easier. Even as the effects of the Internet (and more closely related to the information presented in this paper, the effects of social media) have complicated the conversations, the effects also present a myriad of ways to add clarity and widespread understanding. This concluding chapter connects the conversation that, in part, centers around the Internet, to the Internet by employing a Webtext to communicate and synthesize the complex concepts (the reasoning is detailed further in section 3.2).

The visualization of the research presented in a manner that is shareable and connectable to an audience of academic scholars who shape teaching philosophy can spur on conversations about mental health challenges and pedagogical implications of social media. Furthermore, the sharability can extend beyond the academic audience to even the students themselves who might

benefit from knowing that writing and emotion are connected and that there is a reason and right place for appropriate vulnerable disclosure. Section 3.2 explains in greater detail how this Webtext hopes to accomplish the shareable synthesis of chapters one and two.

4.1 Rationale for a Webtext

Understanding the nature of contact zones in relation to the composition course helps connects the concepts presented in chapter one (emotional publics and social media) to each other and to the pedagogies presented in chapter two. Thus, contact zone research becomes an important aspect to consider in relation to synthesizing the elements. The theory of contact zones and the rhetoric of place suggest that a Webtext centered around place is the best demonstration of the argument.

Because of inescapable personal nature of writing regardless of the pedagogy and prompt, the first-year English classroom is often considered a contact zone. As defined by Mary Louise Pratt, contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (4). As interpreted by Cynthia Fields in relation to composition, contact zones enable varying groups to discuss power, facilitate conflicts, and reach understanding (63). In *Freshman Composition*, first-year students learn a range of literate practices that they can then use to formulate ideas and tell their own story among a group of classmates and teachers they have typically just recently met. Asymmetrical relations abound. Because of this and more (see chapter one and two), contact zones, though very public in nature, are often an emotional space (Fields 66).

Reynolds expounds on the idea stating that because the surroundings affect learning, place always carries a political edge. The location of the writing space impacts how writing is

taught (Reynolds 20). As demonstrated in chapter one, students are connected via social media to many different spaces at once. As Pigg observed, all tethered, embodied experiences (social media use and mental health concerns, for example) of students enter the space of a writing classroom (253). The contact zones of social media tether students and change the space of the writing course.

Burns argued in 1999 (before social media contributed complexity) that the electronic public sphere is a contact zone in a way that is sometimes more intense than a typical composition classroom (as cited in Haley-Brown). Reynolds, in an examination of geographies, states: “these actual locations for the work of writing and writing instruction co-exist with several metaphorical or imaginary places where we write, study writing, or create theories about writing: webs of meaning, research paradigms, home departments, discourse communities, frontiers, cities, and cyberspaces” (13). Students bring their online experiences and learning from technology, as well as their mental health concerns that are also inescapable from technology, into the already emotional contact zone of the writing class. What happens when the contact zones of the web (particularly social media) and the classroom collide, as they almost constantly do? The space becomes even more complicated.

While this presents a challenging view of space, interpreting space as rhetorical place offers a strategy for synthesizing the variables and different pedagogies. As the classroom is a space, the web is also, as Burbules terms it, a place of important contact. Spaces become rhetorical places by mapping a representative process and creating enduring and transformative architecture to reconfigure the spaces.

As such, a technological diagram considering space is necessary for synthesizing the overarching complex variables [social media, mental health (anxiety and depression especially),

expressive pedagogy, and critical pedagogy] as presented in chapters one and two. Since social media occurs on the contact zone of the web, using a technologically enabled, Internet housed, interactive image of the classroom complemented by a more traditional (but still a Webtext) diagram applies theoretical concepts about space to an image of the space. The choice to clarify the information presented in chapters one and two through a Webtext is intentional because of the importance of incorporating technology, the psychological value offered by the web, and the immersive opportunities.

Culturally, centering this argument online creates a more significant argument because of the importance of the web itself. In 2001, Bolter discussed the importance of incorporating technology: “technologies do not determine the course of a culture because they are not separate agents that can act on culture from the outside” (19). As an unavoidable aspect rather than a separate agent of culture (especially the culture of social media) understanding and embracing technology’s role is crucial. Rather than fearing the technology that has changed dynamics in the writing classroom, using the very technology to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the change adds a level of relevance that can empower the writing student familiar with the positive cultural components of technology. Social media (and the Internet as a whole) is not a negative force actively destroying the minds of students and corrupting writing studies. Rather, like any global impactor, the web offers opportunities and that impact culture and conversation.

The language of the conversation is also impacted. As argued by Bush, our communication technology connects closely to the ways in which we think. Through the invention of the computer, the understandings of how psychology could best help and how the brain worked changed. Psychologists were able to use the language offered by the inventions (input, output, etc.) to better define concepts of the mind and offer mental health help. From the

mind being a “blank page” (a communication technology inspiring psychologists of a different time) to a web of systems, language of the mind and cultural phenomenon have been long related to each other. Intersecting the multimodal ways in which we think to a discussion about the changing dynamics of thought (mental health concerns) captures the conversations in the spaces where they are already taking place.

Beyond even the connections to thought and the important role technology and the web play in culture, multimodal readings are arguable, immersive, able to capture a more sensory experience, engaging, nonlinear, and “full of temporal ruptures” (Losh). These elements offered by webtexts will be better clarified in relation to the explanation of how the text is adapted in section 3.2 as I discuss the affordances offered by an interactive diagram rather than simple text on a page. Understanding how technology impacts writing, pedagogy, and even mental health concerns naturally demands using technology.

4.2 Developing the Webtext

In the past two chapters, I’ve argued for ways in which the space of the writing classroom should and can be reimaged. To these conversations, I contribute a two-part digital text using the web as a purposeful rhetorical place. Using the free website designer “wix” I have created a platform to house the text: <http://sarahkgeil.wixsite.com/teaching/thesis> .

The first part of the text is a virtual, moveable image that seeks to imagine the classroom in regards to the variables presented. By using one image, variables that naturally occur simultaneously are housed in the same rhetorical space. Using the Wix App “360 images”, I uploaded a panorama picture I took on my Samsung Galaxy 7 cell phone of a writing classroom space at Georgia State University.

The choice of this particular photo setting was inspired by the conversations on space and rhetorical space. Space relates to accessibility in a practical way. In the same way stairs present challenges to someone in a wheelchair, certain prompts and expectations present problems to a student who clinically suffers from anxiety. Classroom spaces must be accessible for all disabilities, even those often invisible disabilities of the mental variety. As Brewer states, “changes in language may seem like a fundamentally different undertaking than making accommodations along the lines of extended time for completing assignments, or working with interpreters. But our language reflects our attitudes toward disability, just as the built environment does” (Yergeau et al.). The built environment of the classroom, captured in an image, will hopefully broaden understanding and lead to a more accessible space within the classroom. The space of the classroom is central to every aspect of the photo.

Once again, my own (expressivist inspired) positionality blends well with the choice of photo. This image is not one I found online, but one I captured after teaching in the space. Classrooms more fitting to the technological demands I’m placing on the photo could have been found, but this topic must retain personal meaning to me as I write, process, and call for social change (as critical pedagogy encourages). The complexity of this conversation is also best captured by this space that is, to me, very real.

The 360 degree “virtual” aspect of the classroom image demonstrates the complexity of the concept and space. For each user, there is more to the composition classroom than is understandable in just one still screen. Thus, the movability of the image mimics the complexity of the minds of students who would occupy the desks pictured. There is more than a simple teacher instructing. As demonstrated, the student entering the composition classroom is tethered to the mental health challenges they (or their friends/classmates) bring to the room. At the same

time, the student is also bound to their larger community through the phones that vibrate in their pocket and the laptops they pull out. Even if a teacher does not permit electronics, most students will have recently viewed social media sites in at some point before class begins. A single picture of a classroom does not necessarily capture these elements. Interacting with the image and seeing that there is more to the room than fits on the screen takes advantage of a unique affordance offered by the web.

Figure 3.1: 360

Social Media, Mental Health, and The Blurring Lines of Teaching Rhetoric

The following interactive images invite you to think about the students in a typical first-year collegiate writing course. What knowledge and emotions enter the classroom with students? In highlighting the elements of social media and mental health concerns, a re-imagined way of teaching writing emerges through the discussions. But what do you think? See for yourself.

Navigate through the picture of the classroom at Georgia State. Read about my rationale for the image [here](#).

If you're then interested in learning more, scroll down to the Venn Diagram, and hover over the circles or the overlaps to follow the links.




Figure 3.1 demonstrates the introduction to the Webtext and the revolving nature of the image of the classroom.

Physically interacting with the image by tilting a phone or navigating beyond the edges of the photograph with the mouse hopefully enables a broader interaction with the theories and allows the users to then enter into the conversation (as represented in large part by the labels within the picture) with the classroom space and complexity in mind. The still picture is obstructed throughout the movement. Rather than remaining a simple perspective, the places around the edges become blurred and elongated. This contributes to the abstraction that students on the margins of mental health might feel. Though the experience navigating this image cannot be fully captured apart from the technology that enables it, the screenshots of the website offer a glimpse of the image.

Figure 3.2: Socially Connected



Figure 3.2 displays the label 'socially connected' placed over the desks in the classroom at GSU.



Figure 3.3: Mentally Complex

Figure 3.3 displays the label 'mentally complex' placed near a bulletin board in a classroom at GSU.

Figure 3.4: Impacted by Teaching

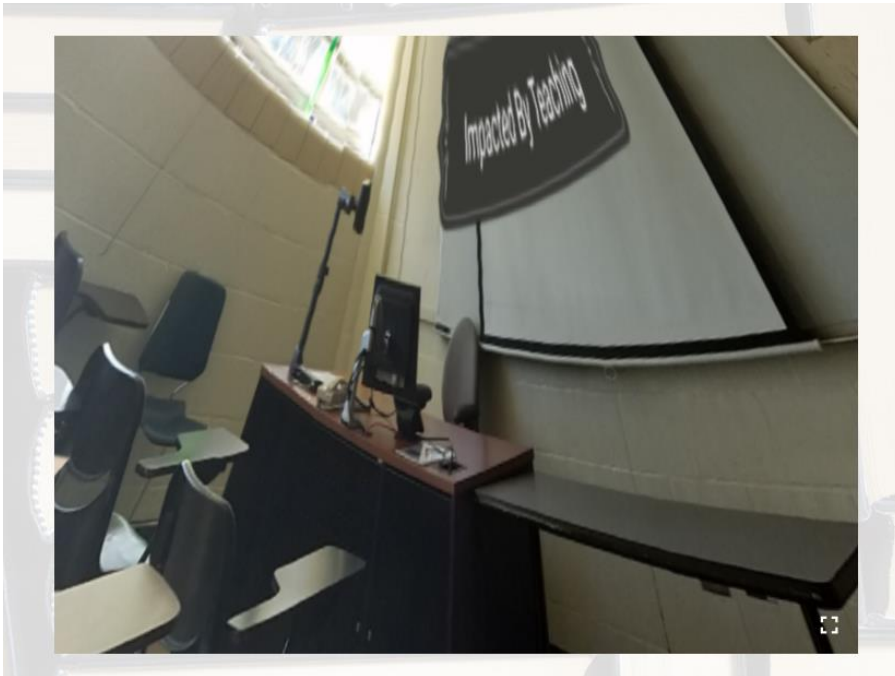


Figure 3.4 displays the label "impacted by teaching" placed near where the teacher would teach in the classroom at GSU.

As a model for the image, I hope this project mimics some of the quality images found on kuula.co (<https://kuula.co/post/7IJvg>). However, very few of these representative images have labels within the picture.

With photo-editing technology on my cell phone, I have placed labels within the image. This technique allows the labels to remain static even as the reader can navigate to different elements within the single image. All variables that make up the picture have a corresponding label within the Venn Diagram. These labels are selected based on Bolter's observation that language reflects attitude (Yergeau et al.). The language also bridges the two elements of the webtext.

Figure 3.5: Venn Diagram



Figure 3.5 shows the Venn Diagram that connects to the aforementioned and displayed labels.

The Venn Diagram allows readers to see all the labels (variables) housed within the picture in a more traditional, academic layout. For example, the label, “socially connected,” (representing social media) sits over the computer in the 360-degree image. If this particular

element interests the reader, they can scroll down to find “socially connected” in the Venn Diagram. Both the user-controlled movements within the picture and the nature of the Venn Diagram show that social media is inseparable from the other elements included in this particular conversation. Still, social media itself is a massive variable, and more information on its connections to the other variables and other current discussions can be read via hyperlinks. The hyperlinks all contain similar information as was presented in the previous chapters condensed for the online format, figures, and audience.

With active hyperlinks, the reader can access more information about each of the elements that make up the labels. The labels represent important conversations that demand attention. The information would not all fit on a traditional print Venn Diagram. And the moving images behind the circles of the diagram (the students learning to dance for impacted by learning, the city and bridge for socially connected, and the man walking down a hallway in a modern building for mentally complex) situate the conversation in visual rhetoric that further emphasizes the realities for the individual behind the less personal terms.

The details that are shared via this Webtext not only benefit the students who are daily impacted by the realities and struggles of tethered lives, but the information also further highlights the necessity and demand for composition studies. If writing can help students process turbulent information and better understand the blurred line between the public and the private spheres, then teaching writing is critical indeed.

Conclusion

The pedagogy within which writing is taught impacts more than just the student’s writing. A student’s tethered life to social media is composed of more than momentary likes and swipes through apps. The mental health crisis that is real among college campuses demands

attention. These variables that first emerged around the same time period as composition studies experienced a pedagogical pendulum swing now collide as the field is, once again, perhaps on the brink of another change.

Expressivism's emphasis on personal language and embracing the emotion of the individual blends well with critical pedagogy's focus on practical application of the personal emotions for social change. This blend empowers students to write and disclose vulnerable emotions (that they are likely already experiencing) safely and productively whether they are writing for social media, mental health exercises, their academic classes, or a combination of the three. Critically expressive pedagogy also includes the potential to teach students to healthily interpret the rhetoric they encounter every time they tether their lives to the internet.

As major scholars in the fields address the relevancy of an updated expressivism that naturally combines with social action and the valuable prompts and procedures of critical pedagogy, great potential emerges for the field and for the individual students. Like many subjects, the field of composition studies faces many outside pressures to perform and meet certain standards. These standards, while excellent for establishing a unified area of study, are still largely subjective and unmeasurable due to the nature of writing and teaching writing. As a result, composition studies does not receive the standing with which it is due. Showing that well-established pedagogies can blend together and create crucial change in the individual lives of students demonstrates the importance of continued funding and recognition for the field of composition studies.

Because of the statistics and bleak picture painted by chapter one, this pedagogy has the potential to help a widespread variety of students. Most students use or are familiar with some form of social media (their writing is public or they are continually tethered to the lives of their

peers through simply looking through an app). Most students also, directly or indirectly, must ask deep mental questions prompted by new and traditional challenges brought on by transitioning to college. While these changes have broad and far-reaching potential for social change (in true critical fashion), the changes themselves must remember and value the individual (expressive theory at its core).

Beyond the necessary credit this might lend to the field as a whole, if this called for critical expressivist pedagogy can help one student better process turbulent emotion to the point that the connection between thought and writing shows the student a healthy option for the release of emotion, then that is a triumph. If it can offer solutions to one writing teacher who also operates in a tethered world and does not know how to respond well to a student's vulnerable disclosure, then the well-researched, emerging critical expressivist pedagogy should be more widely recognized and applied in the classroom.

Next steps include establishing praxis that specifically attunes to the knowledge of the blurred line between the private and public. A mixed methods study gathering quantitative data on the vulnerable disclosure of students was beyond the limitations of this overview, but such a study could add weight to the argument that first needed a theoretical foundation. These variables of social media and mental health require careful attention and detail, so further attention to the unfolding effects remains necessary.

None of the variables or pedagogies presented in this study are altogether new. The theory that writing is associated with thought and emotion to such a degree that emotion is realized and relieved through writing has been understood and practiced since before Aristotle wrote about it. Writing scholars have addressed this fundamental connection through various established pedagogies. Even the relatively recent developments such as social media have been

examined to understand generational changes. Mental health research, too, is built on centuries of studies designed to ask and answer questions about the human condition. Combining all this excellent research presents a gap and gives significant credence to critical expressivism. The concepts themselves are not new, but connecting them is. Visualizing the overlaps between well-studied areas of research demonstrates new potential for healthy change. That change is critical in liberating the expressions of tethered, vulnerable generation of students.

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