

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

One Omits the First Person: An Argument for a Measured Integration of “I”

One of my students recently handed in an argument-based essay about illegal immigration. This is a hot issue—there is no way around that fact—but more importantly, it is also the kind of issue that students are likely to debate and encounter in the larger world. With this in mind, the student wrote a sentence much like the following:

“The author feels strongly about the topic of illegal immigration because she has family members who have been separated from their children due to this policy.”

This is an interesting syntactic construct because it completely disembodies the ownership of this event through the use of third person. Rather than presenting it in first person, which is how this writer would do it when telling this story to every other person on the planet, the student felt the academic environment forced her to disown her own values and experiences when arguing an issue about which she rightfully has strong associations and feelings. Though prior to this submission I had encouraged her to speak in first person in her work, the message from the academic environment was so deeply engrained in her that it came out clear in her third-person account. The message is that her personal experiences are not welcome in an academic setting. The message is that, as teachers, we only want to hear about her research. The message is that, as an individual, her firsthand knowledge of this subject must be muted.

I will immediately grant that research is an essential part of any academic environment. Since it is a consistent focus of my job, I can certainly attest to the fact that it is difficult to get students to conduct research in a proper way. Yet putting the value solely on the research process implicitly invalidates the value of the human experience. Because my student felt obligated to write in the third person, what could be a very powerful testimonial, entirely appropriate to her topic, instead became a useless statement sapped of its rhetorical power. As an English instructor, my goal is to teach students how to harness their voices to move others through rhetorical strategies, so this emptiness concerns me.

I thus propose that the bugbear so long banished from classrooms across the world—the “I” many teachers

withdraw from in horror—be permitted back into essays.*

Asterisk Caveat I

First, instructors must stop teaching that the “I” is impermissible and instead start teaching when and where its application is appropriate. There are some obvious areas where it is not, with the hard sciences coming immediately to mind. “I” has no place in any biological, chemical, or astronomical explanation of the world, as it would seem absurd in those cases. Imagine a press release stating, “I maneuvered the Hayabusa-2 to land on 162173 Ryugu.” Its inclusion here is a distraction since it draws away from what can and should only be objective information: “Japan’s Hayabusa-2 rover landed successfully on 162173 Ryugu.”

The social sciences are a little trickier, though they fall largely into the same category. For instance, no good can come of students explaining the Milgram experiments from their own perspective, at least not when simply recounting the basic narrative. However, the *interpretation* of these experiments is open to debate. Do the experiments indicate that people are essentially evil and will seize on any excuse to hurt others? Or do they mean that people are subject to authority—no matter how tenuous the claim to authority might be—and will blindly follow it to any end? I tend to think the latter since I can see examples of this throughout history (including the Nazis), though I can understand why some might think the former.

The use I just made of “I” is entirely appropriate. I am objectively expressing my point of view with “think” and with the use of objective information from history. I do not use my subjective experiences to embody my idea, nor do I attempt to engage this important psychological experiment without research since I make an appropriate nod to history. I am not stating, “I do not like the Milgram experiments because they make me uncomfortable.” Instead, I am housing my approach within the place it belongs—in the individual who can support an idea with clear illustrations and through appropriate connections.

Cultivating Responsible Citizens

Though the hard and social sciences are fraught with perils for writers, when students enter any social or industrial space, they will be expected to speak from the first person. No water cooler talk in the history of humankind ever sounded like impersonal academic talk, even when it takes place in an academic environment. The

*Of course, there is an asterisk on this statement. There has to be, since there are two caveats that come with this idea.

mentioned use of “I” thus emulates what students will do in the real world, meaning the artificial construct of impersonal third person is removed in favor of a more natural ownership of thoughts. Requiring students to use an impersonal third person means we are teaching them to code switch their thoughts in a meaningless way, for it creates a clear delineation between objective and subjective thought processes. Put in simpler terms, it means students know to provide evidence for their thoughts only in the academic environment since evidence is associated with the absence of this “I.” Disallowing the “I” entirely from essays can only mean we are teaching them they need evidence in the classroom, but that they do not need it in the real world where the “I” is used. That is a dangerous ideal that has far-reaching consequences for any political structure that is concerned about issues of “real” and “fake.” If one goal of education is to build socially responsible citizens, then students should be taught that it is appropriate to use their “I” to house a thought that can be objectively demonstrated to others. The “I” is not the other half of a dichotomy; it is the locus of social responsibility.

Asterisk Caveat II

This thought leads to the second part of that asterisk. The second caveat is that the reintroduction of “I” into academic writing must be done in a way that encourages students to take responsibility for their ideas. In this view, students must be encouraged to think through the ramifications of their research as it applies to their thought and the value of their ideas. Again, the research process is essential to effective academic writing. I usually frame this discussion in a classroom by asking students to think of me hanging out with a tattoo-laden, beer-chugging, leather-wearing, bare-chested biker just before class. If I high five that burly guy and then walk into the classroom, it doesn’t matter if I wear a three-piece suit since students will forever see me as a biker who masquerades as a professional academic. Likewise, in the research process, I am only as good as the authors with whom I intellectually associate. If I choose the mainstream news, I cannot be taken seriously as a researcher; I only visit the academic environment from time to time.

By banishing the “I” from writing, we subtly prevent students from taking up a voice; they are only allowed to stand outside the classroom and hang out with bikers rather than enter and work to become effective researchers. This fails to invite them into the discussion in a given community by permitting them only to have one identity. If the Milgram experiments are open to interpretation and informed speculation through research, then students begin to make the connection that they are only as good as the research with which they associate themselves. Critiquing Milgram’s conclusions with our Uncle Bobby’s thoughts is not the same as critiquing them using information from *The Journal of Applied Psychology*.

A Note on Sources and Bridging the Gap

Students appreciate news organizations as a model for

reintroducing the “I” since these outlets value “I” more than academia. News stories present a countless parade of individuals who give firsthand accounts of events; these are then curated in places like YouTube where viewers may watch them repeatedly. I know from experience students want to research what feels good to them. These are the waters they feel the most comfortable navigating, so their inclination carries them back there consistently. However, the academic environment stifles a connection to research by asking students to leave their views of the world at the door. By allowing students to use “I” in specific, objective circumstances within the classroom environment, the hoped-for goal of bridging real world, water cooler talk with what takes place in academia becomes more accessible and obvious to students. Instead of “dropping the academic act” when entering the scholastic environment, students should start to meld the research process with day-to-day discourse. This is how the real world behaves, and it is the ultimate goal educators ought to aim for in our pedagogy. Instead of alienating students from their ability to “have a more informed discussion,” we ought instead to encourage students to have a more *responsible* discussion.

Putting the asterisk aside, I want to return to the opening example. Rather than disallowing this student’s strong feelings on her selected research subject, I provided feedback encouraging the student to use this narrative in a precise, meaningful way in future discussions. The student should understand that her firsthand knowledge does not automatically negate authority or the ideas of others, but instead that it can provide a powerful counterexample to anti-immigration individuals when used the right way. Thus, “I have seen family members who have been ripped apart from their children due to these policies” is a powerful statement that gives full ownership of the idea to the student in a responsible way. It captures the moral indignation without implying that this simply ends the debate. The student recognizes the value of her own witness as a part of this ongoing discourse. When supplemented with research, she becomes a powerful voice in a difficult discussion. If we are teaching intellectual responsibility, then this sort of outcome is the ultimate goal at which we ought all to aim.

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