



*Jennifer Bertrand*

# The Self as Chambered Nautilus

Discovering the Healing Power of Writing as a Graduate Student

*2023 Creative Bridges Conference*

# Land Acknowledgment

## *Honouring Canada's Indigenous Peoples*

I am privileged to work and live on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples including the Nehiyawak (Cree), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Métis, Nakoda, Dene, Anishinabe, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community in Alberta, Canada



# Attendee Poll

## *Personal Writing in Higher Education*

Personal writing is a methodology that should be employed in higher education.

1. Agree
2. Not Sure
3. Disagree



# Introduction

## *Healing and Zombies*

*“I will show you something first,” he says. “Then maybe you will not want this for your mother.” He holds open the door...*

*A man sits on a sagging sofa in front of the television...She does not scream when she sees what he holds to his mouth, but she feels as though her breath stops. It is a human arm.*

“The Pall of a Past World” (2021)

# Research Overview

## *Personal Writing for Transformation*

- Expressive writing studies have explored the power of writing to improve physical, emotional, and psychological health
- Some researchers have looked at how writing impacts the health of students
- Few have considered whether graduate programs of study might benefit from incorporating personal writing and reflection into their curricula
- Personal writing contributes to a transformative process that broadens self-awareness and supports student wellbeing, enriches research, and cultivates academic potential

# Autoethnography as Methodology

## *The Self as Research Subject*

- A type of narrative inquiry to help with understanding broader cultural and sociological phenomena through analysis of the personal
- Definition of self as fluid, mutable, and relational
- Attention to ethics and researcher's positionality
  - Privacy and confidentiality
  - Consent
  - Comfort with disclosure



# Metaphor and Theory

## *The Self as Chambered Nautilus*

Imagine the nautilus

Vulnerable core encased in shell

A fragment

Yet already expanding

With mathematical precision

One chamber after another

Filling and overflowing

Unable to contain the drive to push, to grow

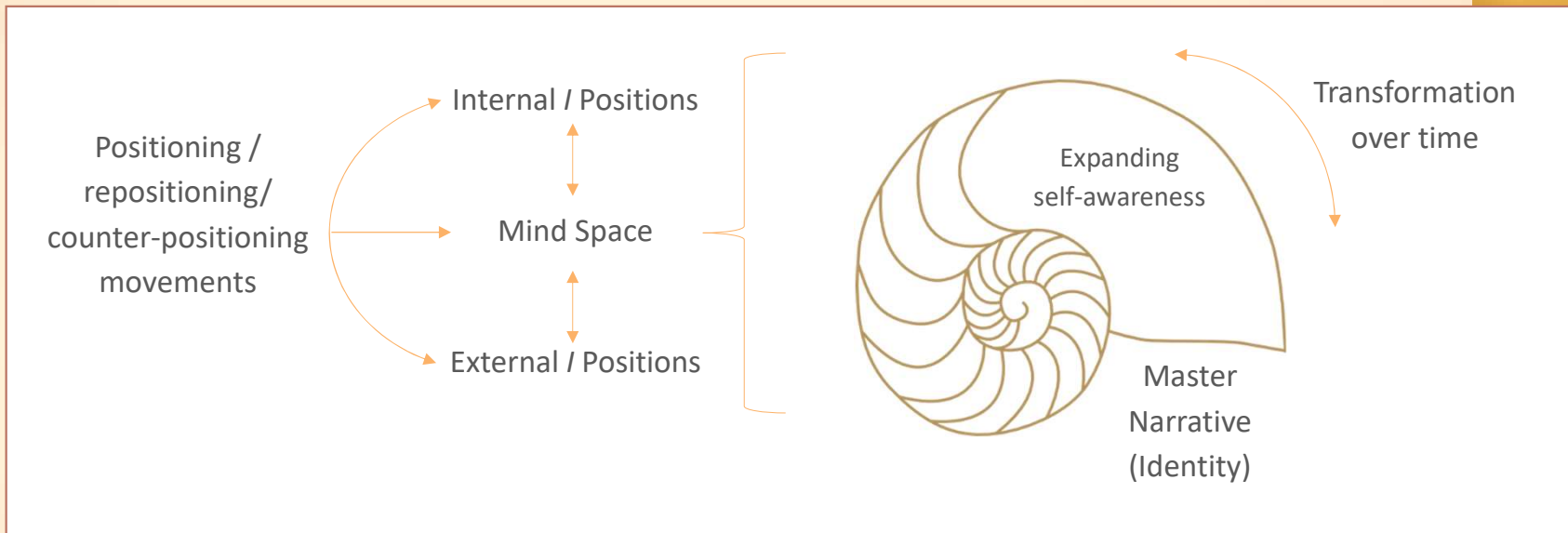
To be something different than before

This is why I write



# Metaphor and Theory

## *Dialogical Self Theory*





# Applying Dialogical Self Theory

## *Personal Position Repertoire*

Internal Positions	External Positions	1. My husband	2. My mother	3. My grandmother (deceased)	4. My grandfather (deceased)	5. My abuser	Overall Prominence
1. I as a wife		5	0	0	0	0	5
2. I as a child/grandchild		0	5	5	5	5	20
3. I as a victim		0	0	0	2	2	4
4. I as fearful		0	3	3	3	3	12
5. I as angry		0	3	3	3	3	12
6. I as ill		5	3	3	3	3	17
7. I as fighter		0	3	3	3	3	12
	Overall Prominence	10	17	17	19	19	

# Applying Dialogical Self Theory

## *Personal Position Repertoire cont'd*

- Extended narrative self that includes the “I” (self as subject or author) and the “Me” (self as object or actor) (Hermans et al, 1992)
- The “I” can tell a story about the “Me” and a narrative self emerges where our actions, thoughts, and feelings can be understood as movements across time and space
- Upon the “stage of the mind” (Hermans, 2001), the self exists in a multiplicity of worlds in which each I-position enters into imagined dialogue with other I-positions as part of a process of narrative development
- We can position, counter-position, or re-position our I-positions and thereby self-innovate

# Intersection of the Theoretical and Personal

## *Writing for Personal Development*

- Graduate-level course on the use of writing for healing and self-transformation
- Introduction to daily writing practice for self-exploration
- Aim to improve the “fluidity, creativity, and honesty of student self-expression”
- Critical examination of the way we use writing in various contexts, such as health care, career development, and social work



# Intersection of the Theoretical and Personal

## *Writing for Personal Development cont'd*

- Chronic illness diagnosis: “I as ill” position; metaphors for illness and the ill body
- Gothic short story: caregiving and the living death of Alzheimer’s disease

*The disease was not her mother’s fault, but it nevertheless felt like a curse...something designed to hold her back from her own life, to consume every part of her being until she had nothing left to give.*

“The Pall of a Past World” (2021)



# Intersection of the Theoretical and Personal

## *Writing for Personal Development cont'd*

*This is not her song.*

*The bones, lying in piles, sing their displeasure...Beaten down by the relentless rain in a rhythmic heartbeat, they call to her because she left them there to bleach and crack through the seasons. Grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers and fathers, siblings, children. Piled without ceremony...She remains to hear this song, to feel their hunger.*

*The river took her where they cannot follow.*

*Or she followed the river so they could not find her.*



# Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

## *Personal Development in the Classroom*

- How might graduate programs of study benefit from adopting a more intentional approach that incorporates personal writing and reflection into their curricula?
- Promoting “education as a means of providing rich contexts and of fostering ‘knowledge builders,’ committed not only to personal improvement but also to the advancement of communal knowledge” (Ligorio, 2011)
- Learning to explore and interrogate different perspectives; higher sense of agency and lower sense of isolation (Ligorio, 2011), processing traumatic events (Campbell and Pennebaker, 2003)

# Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

## *Personal Development in the Classroom cont'd*

- Graduate programs should purposefully incorporate personal writing and reflection into their curricula
- Provide students with the tools necessary to successfully navigate their academic programs and foster a critical and reflective mindset
- Successful learning processes stimulate change: improving critical thinking and argumentation skills; fostering creative problem solving; building competency in dialogical interactions
- Learning can be organized to support students in the development and elaboration of I-positions as they emerge in the classroom context (Ligorio, 2011)

# Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

## *How to Incorporate Personal Writing*

- Situate the private within larger social and cultural discourses; support critical dialogue about the self and other
- Carry out personal writing within the context of postmodern and social constructivist views of the self; allows a shift from traditional binaries to discussions about knowledge, subjectivity, and dominant power structures
- Redefine the political, interrogate privileged positions, critically reflect on emotion as political theory and practice, improve academic writing, and influence student views



# Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

## *How to Incorporate Personal Writing cont'd*

1. Support student psychological safety,
2. Situate the course within its social, cultural, historical, and political context,
3. Ensure assignments are guided by socio-political problems but allow students to retain creative control,
4. Encourage student development by applying concepts from Dialogical Self Theory or related theoretical frameworks, and
5. Prepare for varying comfort levels with disclosure by offering alternative assignments.

# Conclusion

## *Summary & Limitations*

Still, as the spiral grew,  
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,  
Stole with soft step its shining archway  
through,  
Built up its idle door,  
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew  
the old no more.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1858)



# Wrap Up

*Read More/Contact Info*

*Writing for Wellbeing: Theory, Research, and Practice (2023):*

<https://www.routledge.com/Writing-for-Wellbeing-Theory-Research-and-Practice/Elzen-Lengelle/p/book/9781032163147>

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