

Chapter 4. The Value of Violence in Student Writing

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Columbine. Virginia Tech. School names forever associated with deadly, senseless acts of violence committed by their own students. But the shootings are linked by more than guns, grief, and shattered communities. In both massacres, the shooters prefaced their in-school carnage with violent writings that alarmed English/Creative Writing instructors.

Two months before the April 20, 1999, shooting, Columbine shooter Dylan Klebold wrote a dark short story for his Creative Writing class with English teacher Judy Kelly. The story described a black, trench-coat clad shooter with pistols in a backpack (Cullen; Hudson, *Student*; Langman, Lieberman). Kelly explained that Klebold's text was "the most vicious story I have ever read" (Lieberman 95). Similarly, shooter Seung Hui-Cho's texts of rape and murder troubled Virginia Tech classmates and professors so deeply that he was required to exit the formal English classroom setting and continue English studies in one-on-one tutoring provided by Department chair Lucinda Roy (Roy).

In both settings, the shootings were foreshadowed by a series of violence indicators, including disturbing written course assignments that forced the English / Creative Writing instructor into the role of *First Responder*. The term *first responder* is used in this context to explain that the academic instructor was among the first individuals within the school/university setting to encounter and grapple with the perpetrator's violent texts.

As the media became more aware of the violent and alarming nature of Cho's former writings and the fact that Dr. Lucinda Roy had tried for two years to warn the university that something that might happen, the media frenzy continued to intensify. Roy explains that every outlet from ABC and NBC to CNN, the BBC, Sky News (United Kingdom) and Japanese and Korean journalists descended on the Blacksburg campus to learn more about the tragedy and the events that prefaced the shooting.

This sort of mass media frenzy, which seems to be repeated any time there is a significant national shooting or violent act, evidences Sarah Hardison O'Connor's description, in this collection, of media *hyping*, meaning news and information is collected and disseminated so quickly so that the value and quality of the information is called into question. While O'Connor accurately explains that this sort of media hype has negative ramifications for student understanding of text and the accuracy and quality of written text, it can also be argued that this sort of media hype has a highly negative influence on educators, as it establishes an irra-

tional fear that any student who writes of disturbing or violent themes has already designed and prepared to commit the next school massacre.

When irrational and unfounded fears emerge, the ability of instructors to accurately and with clarity assess and respond to student writing, particularly writing with violent themes or drawings, diminishes. Diminished capacity to carefully, patiently, and accurately review and respond to any sort of student text, fails to keep an instructor *neutral*, which according to Ruth Goldfine and Deborah Mixson-Brookshire in this collection is important if students are to interact effectively around and form their own opinions about controversial issues and or topics.

Although remaining neutral and open-minded about student selected topics/themes of interest, regardless of the amount of violence presented by such topics, is a key component of fair and equitable learning environments and composition classrooms, the fact remains that too many episodes of violent texts that prefaced violent events, and the accompanying media frenzy around those examples, just make violent writing instructor responses challenging and perhaps different from any other sort of student response. A brief overview of tragedies prefaced by violent student texts follows.

School Based Violent Texts from Violent Perpetrators

Many schools, including secondary and post-secondary institutions, have faced pre-shooting patterns of violent written expressions from the student perpetrators. These episodes often placed instructors/administrators into first responder roles. Examples include:

- Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, 1998—shooter Kip Kinkel wrote a school essay about love in which he indicated that only firearms could help him fight his unloved “cold, black heart” (Lieberman 95).
- East Carter High School in Grayson, Kentucky, 1993—shooter Scott Pennington kills his 7th period English teacher, Deanna McDavid, claiming it was McDavid’s continued questioning about his morbid writing that triggered the shooting (Lieberman).
- Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Washington, 1996—shooter Barry Loukaitis wrote ninth grade poems of a violent nature, including one entitled “Murder” (Fast 33). He committed the school shooting in February of his freshman year, at the age of 14.
- University of Iowa, November 1, 1991—Former Graduate Student Gang Lu (age 28) shot and killed 4 faculty members, 1 student, and injured others because of anger about the university overlooking him for a coveted dissertation prize. Lu’s pre-shooting letters of complaint to university officials were never addressed (Marriott).

In addition to these examples of violent, school-based texts from violent perpetrators, we also know that some violent perpetrators wrote about and/or praised

prior violent acts. Roy explains that shooter Cho wrote an 8th grade text in which he described a desire to repeat the Columbine High School shooting. In this case, it is fair to say that Cho's teachers and educational community saw warning signs more than five years before his rampage. With each violent writing, Cho was expressing the thoughts of someone who was mentally stable and faced significant demons.

But the fact that Cho wrote of violent desires before committing his tragic violent act is very common, according to threat and risk assessment experts. In fact, the FBI refers to this phenomenon as *leakage*. Contrary to popular belief and media hype, violent perpetrators never snap, but rather build toward a violent act by intentionally or unintentionally leaking clues that reveal their disturbed state of mind and or harmful intentions. The FBI explains of this phenomenon:

These [leaked] clues can take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums. They may be spoken or conveyed in stories, diary entries, essays, poems, letters, songs, drawings, doodles, tattoos, or videos Leakage can be a cry for help, a sign of inner conflict, or boasts that may look empty but actually express a serious threat. Leakage is considered to be one of the most important clues that may precede an adolescent's violent act. (O'Toole 16)

Although government research continues to confirm that schools are the safest places for youth to be (Fast), the media's intense coverage of school or university shootings, combined with indicators that violent shooters may precede their actions with violent writings, brings into question the *appropriate* role of violent writing in academic settings.

The prior massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech, along with FBI documented evidence of leaked violent clues, force us to ask what to do with and how to respond to student created violent texts. After all, if a student writes of murder, rape, or suicide, then doesn't the phenomenon of leakage prove that he or she is actually leaking a real-world desire to engage in the described behavior? Furthermore, does this writing genre additionally require censorship, excessive disciplinary responses, or potentially an immediate expulsion and arrest for communicating a threat?

Perhaps surprisingly, the answer to these question is an emphatic *no*. Threat assessors, including Mohandie and the FBI (O'Toole) explain that most students who write violently are expressing their freedom to write creatively, and pose no threat to the academic environment. In fact, educational research provides evidence that K-16 students often write violently, but without subsequent violent acts. Examples follow.

K-16 Examples of Violent Writing

Educational research offers proof that students sometimes opt to write of violent themes. Teachers have reported encounters with violent themes ranging from sui-

cide to sexual abuse, and in both personal and fictionalized student texts. Similarly, K-12 instructors encounter violent themes from students. Research finds prior documented encounters with violent texts among the following sub-populations:

- Boy writers (Fletcher)
- Gang-affiliated youth (Ma'ayan; Mahiri and Sablo; Moje)
- Urban, high-poverty minority youth (Ma'ayan; Weinstein)
- Adolescents from violent-laden communities (Mahiri and Sablo)

Encountered violent topics have included everything from Halloween-type horror stories and alien abductions (Fletcher) to gangsta prayers and parody poems containing descriptions of guns, bullets, or killings (Camitta; Moje). Brown additionally confirmed that high school English teachers report violent texts from 9th-12th grade students, including both males and females and from academically gifted and struggling students.

In addition to information about secondary students producing violent texts, Brown's study specifically considered instructor response. Data revealed that teachers may select a number of responses to violent texts, although some indicated in short-responses that they are unprepared to address or respond to violent texts. Instructor discomfort with response highlights the potential cause of school inaction or over-reaction to violent texts; school staff quite simply do not know how to address violent texts. Details about prior recorded responses follow.

Response to Violent Writing

O'Connor, in this volume, writes:

Our country cannot afford to have citizens who assimilate information uncritically, but critical thinking does not come naturally. It needs to be taught. Students need to know what questions to ask; for example, they should be asking the source of information and how current the information is. (14)

In similar fashion, instructors confronted with response to student created violent texts must be able to similarly assimilate information critically, ask the right questions, and identify the source and accuracy of the provided text in question. In other words, instructors must be as critical as their students, with an open mind and comprehensive approach to any new text. But as evidence shows, sometimes the violent or disturbing nature of highly personal student themes makes response a challenging activity at best.

The K-12 Response

Teachers at the K-12 level, in similar fashion to peers in the post-secondary world, have many response options with violent or disturbing texts. Quantitatively doc-

umented K-12 responses to violent student texts have included the following:

- Discuss text with student (Brown)
- Discuss text with a counselor or other mental health professional (Brown)
- Discuss text with school-based administrator (Brown)
- Discuss text with other teachers or parents of student (Brown)
- Grade written text as normal (Brown)
- Censorship of text (Fletcher)
- Disciplinary or legal action, including school expulsions, suspensions, and jail time (Hudson Student Hudson, Silencing)

This list shows that responses fall along a broad spectrum of intensity, as dialoging with a student about his/her submitted violent text is quite a different response from a school-initiated expulsion or law enforcement pursued arrest followed by jail time. In fact, the extreme nature of turning to school suspensions and arrests for violent themes was on recent display in the media's coverage of a Summerville, South Carolina, high school student who was arrested and suspended for written text about killing his neighbor's pet dinosaur with a gun (Rivera and Jain). In this particular case it appears that the school failed to obtain the full context of the written text before resorting to the most extreme response possible.

The Post-Secondary Response

Although the Virginia Tech tragedy provides evidence of post-secondary responses to violent texts when connected with a student's rare and rather unusual silent behavior, many post-secondary responses to violent student texts have been considered within the broader context of "personal writings" (Connors), and particularly around personal writings of a self-disclosing nature. As Berman explains, self-disclosing personal writings revolving around somewhat intense themes may create instructor discomfort.

Instructors may censor or criticize personal, self-revealing student writings because they are academically inappropriate (Berman; Banks), or narcissistic (Bartholomae). Although Bartholomae never addresses the matter of violent or disturbing themes, he goes so far as to explain that any sort of student fostered personal writing is devoid of academic value for the formal classroom settings.

In contrast, some post-secondary instructors (Berman) encourage and embrace the personal, self-disclosing voice, even when intertwined with violent themes, for the role that it plays in student growth and development. Roy even argues that despite the Virginia Tech tragedy of 2007 and its explicit connection to violent texts, the violent student voice should not be silenced or censored, as we risk losing the sense of dialog among student peers and educators that is critical to growth and the advancement of knowledge. Additionally, excessive editing and censorship of student texts that make an instructor uncomfortable, particularly in the early years of one's schooling adventure, can "paralyze a young writer"

(Roy 197) and even present mixed messages to students (as they often hear and read violent expressions in every day communications and among peers in local neighborhoods, social settings, and mass media).

It has even been argued that to deny a student of self-selected, personal writing themes is to deny personal identity (Blitz and Hurlbert). Additionally, censorship of the personal, violent voice may be seen as a rejection of the student's voice and culture; meaning their unsanctioned voices (Moje; Weinstein) are forced to yield to classroom accepted sanctioned voices devoid of personal, violent, or uncomfortable themes. In addition to concerns about censorship of student writing, this scenario begs the question of messaging to students. What sort of message does an instructor send to his/her students if the community-based voice is silenced the moment they step into a formal academic environment? The issue of sanctioned vs. unsanctioned classroom based literacies begets additional concerns around equitable learning for the advantaged and disadvantaged.

The Result of the Response

While opinions about the appropriateness or academic quality/validity of personal, self-disclosing writings may vary, educational institutions across the K-16 spectrum must acknowledge that violent writing should never be equated with intent to commit a real-world act of violence, *unless* identified as such by a highly trained threat and risk assessment team. In other words, institutions should never allow descriptions of the death of pet dinosaurs or a research paper on serial killings to lead to the conclusion that any student needs to be immediately suspended, expelled, arrested or even charged with communicating a real world threat.

To prevent inaccurate and extreme assumptions about student writer intent, educational institutions must adopt effective threat assessment processes that are openly known, communicated, enforced and practiced. Effective threat assessment procedures ensure a balanced approach to violent or disturbing writings, which is an absolute necessity if we adopt the notion that violent writing can at times serve a highly beneficial role for the student writer, including the opportunity to process the real world violence of his/her world.

Finding Value in the Violence

Research from three distinct fields of research (threat assessment, psychological, and educational) provides insight to the benefits of allowing students to write violently. The benefits include:

- Safety: Violent writing provides the disturbed/threatening students a forum for leaking clues, which triggers interventions to stop violent acts
- Health and Self-Advocacy: Violent writing is an outlet for healing from challenging and traumatic events, and a way to advocate for mental health support

- Educational: Violent writing is a forum for encouraging improved writing skills and breaking down barriers between sanctioned and unsanctioned literacies

Safety Benefits

Threat assessors and the law enforcement officials tasked with responding to violence welcome leaked, written clues that signal an individual is struggling with disturbed, violent, or threatening thoughts, as these clues may initiate a successful intervention process that stops a violent act and provides the writer with appropriate mental health support. In this regard, student created violent writing is both a clue and a calling: a calling for help. Langman explains that Columbine shooter Dylan Klebold's personal journals and papers were filled with repetitive clues of his dangerous and psychotic thoughts, but they went largely unnoticed by educators untrained to recognize text-embedded mental health clues.

Educators, particularly post-secondary educators who are often trained in their content field rather than in the broader field of educational practice, are never prepared to recognize written clues that indicate disturbed student thought, as that sort of training and activity is often reserved for those in the mental health and law enforcement fields of study. Consequently, placing blame on educators for failing to recognize a student's real world violent intent is frequently misplaced blame, as there is simply no way to provide all K-16 instructors with this form of highly specialized threat assessment training that studies written patterns, etc. But with that being said, it is important to note that institutions can take some steps to better prepare instructors for confronting and responding well to violent or disturbing student texts.

Although educators should never be asked to assume the role of threat assessor, they can be trained as first responders who recognize clues/warning signs or patterns of behaviors that merit further investigation by trained threat assessors. These threat assessors can in turn identify the types of clues that Langman explains may be presented in a potential perpetrator's written expression. As *first responders* instructors might be trained to simply recognize the following basic conditions:

- A student has a pattern of writing and/or speaking about violent and dark themes
- A written text details a fictionalized assault/attack within a setting or with characters who mirror real world characters and settings
- Student text is filled with a desire to engage in self harm (suicide, self-mutilation etc)
- Written texts convey an unusual obsession with violent weapons, acts, or figures
- A student's intense violent or disturbing writings seem to accompany a significant change in behavior

In each of these scenarios, an instructor is only being asked to be aware and to notice patterns of behavior or written expression. Awareness does not force a teacher into the inappropriate role of *threat assessor*, as that is not their role in the educational environment. But awareness can lead to the right persons who are capable of conducting effective threat and risk assessments, given what is known about the student's disturbing or frequent expressions. Once this information is transferred from teacher to threat and risk assessment team, the team can make a variety of decisions that may or may not include a comprehensive needs assessment process and that may even lead to getting the student appropriate mental health supports, if that is determined to be a need. When this happens, the teacher has taken the critical first step of letting others know that something may not be quite right, which allows other experts to play their role in the ongoing process of addressing student need.

The advantage of the establishment of sound threat and risk assessment procedures in educational settings is that the burden of action is removed from the shoulders of the instructor to a broader, more specialized group that has the background and knowledge to reach a more accurate conclusion surrounding student motives for violent texts. Thanks to the volume of post-Columbine threat and risk assessment research for school settings, institutions, particularly K-12 settings, have a myriad of school threat and risk assessment guidelines and recommendations for academic institutions from which to pull and implement (Fein et al.; O'Toole; Dwyer, Osher, and Warger; Mohandie; Cornell and Sheras). Today's schools have access to multiple free resources that help institutionalize comprehensive threat and risk assessment procedures that trigger accurate responses to violent writings or other potential threats.

At the post-secondary level, the errors of response at Virginia Tech have led to better resources for schools concerned with the balance between student privacy and mental health interventions, as part of the initial breakdown of communication around Cho's potential for violence revolved around prior ineffective mental health policies that led to a lack of shared information between the school, mental health specialists, and the student. In fact, prior to the one year anniversary of the Virginia Tech shooting, Virginia Governor Kaine signed into law significantly revised mental health bills that would both reform and fund the state's struggling mental health services (Roy). If there is anything positive that emerged from the horrendous tragedies suffered at Virginia Tech and many other educational campuses between 1999 and 2007, it is the emergence of comprehensive models/resources for helping other schools address and try to prevent similar fates, many of which were newly designed with the direct assistance of our nation's top threat assessment experts and researchers.

In summary, academic institutions must embrace and train staff to understand the safety nets in place to keep all safe and secure, starting with classroom based responses to individual student cries for help through written violent or disturbing expression.

Health and Self-Advocacy Benefits

As previously stated, few students who write violently actually intend to commit violence. Instead, some students write violently as a way to process the violence they have encountered in their lives, communities, homes, and social settings. Similar to the aggressive student who writes of a violent incident in hopes that someone may notice his cry for help, a previously victimized student may write of a violent episode in hopes of obtaining some level of support to process the horror.

The victimized student who writes of a violent encounter with rape, bullying, or aggression may share these stories for the purpose of trying to determine why it happened and how to live with the assumed shame that may be associated with the violent act. In this context, psychological researchers would agree that a student's written description of the prior trauma is an effective way of beginning to process and heal.

Research shows that writing through our personal life challenges/traumas both develops the person (Berman) and heals the soul (DeSalvo). DeSalvo explains:

The writing process, no matter how much time we devote to it, contains a tremendous potential for healing. . . writing about the traumatic events that we've experienced is an extremely helpful way of integrating them into our lives, of helping us feel happier, of improving our psychic and physical well-being (73, 159).

DeSalvo further explains that writing can be viewed as a necessary and significant act that synthesizes our thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a manner that promotes spiritual, emotional, and psychic wholeness.

Classroom based action research supports this finding, as Berman's survey of his graduate students revealed that 86% indicated that being allowed to write of personal, self-disclosing themes in the classroom contributed positively to their health, well-being, and emotional intelligence. In other words, students freely admit that being allowed to write of highly personal and self-disclosing themes is cathartic and useful. If that is the case, then any teacher's choice to censor these personal, self-disclosing topics (because they feel uncomfortable with the personal information) may prove more problematic than the initial writing itself.

Although the written texts of victims can be disturbing, graphic, or painful, broad scale censorship or avoidance of these written themes is in fact never advised. It is important for students to know that if they risk crying out for help, an adult on the receiving end of the written text is going to risk asking the student if he/she would like to speak with a trained professional who may help. Additionally, if the cry for help involves abuse for students under the age of 18, students need to know that schools will immediately make a referral to local DSS divisions. Because disturbing or violent texts hold the potential to both leak violent inten-

tions and to provide a cathartic outlet for students faced with trauma, instructors should acknowledge that the silencing of either intent is potentially more harmful than beneficial, for both overall safety and personal well-being.

Educational Benefits

Writing begets better writing. We only improve as writers when we practice our written and spoken literacies in meaningful text activities. This basic premise of strong writing classrooms was highlighted by Applebee more than 30 years ago when he explained that in addition to being asked to write “more often” (99), students need to be engaged in meaningful written activities that require the production of new text and new meanings (in other words, limited multiple choice and fill in the blank activities across the disciplines, etc.). If English classrooms are bastions of intellectual freedom with equitable response to all student literacies, including those perhaps once viewed as unsanctioned or inappropriate for the classroom, then instructors must allow some creative license in the writing process.

In a study of adolescent girl literacies, including girls from high-poverty, violent-laden communities, Ma’ayan found that many adolescent girls failed to write of their violent communities and lifestyles because such themes were unwelcomed by instructors. When Ma’ayan allowed the girls outside opportunities to speak and write through their violent, crazy worlds, personal literacy improved, meaning students took a critical first step toward becoming improved literate citizens.

To teach students the value of intellectual freedom and to grow them as creative, powerful writers means we cannot shy away from uncomfortable themes. This includes avoiding censorship. Beyond the legal ramifications of censored student texts, censorship runs the greater risk of silencing the modern student voice and stunting literacy development. Even Roy argues the personal and violent voice still has a place in the classroom, even when it is unpredictable and uncomfortable.

But, it is important to note that while broad scale censorship of uncomfortable topics/themes is not recommended for the academic setting, “truly threatening speech is not constitutionally protected” (Oltman 26). In other words, freedom of creative expression does not mean that teachers should tolerate threatening expressions. Schools can take specific disciplinary steps to address threats, and they should address them swiftly. The challenge for teachers is determining whether violent or disturbing text is truly *threatening* or just weird. Because this challenge makes response to violent expressions difficult, the need for school and district leaders to support teachers with proper safe guards and strong threat assessment teams becomes even more critical when creativity proves challenging.

Proper Response to Violent Texts

As shown, violent writing is not necessarily a bad phenomenon within the academic setting. When responded to properly, such texts can serve a beneficial role

in the lives of student writers, including expanded creative thought, cathartic outlets, and improved written and literacy skills. But these benefits do not negate the fact that violent texts can also be leaked violent clues demanding a high higher level of broad-scale response, and for this reason, a balanced approach to these expressions is recommended.

The dual nature of violent expressions (resulting in both positive and negative outcomes) demands that schools and instructors take the time at the start of each new school year to carefully consider appropriate and sanctioned responses to violent texts. School leaders have no desire to see their staff plastered across the 6:00 p.m. news for arresting a young adolescent who wrote about killing a pet dinosaur. It does not help the school image and such extreme reactions can cause significant negative repercussions for students who actually communicated no known threat (long-term disciplinary reports that follow the student etc).

But on the other hand, school leaders have no desire to find themselves in the same situation as Virginia Tech with international stories about the way that the school avoided leaked clues from the deadly perpetrator. In fact, following many school shootings, schools, school boards, and educators have found themselves facing significant lawsuits for failure to address known leaked clues in advance of the tragedy.

To avoid either extreme, schools need to work closely with their instructors to determine a common language of response for student violent expressions. The response tips that follow provide a brief snapshot of potential actions leading to balanced educational responses. The tips can help successfully embrace, rather than censor or mishandle violent expressions. When these action steps are partnered with effective institutional threat and risk assessment procedures that are effectively communicated to call, good results will follow.

10 Instructor Tips

1. Acknowledge violent writing as a genre meriting the same consideration, and even expanded consideration, as other classroom genres
2. Realize that your own history, philosophies, thoughts and emotions may positively or negatively influence response
3. Realize that traditional educational assessments of violent texts may be an insufficient response
4. Avoid censorship because of personal discomfort, but recognize your freedom to identify limits of guidelines for written personal themes
5. Acknowledge the role of communication and speak safely with the violent writer
6. Know when to acknowledge your inability to properly respond and when to seek help from other professionals
7. Know your school's mental health policies and the institutional threat assessment process

8. Never assume a role beyond your expertise. You are not a threat assessor.
9. Share with students at the beginning of a course your anticipated approach or response to violent/disturbing texts, including your right to question, converse with other personnel, and/or contact guardians or institutional counselors (as appropriate and within FERPA or HIPAA guidelines)
10. Continuously revisit your anticipated responses to violent writing

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