Confessions from the Classroom: When and How Should WPAs Intervene?

Confession is deeply embedded in our culture. However, most of us do not want to see—much less invite—confessional writing from our students. At the same time, confessions enter into our students' writing regardless of whether or not we discourage such writing.

When we are faced with confessional writing that troubles us, I think we have to ask ourselves a number of questions. For example, what is the writer confessing? Why is she sharing very personal information? There may be urgencies that even she cannot clearly determine. To whom is she confessing? It's not always the teacher. What resolution is the writer seeking? Neither she nor the reader may be able to say. And most important, how do we as teachers respond? Teacher response is crucial, but often not without some form of consultation. With whom should the teacher consult? The student? Other teachers? A department or program administrator? A university counselor? A university pastor?

These questions can guide us toward a better appreciation of how confessional writing may measure a student’s self-understanding and moral growth. Below are some sources that focus on dealing with confessional writing:


Workshop activity (20 minutes):

- Break into groups and designate a recorder.
- Choose one of the six pieces to read through and respond to. Decide why your group finds this piece compelling.
- Respond to the following questions:
  - What, precisely, is the writer confessing?
  - Why is the writer confessing?
  - To whom is the writer confessing?
  - What resolution is the writer seeking?
  - How should teachers respond?
  - With whom should the teacher consult?

- Your group’s recorder will briefly summarize the piece your group chose and the responses you gave.

NOTE: Pseudonyms have been used in all writing samples below. None of the writing samples come from students at NIU. Identifying information has been removed or altered.
I've been thinking a lot about my research topic-- eating disorders. I'm ready to admit why I really chose this topic. For two and a half years now, I have been bulimic. It has been hell at times. And other times, I have almost overcome my problem.

Mom and I have talked many times about my disorder. She gives me all kinds of information and phone numbers to call for help. She's tried herself to help me, but I only end up lying to her.

I'm writing in the present tense, but I would like to clarify something. I'm confident that I have overcome bulimia. I've been exercising regularly and eating the right foods. As dad always says, "Nobody can do this for you, kid. You have to do it yourself." And I am.

I look back and try to remember how it all began. All through junior high and half-way through high school, I had been involved in sports. But after volleyball my junior year, I "retired." I continued to eat large quantities of food. I was never worried about what I ate before. I was always known as the "bean-pole" on the team. But one day, mom confronted me. "Joan, you're getting fat." She explained metabolism and all that "crap." It went in one ear and out the other. I continued my normal eating habits.

Then I can remember the night Jodie stayed overnight. She was very weight-conscious. We had just finished "pigging out" on Cookies 'n' Cream ice-cream-- our favorite. Jodie went into the bathroom and purged. I freaked out at first. I had never known anyone to do this before. That's when I got the idea into my head that I could eat as much as I wanted to, or more, and still be thin. I never realized I was only hurting myself.

I began to eat my meals alone. I was very irritable and many times depressed. I thought about food 24 hours a day. I even dreamed about it!! I was obsessed. My mom began to notice a change in me, and she finally confronted me with her suspicion. That was one of the worst moments of my life. Admitting to my mother, a health teacher, that I had an eating disorder. It crushed her.

She arranged for me to see a counselor (which I was totally against) but I went anyway. I learned why my cheeks were swollen and my stomach looked like a watermelon. I learned why my singing voice had changed for the worse and why I was so moody. I also learned I wasn't the only one in the world with an eating disorder.

Just recently I told my best friend, Susie, about my past problem. I felt and still feel ashamed about it. I feel like I'm less of a person and weak because of it. I remember her reaction. "I thought you had an eating disorder, but I didn't know for sure, so I just kept quiet." She had noticed my desire to eat alone or leave before everyone else to "go to the bathroom." She also noticed that I constantly talked about food and meals.

It has been very hard to overcome this problem. I don't feel I can honestly say I am cured, but for four months I've been "normal." I still think I am overweight, but I know I can overcome that through a healthy diet and regular exercise.

I want to do my research paper on eating disorders for my own benefit. I still think I am overweight, but I know I can overcome that through a healthy diet and regular exercise. I also want to do my research paper on eating disorders for my own benefit. It will be a way of "counseling" myself. There are a lot of things I still don't know and understand about bulimia and anorexia. This will give me an opportunity to obtain much more information about these conditions.

I wrote this for myself. I've never wrote about it before and by doing so, I feel relieved-- "lighter." Thank you for being a good listener.

Over the past few days I have actually begun to do something which I thought I never would really have to do. I am in fear for my life. It seems that Carl is not satisfied with my explanation of what Megan and I did to his section of our collaborative essay. All we did was change the wording to make it a little less graphic, but he seems convinced that we omitted the most important part of his portion. My life was threatened unless I put these words back into a paper that has already been handed in. Well, he just said that he knows my phone number and where I live. We told Carl where and when we were meeting to tie all the loose ends of the paper together. The first time our group met he went weight lifting with my roommate. The second time we got together he opted not to show up at all. We only did what we felt was necessary as editors of the paper. We did nothing in malice, only for the betterment of the entire essay. I don't really know what to do now. I'm afraid to work with him on our other assignments. Who knows what he may pull on us.
WRITER #3: a response to an in-class evaluation of a drafting workshop. Students were to describe what they intended to change in their drafts. Shortly after the writer provides this response, she catches up on work but stops being a class leader and demonstrates signs of depression.

I'm sorry I've been absent and falling behind on my assignments lately. I haven't been thinking much about schoolwork since last week when my roommate was raped. She's been going out with this guy on the football team, and Saturday he and some others on the team (yes, more than one) attacked her in his room. When she came back to our dorm, she was a mess. I asked her what happened, but I couldn't get her to stop crying for a while before she finally told me. I was shocked. I convinced her that we should go down to the police station. She didn't want to go at first, but I told her we had to go so I drove her. When we got there, this woman came and took her into a room where she asked her all these questions. Then I called her parents and they came (she lives in a town 10 miles from here). It was awful. We ended up going to the hospital, where she was examined and we talked her into pressing charges. Then she went back home with her parents for a few days.

Sunday, I was numb. I didn't want to talk to anyone, but my boyfriend came over. If he hadn't stayed with me, I probably would have gone out of my mind. I kept crying, so he held me a lot and stayed around most of the day. Monday I didn't go to any classes and sat alone my room. I couldn't concentrate on anything and I hardly ate. On Tuesday the draft for my research paper was due, but I didn't have anything written and just couldn't face being in class when I was feeling so bad. Then on Wednesday, my roommate came back and we both tried to go to classes. We have a class with a good friend of one of the guys, but he just sat there like nothing had happened. Later that day we were walking and two of the guys who did it walked by. My roommate got freaked out, so I got her back to our dormitory where I managed to calm her down a little. But she finally called her parents to tell them to take her home again.

Since then, I've been on the phone with her a lot. She didn't tell me right away, but now she's saying she doesn't want to go through with the charges. She says she just can't face it. I'm so upset and angry. I've tried everything I could think of to talk her out of it. I can't believe it. But that's not the worst. Now she's decided to drop it, the University has turned around and said they might sue her for pressing false charges! I'm so sick of the whole thing I don't even want to talk to her anymore. She can't decide if she's going to come back to school. She's probably won't finish this semester, because she's afraid she'll keep running into the guy she was dating again. I see him and the others all the time when I go to classes and I want to scream at them. I've told my parents I want to go home this weekend, so they said they'd come and get me. They know what's happened, and they've been so good. I only hope I'll feel okay after a few days away from here.

WRITER #4: a response to the first assignment of the semester, reflecting on a memorable writing, reading, listening, or speaking experience. The student stops attending after two classes.

I think that I have always been able to express myself-- my thoughts, feelings, and ideas-- better on paper than I ever could with my words. It has always seemed that when I tried to explain these to someone that I would say something wrong or I would twist my words, and someone would end up getting hurt or upset. For me, it seems that when I want to explain my feelings, I want to explain them to someone with an open ear-- an invisible entity with whom I can confide everything.... Someone to listen who won't give me a look of indifference or an apology. These are the reasons that I write.... There is one experience that I would like to share that made me a stronger person-- both in and outside of my writing. I won't go into much detail, as this has been a particularly painful experience for me, but my experience with my ex-boyfriend, Nick, has encouraged my writing.

I was in a relationship with Nick for three years-- from the middle of my freshman year in high school through the middle of my senior year. At first, it was a very healthy relationship. But as the months turned into years, Nick became more possessive and controlling, limiting what I could do and who I could do it with. Finally, after two years, he started hitting me. I tried to leave him so many times, but every time I left, Nick would find me and I would end up getting beat worse than before. Finally, last February I found the strength to tell someone about what Nick was doing to me, and my mother and I left for [this state] early the next morning. I was gone for a week, and after that I never went back to him. He tried all sorts of ways to get back at me. He tried to beat me up at the high school, he cut the brake lines on my car, but I never went back.

Through my experience with Nick, my writing took a turn from more pleasant writing to dark, gloomy poetry. It also shows how much I've grown up through the three years we were together. I guess that all these experiences show how through painful times my writing has improved, and it shows that for me, pain in writing is a definite motivator.
WRITER #5: a response to an interview assignment requiring the perspective of someone close to the writer—in preparation for writing an autobiography. As with almost every other assignment, the student focuses on the results of excessive drinking.

My friendship began in seventh grade with Gary. I met him through one of my friends, Rick. The way we really became friends is through a cop escapade in seventh grade. One night, after we stole a teacher's car, we drove out to a desolate graveyard in Fern Hills where we were just hanging out. Suddenly, we saw two headlights coming towards us, catching us by total surprise. We then jumped into the car and proceeded to evade the oncoming automobile, to our surprise, two revolving red and blue lights showed up in our rear-view mirror. After trying to outrun the pursuing cop, we had no choice but to pull over and face the oncoming consequences.... Oh boy, did the shit hit the fan, but it made Gary and me friends for life.

College life, unlike most other friendships with my other friends, has proven to pull us together rather than apart. One test of true friendship is when I was stuck in jail because of driving while intoxicated and he came to my rescue, keeping my parents clueless of what really happened. My test of friendship is when we went to a club and he had a skirmish with some other guy in the club and I backed him up in the fight. We both were kicked out, but it didn't matter because we protected each other like family.

One night while hanging out with some friends I decided to go to a party one of our friends was throwing. After walking to a friend's house, I bumped into Gary and began drinking with him. We began to make this hellacious punch mix. We began putting in all sorts of crazy things like beer, vodka, rum, ecstasy, spiced rum, and some other forms of aphrodisiacs. Knowing what we had done to the punch, we began to ask people to try it, seeing what it would do to them. One particular girl, Nadine, drank the most, saying it was the best damn drink she ever had. Other people tried it and were very displeased with the taste and wondered what was in it. We told them that it was all natural ingredients, with a chuckle to the side. Nadine, in her drunken state, wanted to go outside and walk around, so Gary and I took advantage of the situation and became her horny bodyguards. We both took advantage of her, which to this day we both regret, but at the time we just didn't care. Later that night, Gary and I went walking around the block and were jumped by some people. Actually, we were mugged by a group of people. We found out the next day that one of the guys there had gone to the same junior high with us, so we pulled our friends together and proceeded to get even, making him wish that he was never there that night.

Gary was definitely one of the drinking buddies whom I would do anything for.... All in all, we know that we have learned from each other's mistakes and grown into adults from our experience we've shared together.

WRITER #6: an email response to a notice that the writer will fail because he's accumulated 5 weeks' absences and a backlog of work that can't be made up. The writer begins coming to class again (always late) and showing up during all the teacher's office hours, demonstrating highly disruptive, irrational, aggressive, panicked behavior.

I cannot express how important it is for me to complete this class.... My soul cannot take it if I had to repeat this class a third time, a class which I know I can succeed in.... I know I have never, since the beginning of this semester, given you a reason to trust me. So I have no quarrel with you reading this email and thinking, "Why should I trust him now?"...

My last two weeks have been a nightmare. Just as my life began to slow down and I started to take control of my life, my lover gets put in the hospital for a week because of kidney stones and I come down with the flu, on top of everything, carrying a 104 temperature. I was taking care of every aspect of the company and school and so on and so forth, it is no wonder my body broke down and screamed at me "ANDREW WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO TO ME!!" But I still did it. I did the work and I can turn it all into you. Nine weeks of journal writings, which was easier than I expected, one essay and two short-writes. And I've begun something that I haven't done in five years. I've put my schooling first. I'm almost caught up in all my classes and in two weeks I will be ahead because I have truly changed my whole outlook on school.

I beg of you to give me just one more chance.... There is someone inside of me that has the ability to succeed and I think I have found him again. I would love the opportunity to prove this to you.