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An Evolution of Writer's Notebooks: Authenticity and the Power of Writing in a Pandemic

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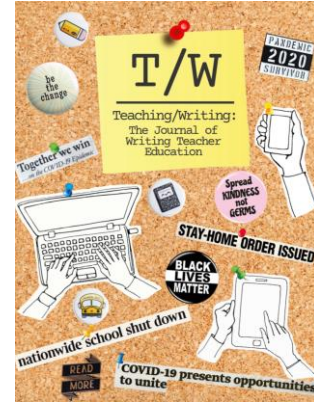
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An Evolution of Writer's Notebooks: Authenticity and the Power of Writing in a Pandemic

Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to acknowledge course colleagues and program faculty for their influence in this article.



An Evolution of Writer's Notebooks: Authenticity and the Power of Writing in a Pandemic

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Authenticity is critically important to use as teachers of diverse writers and writing: authenticity in relationships with our students and each other, in invitations to compose, and in the connections we make between coursework, colleagues, and our lives outside of school. In this article, we, Alex (a teacher candidate) and Sarah (a teacher educator), share our experiences of learning and teaching in one section of a writing methods course at a Midwestern university during COVID-19. Our narrative centers on a single component of the course—the writer's notebook—and how it shifted in focus and outcomes during the spring 2020 semester. We draw on Whitney's (2011) definition of authentic assignments to frame our thinking as we collectively process the evolution of the writer's notebooks in our learning community. Specifically, Whitney defines authentic assignments as "work that is in some way meaningful beyond the context of school" (p. 51). In offering our early observations and selected reflections from our course colleagues, we emphasize the power of writing and echo the necessity of authentic writing assignments, especially during COVID-19, when our commitment to these always-important values was disrupted.

Writer's notebook: An Overview

The writer's notebook is a semester-long inquiry that provides an informal but dedicated space to record our individual thinking about concepts, methods, terms, ideas, and impressions important to us as we engage with materials and dialogue with others. The notebook has historically been introduced as a place for notes and, perhaps more importantly, for wrestling with ideas and trying out language for emerging understandings of what it means to cultivate writerly identities and grow in socially just teaching of the English Language Arts. Below, we include excerpts from Sarah's spring 2020 syllabus to provide further context:

I'd like for you to organize your writer's notebook in a way that makes sense to you, and I ask that you include deliberate sections, using titles/language of your choice. Here are a few ideas, though any purposeful framing will work: a section for starting your writing (academic, creative, personal, etc.); a section for general thinking related to our course; a section for notes on class discussion; a section for

annotations and responses to our texts; a section for planning major projects; a section for documenting clinical fieldwork.

At various points in the semester I might give you specific prompts to respond to or ask you to continue a line of inquiry from our shared class discussion in your writer's notebook. I'd like you to bring it (and use it) in class, take it to your field placements, and be prepared to share parts with me during conferencing.

I will not ask that you turn the whole book in for assessment or evaluation: this space is for you and your processing of our work and your development (or continuation) of a writerly identity. So, while I will ask to see parts of it at various points this term, I will not ever collect it. To be clear, I expect that you're using your writer's notebook for evidencing your thinking by annotating and citing our texts and colleagues and discussions as a means for talking back to them and rehearsing ideas as they connect to your identity as a writer and socially just teaching of writing/writers.

In situating the notebook, it's important to mention that versions of the notebook have been in use in this course and courses throughout the methods sequence, meaning, the act of jotting, recording, and reflecting in a daybook or journal format is a common part of our program's culture. Students and instructors care about, for example, capturing ideas for the purposes of tracing the emergence of understanding over time. We share this point to demonstrate that the notebook is less an isolated activity or assessment and more a natural extension of documenting the discoveries we make as educators.

We view this work as rooted in authenticity because its intent is to record noticings and wonderings that are meaningful to us at various intersections of learning about teaching diverse writers and writing and thinking about being a writer across our program. And while that intellectual and emotional labor grows out of an academic space, it informs dispositions and writerly habits that are foundational for a sustained career in education. Our focus here is the way the notebook was framed this semester and how the ways it was put into practice, and its authenticity, shifted as we migrated from in-person learning to alternative instructional modalities in a moment of extended trauma.

Notebooks and the Transition Online

Our university announced a move to virtual platforms during spring break in mid-March. Instructors were given a week to adjust modes of delivery for teaching, during which Sarah rethought course objectives and outcomes and sought the most productive spaces for continued learning. Critical to her decision-making was the solicitation of feedback from student colleagues. She sent out a brief survey about preferences, anticipated challenges, and the perceived benefits of retaining specific aspects of the course. Results suggested

that we wanted, as much as possible, to keep going as planned, but with modifications. Sarah read this to include a continuation of the writer's notebooks.

In an effort to be responsive to the moment and honor our collective commitment to authentic teaching and learning in community with others, Sarah began each of the remaining weeks of the semester with a specific writing prompt¹. Previously she might have suggested we use our notebooks to flesh out our thinking on a thread from class discussion or record a specific quote or idea; now Sarah provided more structure to our writing with pointed questions. Sarah shared the following in an announcement on our course Blackboard page the Sunday of our first week back:

Week 11 (March 22, 2020):

How are you doing?

Take some time to log your recent experiences in writing. My goal is for you to get back into (or continue) the habit of writing and have documentation in your notebook of how you're moving through the world in this particular moment. [I realize this may be too traumatic a moment for some of you. The goal for you, then, might be to refocus on your role as student or write to meditate on a personal affirmation.]

Sarah's goal was to post a scaffolded set of invitations to writing for the remainder of the term that worked to reorient student colleagues to course objectives while recognizing the very real threats to meeting those objectives as we navigated fears about COVID-19, like how it might affect our own health, the health of those we care about, student teaching, future employment, and related concerns. A focus on the personal and wellbeing is always imperative in any learning space; though, like the earlier point about the threat to powerful writing and authentic teaching and learning in a pandemic, writing in response to basic needs struck Sarah as acute.

Colleague Reflections

The final prompt asked for reflections on the writer's notebooks from the last half of the semester. More concretely, Sarah posted the following in her Sunday announcement:

¹ Week 12: Spend some (safe) time outside: what are you noticing?; Week 13: What does learning and teaching look like during COVID-19? What could or should it look like?; Week 14: How might you update your Unit Plan [summative course assessment] to be more responsive to students in this time of COVID-19?

Week 15 (April 19, 2020)

Please select the most notable pages from the last eight weeks of your notebook to informally share with colleagues in our FlipGrid. [...] I'd like you to narrate your selected excerpts and share them with our larger learning community. Our goal is reflection and a "think forward," meaning, I'd like you to look back and consider your take-aways from our texts and conversations since the midpoint, and then connect them with what's ahead. I'm hopeful you'll select material from various sections of your notebook, perhaps including writing from before and after we migrated online, but the final decision is yours. You'll have up to ten minutes for this task.

We reviewed the posts in our newly formed class FlipGrid (an online platform for asynchronous discussion via short videos) and the responses from our colleagues were telling: most pointed to significant changes in how they used their writer's notebooks, which offered us important insights on how the notebooks functioned and what that might mean for future use in the methods course and middle and high school classrooms. While all of our colleagues' reflective posts were valuable and commented on the transition's effects on their thinking and writing, we highlight excerpts from transcriptions (used with permission) from the most compelling videos to support our observations about how the notebooks served us before and in the early weeks of Coronavirus.

Colleague 1

"Ever since the 'how are you doing?' prompt [...] my writer's notebook has felt like a writer's notebook. Up until that point [...] even though I knew the invitation was there to use it as a space for writing about the things that I'm feeling or noticing, or just wanting to think about during the first half of the semester, it wasn't until I really felt so urged [...] that I felt like I needed to put out on the page [...] feelings and stuff [...] that I was able to buy into my [course notebook] as a space to do that. [...] It's not just my notes, or [...] super dramatic daily notes, or [...] just one thing. And, I think the notion that I had in my brain of what a course notebook is was very 'notes, basics, boring.' I didn't see a notebook as a dynamic space that can take whatever it is that I needed to do in writing, or just think about."

Colleague 2

"Once we switched over to all completely online, and we started getting writing prompts, I don't know why, I for some reason felt like I couldn't write those in this [holds up original writer's notebook] so I have two notebooks that I have been writing in [holds up a second notebook]. [...] I think we're all teachers, like there's still teachers in this [second notebook], but I think we're all learners in this. [...] I feel like my writer's notebook is different. And I think that's why I started writing in a new notebook. It didn't feel like it belonged with my academic thinking [...] now I feel like this [second] writer's notebook is

something new. It's something I was never considering before like thinking about this kind of thing, like, okay, let's prepare. And, thinking ahead, and thinking about ourselves. [...] I feel like this event changed my writing, and I kind of like it."

Our colleague spoke until the ten minute limit on the post, then posted again to add to their reflection. Key quotes from the added post include the following:

"I'm a different writer and also, that I think that we don't realize how much writing can be there for us. [...] I want to give that gift to students. I want to have prompts like this where it's not just about exit slips about what you learned today [...] I want to create an environment where they can turn to writing. [...] Writing isn't just about academics. You can [...] just write about yourself and what's going on and it still counts."

Colleague 3

"Things kind of changed a little bit especially with the writing prompts. [...] Through this writing experience I did actually feel much more connected with my own writerly identity. [...] I really appreciated those writing prompts; [they] made my writer's notebook feel more personal to me. [...] I loved that this pandemic made me think about teaching in ways that I never thought about before."

Colleague 4

"Okay, honestly, when we switched to online learning, I really liked [it because] spending time just writing is something that I have a hard time doing. [...] I have a journal, but it's mostly just a gratitude journal instead of a cohesive text. [...] So, I really loved the prompts, thinking about 'spending time outside.' Just [...] getting in touch [...] with who I am."

Colleague 5

"I really enjoyed the prompts being proposed to us because I felt like it was a good-sided way to process things. I think, in the past, I've definitely used writing before to cope with different situations. [...] I've lost a lot of the personal writing that I used to do, so this was a good way to keep myself on track and to hold myself accountable for my thoughts. [...] I think a lot of it [the prompts] helped me process the situation itself and understand how I can respond to it as an educator."

Reflecting on Colleague Reflections

It was difficult for us to choose representative samples of our colleagues' reflections on the writer's notebooks: every post offered rich meditations on writing, thinking, learning, teaching, and *being* in a precarious moment. We selected the above excerpts based on a pattern of themes of authenticity and the power of writing in a pandemic. Our colleagues noted the binary between schoolish writing in their notebooks in the first half of the semester and the more personal, authentic writing that emerged in the second half, how the writing prompts and the date shaped their entries, the deep impact of writing to process

feelings and, separately, ideas about teaching, and the appreciation for time to write. Each of these threads in the larger collective of reflection calls us to consider both the ways we invite writers into keeping writer's notebooks in a classroom context and how invitations are taken up in different ways depending on certain factors.

For Alex, an examination of colleague reflections coupled with her own experiences as a student in the course confirmed for her the significance of routine, community, and a place for being vulnerable in writing. The writer's notebook fulfilled these needs for her in the post-COVID classroom. She notes that the way the pandemic shifted the class was indescribable. For so long, the cohort relied heavily on the physical presence of each other, which created a bond, a bond that was recreated through a community on FlipGrid where colleagues were able to communicate asynchronously through video. Although the pandemic made us feel stagnant at times, the semester continued, and so did our work. One thing that was critical to Alex and others was keeping up the writer's notebooks. Before the pandemic, the writer's notebook was a place for her to take notes about the texts we were reading in class, comments that colleagues would mention, and somewhere to jot a note about what she was curious about, or wanted to learn more about. What it was not was a place to be extremely personal and vulnerable. While the invitation was always there—the notebook as a place where we *could* be vulnerable—oftentimes, it was an academic space for Alex. However, when the pandemic happened, Sarah began giving the class prompts to write about in the notebooks. These prompts helped Alex and others feel grounded in a time where everything else seemed to be so uncertain.

For Sarah, a key take-away centers on the use of prompts in the writer's notebooks. While she offered the occasional prompt for colleagues prior to the shift online, Sarah was purposeful in providing more structured openings to writing in response to colleagues' requests for "routine" in light of pandemic learning. She recognizes how the nature of those prompts, the first few of which were focused on wellbeing rather than, say, curriculum development, opened opportunities for colleagues to reimagine the purpose of the notebooks toward a more authentic space for writing. Many colleague's reflections indicate that the shift online, the prompts, and the time to write was a boon to their conceptualization of themselves as writers, students, and teacher candidates preparing to teach diverse writers. Most impactful for Sarah is her knowledge that this kind of empathy-driven instruction is always central to teaching for social justice, but, in reviewing the reflections of those in her class, she sees now how essential those prompts were in offering reassurance during the special kind of dread we were all experiencing. The structure of the weekly prompts and the prompts themselves served to bear witness to the trauma of the moment and link non-school experiences with teaching and learning in lasting ways.

We understand our individual and collective conclusions from our examination of the writer's notebooks to hold significance for what's ahead. Specifically, Alex sees potential for writer's notebooks in the secondary classroom as part of her socially just curricula. She

envisions these notebooks as spaces for students to do the authentic kinds of self-discovery and “therapy” she and her methods colleagues did when writing during COVID-19. Sarah is considering weekly prompts in future semesters that more effectively solicit the kinds of authentic writing we generated this last spring. She will emphasize how authentic writing is powerful because it sustains us in ways that are more than academic. For both of us, the commitment to continuing writer’s notebooks is strong, as we agree with our colleagues’ reflections that the content captured in the notebooks speaks to the power of writing in a multitude of moments.

Reference

Whitney, A. E. (2011). In search of the authentic English classroom: Facing the schoolishness of school. *English Education*, 44(1), 51-62.

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