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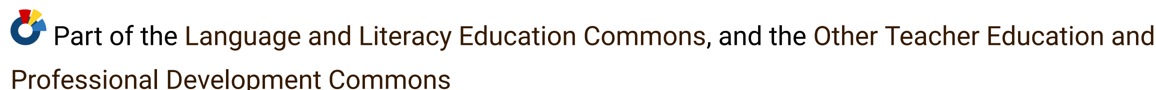

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Teachers Writing, Healing, and Resisting

Anne Elrod Whitney, *Pennsylvania State University*

For at least the past twenty years, writing education and writing teacher education have been carried out in more and more tightly managed, neoliberally influenced policy conditions as well as worsening conditions of inequality in educational resources based on both race and on income. The result is increasingly dehumanizing conditions for teaching and learning writing. When we care about young people and their writing experiences, yet have to do our work amidst dehumanizing forces, we just feel bad when our work is constrained in ways the ways that we currently find it constrained.

This precarious situation for teaching, and particularly those bad feelings, intersect in interesting ways with the history of the "teacher as writer," the notion that in order to teach writing well, teachers must integrate regular writing into their professional activities. Here I am going to re-raise and reframe the idea of the teacher-writer in a way that I think opens up possibilities for resilience and resistance-- both in teachers' individual lives, and for teachers in the collective sense.

Note that I use the term *teacher-writer* (Whitney et al., 2013, 2014) rather than "teacher as writer." I do this intentionally: "teacher as writer" suggests that these are two different roles, and that a teacher can move into the role of writer from time to time, then move back into the teacher role. In contrast, *teacher-writer* puts both teaching and writing into one person: the teacher never stops being a writer, and the writer never stops being a teacher, with both teaching and writing being integrated into a person's work.

In my second year in the classroom, I was one of a small group of teachers who met every two or three weeks as a writing group. At that time I think our strategy was an emailed doc and a phone call (a long-distance call, I'll note, on my landline); thankfully, collaboration on documents has since become much easier. We would write before meeting, often about our teaching, but just as often about

our love lives, or families, or anything. Then we'd share the work for feedback. This did for me what all kinds of teacher inquiry have done for teachers for so many years: it made my problems interesting and shareable. My struggles in teaching were no longer simply evidence of my own flaws; now they connected to the struggles of so many in our field. My colleagues and I helped each other work through the struggles, and eventually those struggles could even turn into pride; my very first publication was cowritten with those women in a newsletter. That first land-line teacher writing group I worked with did more than help me solve classroom problems or rekindle my writing life: writing cured, continues to cure, my shame. It helped me be well enough to remain in the classroom and to fight for the right to teach as the wisdom of our field tells me I should.

Though none of us seems to speak much about it, shame (Adamson & Clark, 1999; Brown, 2006; Whitney, 2018) was a part of my teaching life from my first days in the classroom, and teachers have frequently shared with me in interviews and writing groups that the same is true for them. It was shame—specifically, the feeling that not only was I lacking in particular skills or had made a mistake in some way, but that I was also lacking, or that teaching was, for me, a mistake, and that I would never be strong enough to meet the students' needs (or to satisfy myself). Sometimes I made the decision, before a class had even begun, to switch to a less risky (and less engaging) lesson plan because I just wasn't up to experiencing the pain of having the class reject something I offered or refuse to try. More to the point, I frequently felt ashamed of myself for teaching something I'd been provided with that I knew wasn't best for kids yet didn't have the energy or the authority to push back against. You know: the kind of teaching that makes you feel like a hypocrite.

Knowing that others share in similar struggle is helpful, but what was most helpful for me was writing about and from my teaching. When the class dropped into writing time, I did too, jotting a quick reflection on how I was feeling or what I was wondering that day. When I lay awake worrying about school, I opened a notebook, jotted about my worries, then went on to sleep. I let this writing be just notes, not really thinking of an audience, yet simply articulating what was happening for me made a difference.

When I wrote about my experiences in the classroom, those experiences became a story, and I could see them as a reader With more of an outside perspective, I could see myself as a character. And I could see themes in the story, and I could sometimes see very clearly that whatever I was writing about wasn't my fault. I could be much more compassionate toward this me-on-paper than I could be to myself off paper. Sometimes I could even see that whatever I was dealing with that was hard: it wasn't hard because I was stupid, or doing it wrong-- it was hard because it's hard! Many of us feel ashamed of a kind of hypocrisy when we find ourselves teaching in ways that conflict with what we know is best.

Yet this feeling of shame and the impossibility of the issues that cause it, don't outweigh the goodness of our better work, or our worth as teachers or as people. These feelings call for compassion, not blame or shame. Writing about my teaching gave me the perspective I needed for that compassion. The perspective available in writing, the way I could change the narrator to someone more loving; the way I could sympathize with my own self as a kind of character as I wrote--these things helped me to be attentive to myself. They helped me to be kind enough to myself, and thus to remain in a healthy enough frame of mind, to continue trying to do better. When you're able to look at your experiences and thoughts and feelings written on the page, you can often cut that on-the-page person some slack—more than we usually do with ourselves.

So, think back to the notion of teacher as writer. I'm just one teacher-writer, but the stories I have shared here are tied to the larger history of this persistent notion that teachers should also be writers. This notion that teachers of writing must also write has been a theme in writing education consistently from the early 1980s through today; as time has passed, that theme has manifested in different narratives about *how* teachers should write and *why* this is important. First was that rationale that a teacher writing helped students through modeling as well as empathy as fellow members of a community of writers. As time passed, an additional rationale for teachers writing developed, that teachers should write in order to learn about their teaching, as in writing for reflection, or writing in connection with teacher inquiry or teacher research. Third came the possibility that teachers who write might better insert their voices into dominating discourses about education (Fredricksen et al., 2009; Whitney, 2009; Whitney et al., 2012).

Even after all this, teacher-writers can also have important impact on their own well-being and resilience amidst the very challenging conditions of the teaching profession. I am talking about writing for self-care. And with that, writing for survival, for self-advocacy, and for resistance.

You change the oil in your car. You water the plants. You feed your pets. If a window breaks in your house, you fix it. You don't just leave a hole there! Each of us deserves to be cared for at least as much as a car or a plant or a pet or a window. Each of us is a unique masterpiece, a beautiful human who deserves nurture and support. I assert that we are responsible for caring for ourselves in body, emotions, mind, and soul the same way we're responsible for caring for our hygiene, like brushing our teeth, or bathing, or splinting broken bones. Nothing that's uncared for can really thrive. When people in "helping professions" like teaching commit to self-care and form habits around it, they reap benefits such as improved medical outcomes, some protection from and resiliency to mental and emotional stressors, lower rates of burnout and exhaustion, increases in attention, and improved relationships in the workplace context (Coaston, 2017; Kim-Godwin et al., 2020; Lantieri et al., 2016; Sinats et al., 2005).

However, when I browse my social media or talk with acquaintances about social media, I too often hear ideas about self-care that may not be so helpful in real life. Sometimes people suggest that self-care is greedy, as though if you care for yourself you also will not care for others: "me time" as selfish, something we take rather than something to which we are entitled. Other times, ideas about self-care are often gendered and condescending, or racist, or similarly connected to harmful discourses. As such, they can actually be a tool of further oppression. For example, "get a pedicure" is one way to care for your body, but I don't think many people say that to men who face excessive stress; the employer who puts scented candles in the ladies' restroom would probably do better to give the employees a raise in pay instead. Then we can buy our own candles. Even when this discourse is not specifically oppressive in the sense of differences in power, self-care discourse often minimizes the situation of the suffering person. I'm thinking, for example, of the "teacher appreciation breakfasts" my children's schools put on. These are delicious, and breakfast is a healthy way to begin the day. It's a genuine act of kindness by the parents who supply the breakfast. But, how does a morning of fresh-baked muffins twice a year really help you cope with stressors in the job of teaching, like vicarious trauma you experience through the children you work with every day, or the cumulative physical and psychological effects of sleep deprivation born of late-night grading born of an indecent workload?

Instead, I think we need self-care that cuts right to the heart of problems in teaching that harm us. This kind of self-care addresses ourselves from multiple dimensions including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It attends to our individual activities and behaviors, like exercising, journaling, taking time for rest, seeking therapy, and so on. However, but it also takes into account matters of context, like identities, the experiences we are having and our access to resources, and environmental factors like policies, the prevailing culture, and wide structures of institutional organization (El-Ostal et al., 2019).

When we think of self-care in this way, we escape from the trap of feeling that self-care is yet another thing we're doing wrong. That way of viewing self-care just makes me feel like I'll never improve, since I find it hard enough to take enough showers, do laundry before the underwear runs out, or take a multivitamin.

Instead, this is self-care for survival, for power, for resistance. We can frame self-care as building our resilience so that we can not only withstand the current conditions for teaching but so we can also reposition ourselves in more powerful and intentional ways, and so in turn we might resist and, ultimately transform these systems and conditions in which we find ourselves. In doing so, I honor a tradition modeled by so many Black women whose collective and individual experiences of oppression make self-care radical (Ahmed, 2014; Lorde, 1988; Nayak, 2020; Scott, 2016). We care for ourselves as teachers so that we may change conditions like feeling we must buy pencils, much less food, for children who haven't even eaten

before coming to school. Or being the only adult in the room when a child who has survived abuse or other trauma finally chooses to talk about it, or perhaps can't help lashing out in anger. Or reading, again and again, editorials and letters to the editor saying our work is to blame for the significant inequities that permeate our societies. Or working with students with needs related to disabilities or still-developing English language skills that we want to meet, but for which we have not been educated and for which specialists are not available in the school. Or facing mandates to teach in ways that we know conflict with what research shows is best, or prepare students for tests that are poorly designed and actually undermine much good teaching yet will be used to determine our own next year's salary. We can only stand to fight these things if we can survive them, understand them, and unite with the others who experience them. For these we need self-care.

Writing is a powerful tool for self-care, and as teachers of English who already possess the rich history and tradition of being teacher-writers that I have reviewed here, we are especially well-poised to make good use of that tool. Writing has been shown to benefit writers in all the ways that matter for self-care: writing heals in many ways, physical and emotional. Some of the ways expressive writing has been shown to benefit writers include:

Writing to process situations, writing to heal. Writing helps the writer transform a jumbled set of details in a memory to a more coherent narrative. It works this way: have you ever had a car accident? At first, when you try to explain what you experienced, the details are in no order, and your recollections are more like a flood of input that comes in a torrent. But the more you tell your story (to healthcare workers, police, family, concerned, friends, etc.), the more it congeals into a fairly consistent story that makes sense. In cases of traumatic experiences, narrativizing experiences in this way contributes to healing, as evidenced in outcomes such as reduced depression and/or anxiety, reduction in symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome, reduction in sleep disturbances, and reported improvement in general well-being. Some of these effects can be attributed to disclosure (whether the writing is actually read by others or not), whereas other effects stem from the composition of the narrative and corresponding coherence in and understanding of complex factors (C. M. Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000, 2000; Bolton, 1999; Connolly Baker & Mazza, 2004; DeSalvo, 1999; J. Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; J. W. Pennebaker, 1990, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2003; J. W. Pennebaker & Smyth, 2017; Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009; Wright & Chung, 2001).

Writing to understand. discern, and discover. It has long been acknowledged that writing not only records thoughts, it also generates thoughts and changes thoughts. That is, you don't just write down what you already think or know; writing can also show us things we didn't already know (e.g. realizing new aspects of a topic, or making new connections among ideas) (P. Anderson et al., 2015; Blau, 1991; Emig, 1977; McAvoy & Core, 2000). These might include

feelings we weren't aware we were having, patterns in our thinking or behavior, or relationships between ideas (such as cause and effect) of which we had been unaware.

Writing to plan or to set intentions for future action. Writing can also be a method for envisioning possible future outcomes, for making future plans, or for setting intentions and goals. These aims for writing follow from uses of writing for reflection. After all, the point of reflection isn't just to think about something again; it's to modify one's actions or to see situations and actions in a new way when similar circumstances arise again (Whitney et al., 2019).

Writing as a form of mindfulness, meditation or prayer. Writing consistently appears as a feature in many settings for contemplation, prayer, or mindfulness activities. For example, someone might keep a prayer journal, pray in the form of letters to God, or write as a mindful practice, as in a "Mindfulness Writing Group" active in my local area and in others like it elsewhere (Brody & Park, 2004; Damico & Whitney, 2017; Poon & Danoff-Burg, 2011).

With all this evidence, it would seem that every teacher—no, every person—who knows of it must be writing frequently, in order to get all these benefits for ourselves, right?

No. We think, "well, that's cute, but I don't have time for self-care; I have papers to grade. Or, I can't do self-care until the week is over, until the marking period is over, until the term or even the year is over." More to the point: "You want me to do ANOTHER THING? I am drowning already!"

Yes, I do. Choose your adage or metaphor: secure your own mask before helping others. You can't pour from an empty cup. Pay yourself first. You can't give what you don't have. We are obviously going to be better able to work with students if our inner resources are not completely tapped out. But the self-care I am talking about goes way beyond that. I think we, teachers, are on our own fully worthy of being cared for as well. That is, our only value, and hence the reason to engage self-care, is not only for students, although of course that is important.

I do want us to write to be alongside the students in our classes, both to empathize with them and to model for them. And I do want us to write to support inquiry that we do as teachers and to support sharing that learning with our colleagues. I do want us to write to raise the credibility and influence of teachers in the research literature of our profession, and I do want us to write so that we can participate in civic deliberation about education and so that parents, policymakers, and basically everyone can hear from inside classrooms instead of talking about classrooms from outside.

But also, I want us to write so that we can heal trauma—both our own, accumulated in the course of a life, and that which we experience vicariously through our students. I want us to write so we can feel good at the end of a school day. So that we can stay in this profession. So that we can teach long and well.

Most of all, I want us to write because I see it as a responsibility for us as a group. We teachers need writing in order to make ourselves the best possible advocates for the needs of children on a grand scale and the best possible teacher for each individual human child with whom we are entrusted every day. If we fail to care for ourselves, then we have no energy for advocacy, or for action.

Writing for self-care helps us discern what we value, principles and purposes that underlie our work. Further, writing for self-care helps us to understand what we're up against. We need to be writing to get to the bottom of what holds us back. Some of the things that hold us back are policies, systems of oppression, realities outside.

To survive and overcome systems that standardize educational spaces (Shannon, 2013; Shannon et al., 2014; Whitney & Shannon, 2014) for the sake of creating "markets," a system that assumes teachers and children are a matter of dollars in and test scores out, a system that dehumanizes children and teachers by reducing them to data points while willfully ignoring the effects of impending-- no, current-- environmental peril, ignoring the effects of racism, of poverty, of trauma, our strategy has to be a strategy of rehumanizing.

Where educational and political systems say both to us and to kids "do what gets results," we have to be here, remaining, doing what heals hearts, what fosters love. The love that every child, every human being deserves, and that comes through really seeing other perspectives and other lives as equally valuable to our own, a power of English education that we risk losing if we lose ourselves. Writing in ways that help us know ourselves, grow as selves, and care for ourselves, rehumanizes us so that we can remain fully human in the presence of those others we face in the classroom every day.

This essay was adapted from a keynote given Dec. 1, 2019 at the Australian Association of Teachers of English annual conference, held in Melbourne. Many thanks to the Australian teachers and scholars who helped me further shape these ideas, most especially Scott Bulfin and Graham Parr of Monash University.

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