

Finding the Future in Our Past: Student Writers, a Normal School Archive, and What Happens When They Meet

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In the deep of winter at the start of the New Year, on a Sunday, January 1st, 1860, William Osborne began his last year at the State Normal School at Bridgewater in Massachusetts. On that day Osborne resolved to keep a diary, and he did keep it, with great care and attention to the details of his day for the entire year and into the next. He starts each entry with a concise report of the weather: Friday the 28th "lowering with some snow." Saturday the 29th "a variety of weather both rain and snow. Sunday the 30th lowering but much warmer." A weighty sadness in his report of the 24th of February: "cold. very cold." Something Shakespearean for the 8th of May: Thunder Tempest. My favorite, I tell my students, one day in October 1861: Clear. and Fine.

Osborne is not an expansive diarist. He makes occasional note of the news of the day: On the 18th of March: "Today the Prince of Wales has visited Boston. The city gave him an enthusiastic report." The weather: lowering. He reports visits home and attendance at church--the former infrequently, it was quite a walk from campus, and latter regularly. He marks the start and end of terms at school. He makes note of the marriage of the daughter of a local reverend and the passing of the son of a neighbor. But besides the weather, the diary is most completely concerned with recording what he learned day-to-day in his classes at the normal school. May the 5th. A Wednesday: Indications of Rain. And then: In the two triangles EGF and ACG let the side $EG=CA$ (or AC) & $GF=CB$ and angle $G=C$ then will the two triangles be equal. No topic is left out. There are bits of history, US and world. Natural sciences--biology, Botany, even astronomy. He does seem partial to writers. Longfellow and Emerson, local boys and heroes. He quotes long passages from both. From the bible as well. He is partial to Psalms.

In the deep of winter at the start of the New Year, at the leading edge of a spring semester in January 2013, there is nothing of particular note or charm in William Osborne's diary, not a phrase or an idea that immediately speaks to me or my ten students as we crowd around the tiny leather book, frayed and faded, precious, a dull dark green, so dark as to appear black. Our archivist, newly hired, also green, is sweating like a young man on first date, so eager is he to show us the book of William Osborne.

This course that brings us to the third floor, to the archives of the University is ENGL389, topics in writing. Our topic for the semester is archives not necessarily these archives exclusively, but it is a place to start, the local. It seems, at the moment, the easiest thing to get to. In planning the course I have an idea that it will be a creative writing course. Creative nonfiction, to be specific, but not the creative nonfiction of dead grandmother essays and hallmark card sentiments. I have an idea that this course will help these students become better writers because it will create a space between them and their material, the stories of the archived past will not be their stories, certainly, it will create a creative space, freedom from the burden of being true to their own past, enough to attend to matters of craft with rigor and energy. We will explore together the possibilities of telling true stories and well. I have planned a class for students who have experience as writers of creative nonfiction. I have planned a class for students far enough along in their lives as students and writers to be ready for conversations about things like craft. But this is not the class gathered around me. It is cold. Very cold.

Instead, I have the listless group of students who picked the class for the same sort of reasons so many of Bridgewater students pick their classes for--a very excellent time slot, MW 1:50 to 3:05. "You can come from work or leave for work" D. says at the end of the semester "it's the best time to take a class." Two of them say they are in the Writing Concentration. A full

third are elementary education majors. One, well, one or two just look like trouble. I have great respect for my students, admiration really, even and maybe even particularly, the ones who are the trouble makers. Sixty one percent of BSU students, that is Bridgewater State University students, students of the school Osborne's normal school would become as of 2010, identify as either first in family to attend college, students of color, or students financially at risk. Data reported on NSSE indicates that BSU students work, upwards of 20 hours a week in addition to going to school full time. And their own stories, too often filled with daily traumas, sometimes small and sometimes not. And even when they are not, students often desire only to, as a colleague once said, pass through these four years unscathed.

Our archivist, Orson, opens William Osborne's diary to a random page. The students, unsettled by the precision of line after line of tiny, perfect script, lean in to the page. "I don't even know how to write in cursive says E. The diary is a new acquisition, given to Bridgewater by an alum from west bridgewater. Why they had the diary is not clear. It turns out, in addition to being an early graduate of Bridgewater, the third oldest normal school in the US, begun in 1840, a mere 20 years before William Osborne was a student there, it turns out that William Osborne became a general in the Union Army (the only General in any way that Bridgewater can claim), He fought, and was wounded, in the Civil War. After, he returned to his home in East Bridgewater, became the teacher he trained to be, and lived out the rest of his life in anonymity without any other diary by which to know him by. He would one day be selected to write the regimental history of the troop he served with in the war. Orson finds the history for me the following semester, for reasons that will become clear in a bit.

A University Archive is a rather new and fancy thing to us at Bridgewater. We are an old institution, founded by Horace Mann as a Normal School designed to train teachers to serve the

commonwealth in this new-fangled idea of a public education for all. Up until last year, what should have been an archive was mostly a moldering collection of unlabeled stuff maintained or not maintained by the 90 year old Mabel Bates, wife of a now deceased by many many years faculty member in history. Mabel was nearly deaf and retired only last year. I tell my students that you just can't make this stuff up. No one laughs, not even Orson. Orson is the first trained archivist we've had at Bridgewater and he will tell you that every day is an adventure because you never know what you will find hidden somewhere under something. He recently found a complete collection of lantern slides, an ancient form of teaching technology used to train future teachers of science at the turn of the last century.

Orson has other things to show us from the collection, and the students and I move, huddle after huddle around the materials he has set out for us: scrapbooks from 1924 coeds, student newspapers begun in 1928. but near the end of class, one of the students, one of the students that looks like trouble, and will, in fact, be quite a bit of trouble, returns to the diary, gently turning page after page, reading, really reading, the tiny precise prose. This student will later call that handwriting "grandiose and deliberate." He will be oddly right.

In so many ways, this topics in writing course is a failure. I fail to offer students examples enough or reason enough to tell true stories, I think. Some are, I am forced to admit, not strong writers. Craft largely falls out of our conversation. But it is replaced by a different conversation, one that sneaks up on me. My students seem inspired by the story of their own school, a story they had never heard before, a story that challenged, not their writing selves, but their student selves. Bridgewater is located 30 miles south of Boston along the 24 corridor. These students are not from Boston, but their parents were. They are the children of people raised in Dorchester, Roslindale, Hyde Park who left the city for a better life in the bedroom communities

of the south shore. North in Boston there is BU and BC, there is Northeastern and Tufts. MIT, and, of course Harvard. Harvard, sometimes I think, damn Harvard. Bridgewater's hockey team--it's actually a club coached by a dedicated history professor--plays against BC, BU, Northeastern, Harvard, of course Harvard. When our students take the ice, the fans of the opposing team yell in unison, "safety school." Bridgewater was the school these students could afford. Bridgewater was the school they could get in to. Bridgewater--they didn't know it wasn't enough just to get to college.

D. the student who picked the class based on his work schedule, the trouble-maker, found solace in the story of William Osborne. I say solace. But that isn't right, at least it wasn't right at first. At first, D. was enamored with the Civil War General who went to his college 150 years ago. But over time, D became intrigued and in some ways troubled by the story of the student, not the general William Osborne. He marveled at his deep, clear desire to learn the lessons of each day. William Osborne spends two weeks outlining in great detail the rules governing the usage of commas and semi-colons. Two full weeks. D. recognizes in himself nothing of Osborne's focus and commitment to his education, his humility in the face of what he doesn't know. He writes: "I recognize discouragement and embrace it. I do not stand and fight. . . . Truth is, I have no fucking direction and it pisses me off. I want everything but not to work for anything. The overwhelming feeling of tentative effort is an impetus for none. A train of thought that defies logic: it is my modus operandi."

D., I tell him, I have no idea what this means, really, but it's clear to me that something about Osborne's story has made you feel something. Please try again to tell me what that is. D writes: "I grab Passing by Nella Larson from my back pack. I'm supposed to be finished with it. I chose not to read it. A bowl and a few Sierra Nevada's seem to alter the decision-making process.

Dodging proverbial bullets can only last for so long. The only thing on my mind is quitting. Set off apart from this, in italics, he continues: "Just join the union like dad and never look back. I don't need to deal with this, too much time and money. For nothing." D is writing around and around his anxiety. His sense that he has let the last four years slip by him. His shame and his fury. There is no focus yet. But there is truth in this telling. He is his authentic self. Excuse me, his fucking authentic self, he would want me to say. There is no distance, certainly not of a hundred and fifty years, certainly not a creative one, between D. and William Osborne.

The early drafts of D's final paper go like this. He says to me that he wants to write about William Osborne's diary. He is particularly interested in Osborne's coming to consciousness, midway through the diary, about the abolitionist movement and the election of Abraham Lincoln. Osborne writes on November the 5th: It does not seem strange to me that men of these free states should thus link themselves together and come forward to the polls as they will tomorrow and vote for a man whom they know will act an incubus to slavery, which has found its slimy way in to the very dome of the capitol and stands hissing to noble men below. In conversation, D. bemoans the fact that himself does not know that same passion for anything. He does not find it in his job at a local liquor store. He certainly does not seem to find it in the classroom. But it is not showing up in the drafts. I have pointed this out to him. His classmates have too. Back to draft, D.

Of course, it is worth saying that we are on draft three of this project. D. will readily admit he has not willing revised a single piece of writing in his entire college career. So that is something. And he is not the only student in the class to find something to say in the face of the stories they are reading about their school. E., the student who never learned to write in cursive, watches a documentary about Jonestown, having never heard about Jim Jones or Jonestown

before then. He sets himself on a path that leads him to back issues of the San Francisco chronicle and tells a fictionalized version of the Senator shot to death on a trip to rescue lost family members of his constituents. What is more, he submits the piece for publication. He is proud of the piece. He writes in his end of semester reflection: "one of the worst things about going to a small school 30 minutes from where I grew up is feeling no pride in attending it. . . . It was fascinating to learn about Bridgewater's History as a normal school, and how old this institution actually is. It certainly gave me a better outlook on attending Bridgewater, while I wouldn't exactly brag about going there, I feel that there is value in learning the history of the college you attend because there will always be something interesting to find, and always something that you can connect to on a personal level." Actually E. I did not think that would always be the case. I had in fact thought quite the opposite, but it's good to be wrong sometimes.

In Kendall Phillips 2004 edited collection Framing Public Memory he and others describe "the ways memories are things shared by people we might call publics" and how "it is through these things called publics that these memories are maintained." He describes the powerful "affect" shared public memory creates among constituent members. Legacy is an interesting word. Institutions have legacies, both good and bad. We are to understand that a legacy passes on a set of values, a shared public memory, generation to generation, one sustaining the other. To be a legacy in college admissions lingo at elite institutions refers to children of alumni--they have advantages over students who are not those children. A legacy is to be someone who is immediately and already a part of the culture and custom. I have come to see that Bridgewater students have no public memory and, thus, no sense of legacy--not of belonging to one and not of a responsibility to carry one on. That is the discovery of this topics in writing class.

In her 2012 Cs address, Malea Powell opened this way: This is a story.

When I say “story,” I don’t mean for you to think “easy.” Stories are anything but easy.

When I say story, I mean an event in which I try to hold some of the complex shimmering strands of a constellative, epistemological space long enough to share them with you. When I say “story,” I mean “theory.” In January 2013, in the deep of winter, in the leading edge of a new semester, the uneasy story of D. unfolded as he wrestled with the diary of William Osborne. In Osborne's story he saw none of his own and, yet, still, he could: among the cold and the dull mess of his semester: the complex shimmering strands of a constellative, epistemological space. After a semester of unease and revision, D. wrote this:

Osbourne's words hold wisdom beyond his years: "men are not judged by their habits, looks, and appearances; but by the character of their lives, and conversations and by their works." His enthusiasm absorbs me. I find myself wondering what Osborne was like in the flesh. His words suggest he was a committed and upstanding individual. He never gives evidence of fear or conflict and I don't understand it." But then he writes this too: "I like to think there were two sides to William Osborne; the mature and dutiful individual I spend time with, and Bill, a scared young man trying to find his path in life. I also have a dual personality; the side of me that hates the world and everything it it, and the side that craves structure and direction. The difference between him and I is the side we choose to live by.

At the end of the semester, D. is not finished. He commits to a directed study. We will meet one-on-one for a full semester, me and D. and Orson, every week in the archives. Orson finds a way to hire D in the archives. He quits his job at the liquor store. We read in the genre, in creative nonfiction. We read carefully. We (finally) begin to attend to craft. D transcribes the

complete diary. It will now be available for others to read and to know William. D applies to a national undergraduate conference. And he gets in. I'm not sure, exactly, what to say at the end of this talk, D has a long and uneasy way to walk to tell a new story of himself, to operate under a new theory. It is such difficult work.

At the end of the semester, he writes: In the Bridgewater State University archives, I sit quietly by myself. I open this diary and smell a smoky, dusty scent acquired over the past 150 years. As I run my fingers over the pages I feel the indentation of Osbourne's quill pen on each page, the marks he made so long ago. My focus is completely on my task at hand, and I am able to replicate Osbourne's own words for other people to read. In these sporadic moments, I can become what I admire in William Osbourne.

Yes. Something Clear. And Fine.