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(Re)engaging the Body in Being & Becoming Teachers of Writers

Sarah J. Donovan, *Oklahoma State University*

On the bottom shelf of my bookcase, there is a stack of composition notebooks. A few spiral-bound, most stitch-spined with the classic black and white cover. These are notebooks left behind by my former junior high students. A few notebooks I found in the recycle bin on the last day of school. Several, however, were gifted to me –to carry their words, to share as mentors for others.

Every spring, I teach a teaching writers course for secondary English education majors, and in preparing for the course, I read these notebooks. I remember the writer in their script: the way they make a *q* or ignore the page's margin to create their own. I remember the writer's intensity in the weight of their printed words pressing into the next page. I remember a writer for her commitment to getting the story down in one breath, pencil barely skimming the surface, words skating across, down, and around with a passionate exhale of ideas. And I remember the ambivalence and doubt of writers in the strike-throughs and blank spaces.

The course, Teaching Writers, offers future secondary English teachers time and space to develop a capacity to see and seek understanding in the margins, shifts, scripts, long breaths, ambivalence, and blank spaces of writers' pages. The syllabus is crafted as a series of experiences to develop pedagogical content knowledge in writing (Graves, 1983; Shulman, 1987; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Bazerman, 2017) drawing on embodiment (Emig, 2001; Dixon & Senior, 2011) with an antiracist lens (Chavez, 2021; Salesses, 2021) situated in genre study (Dean, 2008; Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015).

In this article, I share selected experiences I have developed to support writers, secondary English preservice teachers (PTs), in uncovering beliefs about writing and shaping their identities as writers and teachers of writers in the tradition and vision of writing educators.

Engaging Life's Span(s)

An overarching goal of the course, Teaching Writers, is to engage the writing lifespan of preservice writing teachers. Bazerman et al. (2017) explained that writing can develop across the lifespan as part of changing contexts. Our students' lived histories influence their writing development (Herrington & Curtis, 2000), from earliest childhood through adulthood, in the context of accumulating yet changing forms of engagement in families, communities, schools, and work (Leki et al., 2008). As they enter teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers reconsolidate past learning while encountering new demands and challenges. How they are able (and invited) to bring their writing pasts into new contexts (i.e., no longer students but teachers) provides a basis for further writing development.

The pandemic is part of that new context as preservice teachers have experienced half of their teacher preparation coursework online. Janet Emig (2001) argued, pre-pandemic, that online distance learning communities can disrupt "our grounded, subtle, and complex knowledge, [because] the seductive simplicities of technological models [may] confuse the acquisition of information with the comprehension and creation of concepts" (p. 273). Thus, PCKW must engage shifting identities and knowledges to understand what it means to be a developing writer/teacher of writers alongside also developing writers, i.e., high school students (Brandt, 2001; Dyson, 1999), enduring pandemic-impacted education experiences.

Research suggests an effective teaching writers course is one that includes authentic writing opportunities to support the transfer of learning from preservice to student teaching to beginning teacher contexts (DeFauw, 2020; Myers et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2019). Sanders et al. (2020) recommend writing teacher educators center writing instruction within authentic K-12 clinical experiences, which includes PCKW acquired through such curricular foci as critical literacy, formative feedback, genre study, modeling, mentor texts, and writing workshop. Through such curricular opportunities, PCKW is taught through process-oriented approaches to support writers' self-identification and self-efficacy as writers, which implies knowledge about the lived histories of those who share the classroom. But we don't quite have the knowledge about the impact of recent lived histories.

Our lived/living histories are not only carried in words; they are carried in our bodies – the way we approach the blank writing space, choose a utensil, situate our bodies, voice passages, respond to peers, sit, stand, breathe. PCKW needs embodiment work. According to Emig, the embodied classroom is a space where actual bodies collaborate with one another "to acknowledge human complexity, situational ambiguity, vexed, even unanswerable questions about self and society" (p. 279). It is a space, says Emig, that "reintroduces students to the joys and

inevitability of human pace [where] learning . . . cannot be rushed or decreed” (p. 280).

A lifespan is all a lot to nurture in a sixteen-week course, but I am not alone; as a class, we depend on one another to engage in practices that honor our past and offer agency in the present while imagining our future students. The pandemic years have created an ever-changing context that has shaken our families, communities, schools, and wellbeing, changes that we bring into the physical classroom between isolation periods. Now 2022, I continue to draw on traditions of writing education (e.g., Elbow, 1997; Graves, 1983; Romano, 2000; Emig, 2001; Yagelski, 2011), but I found creative writing scholarship (Chavez, 2021; Salesses, 2021) in conversation with genre theory (Dean, 2008; Marchetti & O’Dell, 2015) to be responsive to and able to imagine anew how to be a teacher of secondary writers who, because of the pandemic, may not have learned to carry a notebook or physically be part of a writing community: embodied PCKW.

Engaging the Body

When classes shifted online in spring 2020, I figured I would try, for the first time, a digital writer’s notebook. I had always encouraged and modeled for students a paper notebook for play (Elbow, 1997; Marchetti & O’Dell, 2015) and digital platforms for in-process writing or pieces that would become published and public (Donovan, 2020). This shift was an experiment that I did not like. The digital notebook was shareable. Students could easily submit it. I could click on the link to see what they wrote. Convenient, yes, but I felt like I was surveilling. While I know there is a way to look at revision histories, I couldn’t do what I had done before, which was to observe their hands creating: how they used the page to sketch, draw, list, strikethrough. The process was deleted. And while students could choose the font and color, insert pictures and personalize their documents in digitized ways, the font was not created by their hands. In a classroom, I may have been able to watch their fingers move across a keyboard, watch their eyes look through or around a screen, hear the pauses, the space bar – but I could not do any of that while class was online.

When the next spring semester began in person, I sent a video (see, I like technology) to students introducing them to my new notebook, narrating my process, and asked them to bring their notebooks to our first class. For all the above reasons, I was happy to be back into notebooks, but antiracist writing workshop advocate Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) framed writing by hand as a way of being fully embodied in the act of writing: “To resuscitate their practice, participants must break free from their heads and reengage with their bodies as creative instruments” (p. 76).

In paper notebooks, students reacquaint themselves with the shapes their hands can make when not mechanized by fonts, and when they share their writing, they decipher their script in voice as a figurative representation of their body and lived experience. Because many of our students' bodies carry past schooling experiences that may have been harmful or perpetuated a quest for correctness or perfection, this reconnection with hand and voices can disrupt standards-based practices and rubrics with "academic language" or "error-free" grammar, which can immobilize writers. The notebook work of self with others is a kind of writing identity work that stimulates embodiment knowledge, "the very space around/between bodies" (Dixon & Senior, 2011, p. 477).

Before the pandemic, I had never engaged embodied pedagogical thinking in my practice nor shared it with my preservice teachers, so this bringing of our bodies to the work is a way of humanizing one another. No two notebooks will ever be identical. No voiced draft can be depersonalized— a person with a backstory and body wrote these words (Chavez, 2021). Our writing course is one episode of a teacher's lifespan, a life that has endured alternative-even-emergency learning; by engaging bodies, we honor the stories they carry and the people-classmates who listen.

And so we now turn to how we have told our stories and consider what questions of craft have been stirred by this new, ever-changing context of learning.

Craft(ing) Mentorship

In Salesses's (2021) chapter "Audience, Theme, and Purpose," he explained: "Much of what we learn about craft (about the expectations we are supposed to consider) implies a straight, white, cis, able (etc.) audience. It is easy to forget whom we are writing for if we do not keep it a conscious consideration, and the default is not universal, but privileged" (p. 46). In past semesters, and in twenty years of teaching junior high, I had explicitly taught craft and language practices that assumed white audiences. In other words, the assignment, the mentor texts, the examples, the rubric, the standards – all implied a default white audience because I never invited students to think about the raced, gendered, classed, language assumptions school-based writing demands, or, to be clear, the biased ways I designed the assignments. When I taught eighth grade, students created newspapers about a genocide, wrote biographies of classmates, interviewed family members about their immigration stories, gave activist TED talks, and crafted spoken word arguments. Yes, we discussed audience – *who is your audience, what do you think they already know, in what way will you challenge, change, or confirm what they (think) they know*— but I never explicitly taught about raced or gendered language or the way students constrain their storying for school.

In our Teaching Writers course, embodied notebook work is ongoing (Donovan, 2020b; Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015) while we write several genres or what we call *public-facing process projects*. In other words, we literally move something from our notebook to a digital document, from hand script to mechanized font, to acknowledge and attend to an implied audience (Donovan, 2020). Following Chavez's (2021) writing workshop methods, we did *not* begin our first genre study, personal narrative, with mentor texts. Instead, we wrote however we had come to know and understand personal narrative from the lived history influences of our writing development (Herrington & Curtis, 2000).

In notebooks, students (PTs) wrote about their first public speech, a conflict on the playground, a hurricane, a first love. We discussed the craft we used: the ways we began, moved through, and made sense of our personal stories. And we considered: *Who is our implied audience?* When writing in our notebooks, who are we thinking of— age, gender, race, culture, ability? For the most part, we weren't thinking of any audience in particular or consciously, but the structure of our narrative indicated the implied audience was school. Many students had confessed that they had written this personal narrative many times. Every year they were asked to write a personal narrative, they had always written it the same way: beginning, middle, end— in that order— to make neat and clear *what happened*. Personal narrative, for them/us, was a fixed genre that lived in school spaces, and apparently, it was one story that they carried from grade to grade. To develop, we had to disrupt past practices, and so we met new mentors, writers we had not likely encountered in high school.

One reason mentor text (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015) and genre study (Dean, 2008) are important to embodied PCKW across the writing lifespan is the way it can reveal how genre lives for various authors and readers and can live for us. Chavez (2021) curates a living document of mentor texts, "Appendix: Platforming Writers of Color: A Twenty-First Century Reference Guide," which is continually edited and updated. We spent a class browsing this guide and requesting books from the university library. Students checked out *I'm Telling The Truth But I'm Lying* (Ikpi, 2019), *The Body Papers* (Talusán, 2020), and *Me and White Supremacy* (Saad, 2020) among others. Another evening we browsed the biography section in our teaching library. (The library shelf includes verse novels, autobiography, and memoir, too.) Students checked out *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (Andrews, 2015); *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (Kobabe, 2022); *Enchanted Air* (Engle, 2020); and *Bad Boy: A Memoir* (Myers, 2020) among others.

During in-person class (and masked), we gathered all the books in the library and began reading the first chapters: a craft mentorship session. We read, passed the book, read, passed the book, and so on for several rounds. We sprawled

on the library sofas and turned pages. I heard students whispering passages to one another. I saw them flipping to the author's note and searching more books by the author online. Then, we gathered with our books and asked questions adapted from Dean (2008) and Marchetti & O'Dell (2015) to illuminate the ways personal narrative lived for us that hour: *Why did these authors write and publish this genre? What were they asking from you– the reader? What patterns of craft do we notice in the chapters? What attitudes are represented by the patterns? What actions do the patterns allow and constrain (compared to other genres)? What values – kinds of stories, ways of storying– are represented in these patterns?*

Central to our discussion was illuminating the implied audience. We talked about how the author was orienting or disorienting the reader in different ways based on how they began the chapter or represented scenes: *Were we uncomfortable? Comfortable? Was it because we were or were not the implied audience? In what ways were the authors asking us to witness and carry their stories?* Then, we turned to our personal narratives asking *Which patterns that we just read are in my personal narrative? Who was I writing for? Who do I want my audience to be? Which patterns of craft will allow my narrative to live in a more authentic way?* I asked students to respond to several of these questions and offer one PT-writer's "craft mentorship" experience here:

- *The Body Papers: A Memoir* (Talusán, 2019) begins with an author's note that describes the placement of other people within her narrative and gives a little insight into the construction for her narrative. I think it's particularly useful to adopt due to my challenges with writing and how often I forget things.
- This passage utilizes the form of writing in *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures: Two Wings: A Memoir* (Engle, 2016), where Engle emphasizes poetic verse to describe and explore aspects of her life and up-bringing. While she does so chronologically, there are moments in which she uses a back-and-forth, which is what I will attempt to emulate.
- *Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World* (Saad, 2020) includes an intriguing amount of organizational devices, one of which is a question followed by bullet points. These are direct and incisive, aiming to shock in the sense of dismantling misconceptions by directly calling them out, as well as speaking more to the split narrative surrounding her topic of focus.

Story alongside story alongside story, students notice craft and how the author meets or unmakes our genre expectations.

Salesses (2021) wrote, "To use craft is to engage with an audience's bias. Like freedom, craft is *for someone*. Whose expectations does a writer prioritize?" (p. 24). As students drafted their personal narratives, they moved from the privacy

of their paper notebooks into public-facing digital platforms like Google docs with audience in mind, deciding their *someone*. We imagined someone holding our book in a library and how our story might live for them. As we wrote, we became connected to all the moments, present and past that we were trying to describe including all those people in our lives who may somehow figure into the writing. Further, in publishing our writing, we recognize we are connected to the writer in a real way through the future act of reading. The implied audience was the someone we were asking to hold our story. By embodying our someone, the writing lived anew.

We used various methods of peer conferencing (Donovan, 2015) and workshopping (Chavez, 2021) in the development of our pieces to literally embody audience, each time using our voices to speak the stories, together creating, never declaring a safe space. And each time, we were challenged to embrace gaps in our memory or celebrate that we were still figuring out the implications of our pasts on our presents. Crafting with so many mentors, including our classmates, we worked to disrupt audience expectations. We sought moves to draw attention to and replace expectations of a single text structure, welcoming disorientation.

To conclude our genre study of personal narrative, I asked students to write a process reflection alongside the published iteration of their personal narrative to illuminate how they were bringing their writing past into new contexts (Bazerman et al., 2017), and here is an excerpt from the same student:

The Body Papers (Talusán, 2019), *Enchanted Air* (Engle, 2015), and *Me and White Supremacy* (Saad, 2020) influenced my narrative in a few ways that have led me to discover the importance of mentor texts in writing, as I would not have chosen to interweave prose, verse, and questions along with an author's note otherwise...I am used to being told how complicated my writing sounds and seems, which has led to several recommendations to simplify it or redo it all together in the past. Thankfully, that was not the case for Garrett and Hailey's [classmates] remarks from class; from them, I found a mix of encouragement and rewriting with emphasis on doing what I can to the best of my ability with less regard for audience, and that was warming to hear. I am used to rewriting, to trying to make sense of things for others through simplification, but it removes the joy from the process.

This writer (and others) had become aware that, in the past (and even into the early weeks of our course), he was writing for the teacher or to conform to an expectation, but his personal narrative (<https://timefliesbyus.blogspot.com/>) wanted a voice and craft that called attention to some truth in how we carry memories in mind and body—a way of storying that did not fit neatly in a beginning, middle, and end. Dean (2008) wrote, "Teaching genres is to begin with the belief that genres offer options as much as...they do limitations" (p. 24). As a writing

teacher educator, our course is one site where we can situate past school-based writing within our PTs' writing lifespan trajectory to include teacher-of-writers writing. In other words, our course engages their future bodies alongside future student bodies who can reshape the culture of high school writing, who can do the work to "unmake expectations and replace them with new ones" (Salesses, 2021, p. 29). This approach to genre-based writing includes "critiquing genres, with questions as ways to accomplish this important task of trying to see the ideologies of genres" (Dean, 2008, p. 32). Welcoming new mentors— contemporary teacher educators, authors, and classmates— can help us "reckon with the implications of our expectations for what stories should be" (Salesses, 2021, p. 30).

Conclusion

My lived history as a teacher of writers influenced my teaching development. I carry with me my teacher preparation work and two decades of practice. The accumulating yet changing ways of being across contexts —from junior high to university, before and during a pandemic— have illuminated the basis for my pedagogical choices and biases in the routines that had become deeply embedded in my practice. The pandemic, perhaps because of its physical constraints, has afforded me a lens with which to resuscitate the Teaching Writers course and reengage with our bodies as creative instruments (Chavez, 2021).

We cannot know the futures of our writing pedagogical lifespans, but we do need to make space for and be deliberate about engaging in writing communities that will initiate development, that will allow us to draw on our histories and shape the present and future of our practice, our writing, and our teaching of writers. For now, I will continue to make space on my bookshelf for notebooks.

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