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David Premont
None, dpremont@gmail.com

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Unpacking Writer Identity: How Beliefs and Practices Inform Writing Instruction

David Premont, *Purdue University*

The National Writing Project (NWP) has implored English language arts (ELA) teachers to write for nearly fifty years (Whitney, 2017). Similarly, the 2012 NCTE/NCATE standards for the initial preparation of secondary ELA teachers require preservice English teachers (PSETs) to demonstrate a strong command in writing, both as a writer and as a teacher of writing. Consistent with the values of both the NWP and the NCTE/NCATE standards is the potential for writing teachers to develop a strong writerly identity. Such identity development is important considering a strong professional identity is necessary for teachers to be successful (Akerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2006; 2019; Bullough, 1997; Danielewicz, 2001; Izadinia 2013).

However, many secondary ELA teachers and PSETs do not identify as writers (McKinney, 2017; Morgan, 2010; Whitney, 2017). Cremin and Oliver's (2016) review of the literature from 1990-2015 suggests that many writing teachers have "negative" writer identities, leading them to view writing instruction as "problematic" (p. 292). McKinney (2017) and Whitney (2017) corroborate these findings and argue many ELA teachers do not consider themselves writers and struggle in the teaching of writing. This is especially unsettling because ELA teachers who have negative writing experiences or poor attitudes towards the teaching of writing are more likely to implement "pedestrian" writing pedagogy (Street, 2003, p. 38). Simply said, it is problematic that many writing teachers do not identify as writers and view writing instruction negatively.

ELA teachers who have rich writing lives are more likely to be powerful writing instructors (McKinney, 2017; Morgan, 2017; Woodard, 2017), strengthen writing pedagogy (Whitney, 2017), utilize their voice to support professional

development (Dawson, 2017), and establish authority as writing instructors (Whitney et al., 2014).

Although considerable research has been devoted to professional teacher identity (e.g., Alsup, 2006; 2019; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Danielewicz, 2001; Izadinia, 2013), and writer identity (e.g., Daisey, 2009; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Street & Stang, 2017; Woodard, 2017) little research specifically explores the connection between teachers' writer identities and their writing pedagogy (Woodard, 2015). The connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy is important considering that all PSETs have "a writer identity of some kind" (Locke, 2017, p. 135), and that identity is connected to pedagogy (e.g., Morgan, 2004).

In other words, previous research clarifies writing teachers who have robust writing lives are better prepared to offer effective writing instruction to secondary students. However, Woodard (2015) argues there is insufficient research specifically exploring the connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy—the merging of personal and professional writer identities—in secondary writing instruction. I contend there is a powerful connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy. To that end, the following question orients this inquiry: How do PSETs understand the connection between their writer identity and the teaching of writing in secondary schools?

Literature review and theoretical framework

My understanding of writer identity is anchored through the following theoretical frames: (a) writer identity, (b) identity as pedagogy, and (c) writer identity as writing pedagogy. I situate my perspective through a constructivist framework to "point to the unique experience" of PSTs' writing and writing pedagogy (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Such framework enabled me to consider how PSETs "learn and make meaning linking new knowledge to existing understanding" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 17) and construct new knowledge based on their previous understanding or experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Significantly, a constructivist lens afforded new and nuanced understanding of PSTs' experience as writers and writing instructors.

Writer identity

I define writer identity as the culmination of one's writing experiences, beliefs, and habits. Writing teachers differ in the ways they identify as writers. A writer-teacher is one who writes alongside students in class, but offers few, if any, pedagogical implications (Cremin and Baker, 2014). Teacher-writers, on the other hand, compose for purposes beyond classroom modeling (e.g., Dawson, 2017; Hicks et al., 2017; Woodard, 2015). Teacher-writers identify as writers, find professional value in writing, and view writing as a primary component of teaching

(Whitney, 2017). They “write, take risks, and talk to view their potential as writers” (Street & Stang, 2017, p. 55).

Dawson (2017) conceptualized the teacher-writer differently. She agreed that a teacher-writer is one who writes regularly, but she argued the purposes for composing are “to explore relationships and make sense of experiences that matter to them” rather than to inform pedagogy (p. 98). Dawson invoked Yagelski (2011) to contend how writing itself—regardless of the written product—is the most significant component of the writing. Such writing may or may not be linked to pedagogy, but the belief remains that teachers who write frequently are better positioned to become strong teachers of writing (Morgan, 2017).

Regardless of the differing conceptions of the teacher-writer, secondary students benefit from the instruction of a teacher-writer. There is a growing body of literature that suggests increased empathy from teacher-writers is one such benefit (Dawson, 2017; Locke, 2017; Whitney, 2017). This is not surprising since teacher-writers “learn first-hand the possible stumbling blocks students may encounter and ways to support them when they encounter such blocks” (Morgan, 2017, p. 49). Teacher-writers are better positioned to appreciate the challenges writing poses for secondary students as well as those for themselves (Whitney, 2017).

The teacher-writer identity also has professional implications. Whitney (2017) contended teacher-writers grow by embodying a writerly identity “in terms of professional identity and professional development” (p. 72). For instance, teacher-writers are more likely to establish classroom authority (Dawson, 2017; Whitney, 2017; Whitney et al., 2014), participate in writing groups (Dawson 2017, Hicks et al., 2017), publish writing (Hicks et al., 2017) reflect on pedagogy, and compose pieces that are personally meaningful (Dawson, 2017).

Identity as Pedagogy

In their review of the literature on teacher professional identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) noted the volume of scholars who recognized that personal and professional identity work in tandem. That is, personal and professional identity are inherently connected (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Pietsch & Williamson, 2005), influencing both classroom decision making practices (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Kanno & Stuart, 2011) and teacher development (Goodson & Cole, 1994). Alsup (2006) underscored the significance for teachers who merge their personal and professional identities, claiming some parts of each identity may be lost, but what emerges is a stronger, more successful teacher.

Personal identity not only reflects and affects professional identity, but can also influence pedagogy (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Morgan, 2004). Morgan (2004) synthesized Simon’s (1995) work and noted identity “is a pedagogical resource”

(p. 174), or that “we teach who we are” (Woodard, 2015, p. 55). For example, Kanno and Stuart (2011) documented two preservice teachers whose “changing identities shaped their classroom practice” in authority, attitude, and student achievement (p. 247). Narrowing the scope, Woodard (2015) illustrated two writing teachers’ whose disparate, but rich personal writing lives informed their approach to writing instruction, “highlighting the blurred boundaries between” their own writing and their writing pedagogy (p.53).

Writer Identity as Writing Pedagogy

The present research draws heavily from writer identity as writing pedagogy. There are few studies that underscore how such identity influences writing pedagogy (Woodard, 2015). Woodard’s research documented the personal writing practices of two ELA teachers who both led rich writing lives within and beyond their classrooms. For instance, Lisa, a middle school teacher who composed regularly in her writing group and for a writing instructor, found that writing bravely was a strategy she employed as a writer and teacher of writing. Specifically, Lisa’s “participation in creative writing informed the ways she talked about, practiced, and taught writing” (p. 37). She praised secondary students who made significant revisions and who revised to prioritize character development based on her personal writing practices.

Woodard’s (2015) research also highlighted Aaron, a novice secondary ELA teacher, who was interested in digital writing. As part of his personal practices, Aaron often composed for his personal blog, networked via Twitter, and created videos. These personal writing opportunities underscored “how [he] saw the power of online writing for advocacy and promotion, and intentionally used his own networked writing to advocate widely for pedagogical changes for his students” (p. 53). Significantly, the possibilities he considered in his personal writing influenced the way he taught writing.

McKinney (2017) underscored six secondary ELA teachers who utilized their writer identities to “forge connections and navigate through challenges” (p. 95). Specifically, Riya drew from her experience as a poet to teach and share drafts of personal poetry. Another, Peter, credited his strong relationship with students to his personal writing experiences. As a writer and actor, Peter’s identity worked in tandem with “the performance aspect of the class,” such as student opportunities to read and act their writing.

Woodard (2015) and McKinney’s (2017) research illustrated an effective, yet uncommon approach to writing instruction: The merging of the personal and professional writer identity. Such merging enabled them to write and talk about writing with depth that is unavailable to teachers who do not lead rich writing lives. These ELA teachers were able to approach their writing instruction through the lens

of their writing experiences, beliefs, and practices to become more effective writing instructors. Whitney (2017) described the benefits of this practice by saying “my business was no longer primarily to convey information, or to plan and then execute plans; it was to guide people as they wrote, using my experience and theirs as guides” (p. 72). Whitney’s words reflect the transformative experience of drawing from writing experience in writing pedagogy. The present research draws from such framework and unpacks the connections between personal and professional writing practices.

The review of the literature further makes clear that highly effective writing teachers (a) write regularly (e.g., Eyres, 2017), (b) capitalize on writing experiences to inform writing instruction (e.g., Woodard, 2015), and (c) share personal writing with students (e.g., McKinney, 2017). I argue that writing teachers should consider these as interconnected pedagogical and professional strategies rather than isolated or exclusive approaches. In other words, writing teachers should consider how sharing personal writing *and* personal writing experiences work in tandem to create a more authentic, empathetic writing classroom for secondary students.

This need not mean one cannot be a good writing teacher without composing frequently and drawing from personal experiences as writing teachers. Brooks (2007) documented research where secondary writing instructors chose to utilize their energy to respond to student writing rather than compose themselves. However, I argue *highly effective* writing teachers can offer more to secondary students by drawing from their personal writing experiences to strengthen and support their writing pedagogy in the planned and unplanned moments of their instruction.

Method

Context

I designed this study to collect most of the data during the time participants conducted student teaching so they could contextualize their writing experiences, beliefs, and habits to their writing pedagogy. To that end, the following research question guided this study: How do PSETs understand the connection between their writer identity and the teaching of writing in secondary schools? The literature prepared me to encounter PSETs who had few meaningful writing experiences (e.g., Cremin & Oliver, 2016; McKinney, 2017; Morgan, 2017; Whitney, 2017). Thus, I originally designed my inquiry to facilitate a strong writerly identity for PSETs, but it evolved after I conducted initial interviews in the spring of 2019. All participants narrated, to my surprise, their robust writer identities, ultimately changing the course of my research question.

Their writing anchored important moments in their lives whether they achieved daunting writing goals or composed as therapy. Writing, they found,

improved the quality of their lives and provided much needed balance. They already claimed a strong writer identity, so I revised my inquiry. To that end, I situated my research among PSETs with a living writer identity—an identity that clarified their position as confident, capable writers who found value in writing and wrote often. This research does not speak to PSETs with weak or negative writer identities.

I focus on the subset of data that directly aligned with the connection between PSETs' writer identities and how it influenced their writing pedagogy within the standard secondary writing curriculum. I invited all 18 PSETs who were enrolled in the writing methods course at a large Midwestern university to participate in September 2018. The instructor of record designed this course with a focus on strategic writing, grammar in context, and multimodal writing in tandem with writing pedagogy and peer teaching opportunities. My research focus on the connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy was unfamiliar for participants.

Seven PSETs consented to participate, but three elected to pursue their student teaching out of state. This impeded me from interviewing and observing their teaching, so I removed them from consideration. Four students participated in the larger study, but I document the work of three PSETs for this article because they best narrated their experiences as writers and teachers of writing. I argue that all four participants demonstrated sufficient depth and connection between writer identity and writing pedagogy. Participant race reflects the demographics of the institution.

It is worth noting the context of my research changed in March 2020 when the World Health Organization official declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. I had collected nearly half of the data when I realized the pandemic posed concerns about participant health and emotional well-being. Participants completed the standard length for student teaching. However, they all completed the second half by teaching remotely. This was a drastic change not only for them, but also for their students. It would be unreasonable to believe that they continued their teaching unaffected. Similarly, each interview conducted in May 2020 was completed through Zoom rather than in-person. I appreciate the richness of the interviews that occurred through zoom, but I cannot say with certainty that participants were unaffected by this change in interview method.

Participants

Darren. A White male, Darren (all names are pseudonyms) often demonstrated a keen thinking ability. I was his course instructor for a required literacy course for all English education students in the fall of 2018. He worked hard and presented strong work in both conversation and writing. I was impressed with his professionalism as I invited him to present his work from class at a

conference for the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. I prepared him to share his work at a roundtable presentation focused on collaborative writing and sharing writing in the creative writing classroom.

Darren also composed poetry and reflective personal journals that enabled him to “process” and to “feel good.” He described his writing purposes as “intrinsic” because the reward was often insight into his life and the world around him. These and similar experiences influenced Darren’s writing instruction as a student teacher. He taught at a nearby high school, teaching freshman and junior English classes. The student body at his placement school is roughly 2,000 students who were predominantly White (51%), with a sizeable population of Hispanic (29%) and Black (14%) students.

At the time of this research, Darren was engaged to be wed to a young woman he had known since high school, and he worked a part-time job at a local produce store. Suffice it to say that he pushed his schedule to the brink between student teaching, wedding planning, and working. Darren lamented the dearth of writing opportunities during this season of life.

Gwen. A White female, Gwen is intelligent, responsible, and reflective. I also taught Gwen in the required university literacy course in the fall of 2018. I was impressed with the thoroughness of her required writing and her willingness to wrestle with and talk through course material. At the time of this research, Gwen composed to relieve anxiety and to clarify her thoughts through informal journals, and through both sent and unsent letters. Gwen participated in a “community of writers” as a youth where both family and friends composed often and shared writing with each other. These experiences influenced her writer identity.

Gwen also accepted my invitation to present her work from class at the conference for the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. I mentored and helped prepare her to present her work on reading comprehension strategies. Gwen conducted her student teaching at the same middle school she graduated from in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. My conversations with Gwen led me to believe she enjoyed returning to the same school to conduct student teaching. She exclusively taught 8th grade English in a school which enrolled nearly 1,200 students. The student population was predominantly White (88%) while the remaining population was largely divided between Hispanic and Asian students. I also believe she enjoyed the move close to home and family during this period.

Joe. Joe, a White male, is hard working and posed thoughtful questions. Joe was also a student in the required literacy course I taught. He worked hard and completed the assigned material. Joe had a background teaching English as a second language in Vietnam. It was during this experience that he noticed how language works with writing given that students needed to understand grammatical concepts to write effectively. At the time of this research, Joe frequently composed

creative short stories and was in the process of working on a book manuscript. Joe still devoted time for personal writing as a student teacher, specifically describing a short story he composed. Ultimately, I was impressed with his desire to write and grow as a writer by creating specific writing goals. He completed his student teaching at a local high school, teaching creative writing and English 11. My conversations with him led me to believe he valued the opportunity to teach a creative writing class while being mentored by a teacher he respected. His student teaching site enrolled nearly 2,000 students. Most of the student body was White (79%) while a Hispanic population primarily made up the rest of the minority students.

Researcher Participant Relationship

I recognize my relationship with Darren, Gwen, and Joe influenced this research project. Foremost, I believe they were each willing to participate in this study because of our professional relationship. This need not mean to discount their willingness to engage in conversation about writing, but I believe our familiarity helped. I believe having taught them for a full semester and engaging with them in various scholarly pursuits in 2018 and 2019 strengthened our relationship for the interviews I conducted in 2020. Specifically, I believe such interviews were more natural and honest because of our prior relationship.

I believe my extensive conversations about their writing and its connection to their writing pedagogy influenced their pedagogical decisions since our conversations overlapped with their teaching. For instance, Darren and I spoke often about sharing personal writing with students. Though he already had interest in doing so, I believe the support I provided influenced his thinking and pedagogy. Overall, the depth of our conversations afforded all participants to critically reflect about the connection between their writer identity and their writing pedagogy in ways they had not previously.

I also acknowledge my researcher bias. I entered this study hoping to examine and observe, specifically, how and when participants shared personal writing with students. I asked each participant through interview whether they shared personal writing as part of their pedagogy, but I did not require nor solicit they do so. I acknowledge this question alone may have influenced participants to share personal writing or to consider possibilities to share personal writing, but I did not assume a position of authority supervising their language, pedagogy, and practice. Rather, I co-constructed the story with participants when they expressed interest (e.g., Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). For instance, Darren expressed interest in sharing writing with students, so he explored possibilities for doing so rather than me offering my insight or expectations.

Narrative, methods, and data analysis

I utilized narrative methodology. Narrative and identity are often connected (Alsup; 2006; Clandinin & Huber, 2007; Goodall, 2005), and narratives enable researchers to underscore “complex explanations of student and teacher identities” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 1). The concept that people live “storied lives” is prevalent in narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquirers “seek ways of enriching and transforming experience” both for the researcher and for the participants (Clandinin & Roskiek, 2007, p. 42). Thus, I explored the intersection of writer identity as pedagogy and how it is “narratively composed, embodied in a person, and expressed in practice” (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 124). This ultimately led me to identify participant stories about their personal writing and writing pedagogy throughout our interviews.

The primary method of data collection for this narrative study was interview data (Polkinghorne, 1995). I collected interview data over a span of 15 months. Participants’ first interview occurred in January 2019 while I scheduled subsequent interviews in January 2020, March 2020, and May 2020. I audio recorded and transcribed 12 semi-structured interviews, resulting in 480 minutes of data for Darren, Gwen, and Joe. In general, I invited participants to tell me about their current and historical writing habits, their writing beliefs, their work as a writing teacher, and their growth as a writing instructor. I intended to observe participants’ teaching, but this method was significantly curtailed due to the global pandemic. To that end, I do not include observational data.

I transcribed the interviews shortly after I conducted them, reading each transcript multiple times. I utilized In Vivo Coding to “honor [each] participant’s voice,” by directly highlighting participant language (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). I organized codes thematically, initially creating 117 themes. I created such a high number to notice minute details that may prove significant once I completed all rounds of coding. Once I completed the coding, I removed themes with insignificant volume of codes and themes which did not align to the research question. I also collapsed themes after independently examining each.

I highlight an example of my coding process utilizing Gwen’s second interview transcript. I coded one of her statements, “I’ve been journaling a lot more because of my students,” under the theme “Personal Writing.” This quote “[stood] out” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 93) because it illustrated an example of not only her personal writing, but also her motivation. I copied and pasted this quote from the transcript into a new Word document. As I continued reading the transcript, I copied and pasted additional statements that “[stood] out” about writing or writing instruction. Following, I organized each of the narratives and statements thematically. After thematically organizing all statements that “[stood out],” I began the process of cutting any irrelevant statements or themes. This quote

advanced to what became the final round of coding for this interview. After coding all transcripts, I manually transferred data from Word documents to NVivo, a data analysis software tool, enabling me to consolidate all themes and codes, create notes and memos, compare codes across themes and participants, and create visuals.

For the purposes of this article, the narratives and statements that “[stood] out” can all be collapsed into four themes that directly respond to the research question: (a) writing history, (b) personal writing, (c) teaching writing philosophies, and (d) classroom writing activities. The following provides examples of codes for each theme:

- Writing History: e.g., Gwen said she developed a strong sense of self as a writer in elementary school, sustained it through personal writing with friends and family in the years following, but struggled to compose when academic writing became formulaic.
- Personal Writing: e.g., Darren narrated a recent experience when he wrote poetry near a stream and shared it with a group of friends.
- Teaching Writing Philosophy: e.g., Joe said “I feel like the only way for [students] to actually get better is to write a lot.”
- Classroom Writing Activities: e.g., Darren narrated experiences when he informally shared personal writing purposes with secondary students during composition exercises.

Despite the abundance of interview data I collected, I recognize the argument that limited observational data may undermine participants’ self-reported identities. The narratives participants shared about themselves have capacity to construct their identity (e.g., Hendry, 2007; Huber et al., 2013), and inform future identities (Cortazzi, 2001). In other words, their narratives of writing and writing instruction all contribute to their identities as writers and writing instructors. As the narrative inquirer, my purpose was not to confirm their statements aligned with their actions, but rather to raise questions and possibilities.

Findings

The research question oriented my focus of the data towards the connection between participants’ writer identities and their writing pedagogy. I examine this connection by (a) unpacking participant writer identity, and (b) connecting their writer identity to writing pedagogy through narratives, belief statements, and observations. Participants assigned classroom writing activities that I highlight in the first seven weeks of the spring 2020 semester before the pandemic ended in-person instruction. I preface this work with a note: Participant writer identities are more complex than what I can include in one article. The work I highlight represents only part of their complex writer identities.

Vulnerability as a Writer: Darren

Darren has an established record of writing that stretched throughout most of his life. His writing goals were to “process,” and to earn a “socioemotional reward.” He mentioned an unsettling experience at the high school where a teacher was accused of misconduct towards another student. Talking about this experience illustrated his writing purpose to “process”:

I was just thinking last night at work—I work at [Employment] and stack fruit, so I get a lot of time to process. And I was thinking about everything that happened at [School] yesterday and this week and was wondering if there was a way to take personal writing from that because I plan on just writing some poetry just to process that whole situation for me.

This was a startling experience for Darren, and one that he did not expect to encounter as a student teacher. Darren considered processing this experience through writing because writing is his most effective coping strategy. These opportunities to write were personally meaningful for him because reflective poetry afforded him opportunities to “[think] critically, especially about the world around [him].”

Darren not only valued writing to process critically, but he also enjoyed composing simply because it made him “feel good.” Relatedly, his writing purposes were often interrelated, choosing to write for occasions that both enabled him to process and to feel good. Darren narrated a recent experience when he participated in a retreat for young adults with his church group:

I had been processing internally and I thought it’s just time to put something to paper . . . I thought I am here in a forest and above a stream and there are a lot of cyclical processes going on here, and I want to write about all the things this stream does for the world. And it ended up becoming this poem that I really, really enjoyed writing and got really lost in . . . [writing] made the experience almost more real than just sitting over a stream and looking at it

Darren’s desire to compose during this experience is not surprising. He made clear through our interviews that writing made him “feel good,” and allowed him “to process.” These and similar writing opportunities were important for Darren because his father taught him to reflect through writing. Darren’s predilection to reflect was influenced by his family, but *he* discovered its value through personal experience. Composing about nature demonstrated his value of reflective writing. Significantly, such opportunities were necessary for his writing growth. He continued his narrative by illustrating how powerful it was to share his poetry with peers at the retreat:

One of the parts of doing that that was more enjoyable was coming back and sharing that poem with the other people at the retreat, which isn't something I have practiced before with my writing because it's always been very personal and it's hard because you don't want someone to look at it and go oh that's [only] fine.

Despite his writing experiences, I am intrigued by Darren's vulnerability in sharing his writing. When he shared his poetry with peers at the retreat, he noted that, "even though it's scary, I know that it's something that can be really rewarding." Darren further described sharing writing with peers empowered him as a writer, encouraging him to transfer this practice to the secondary writing classroom. Sharing writing was a new concept for Darren that he only considered recently when he was a student in my literacy course: "I think you talked about doing this once in your classroom when you journaled about the events about the school and then shared it and I think that is important." Thus, Darren intentionally considered similar opportunities to share writing:

I think I would have thought about sharing my own writing with my students as a little bit of a boastful, like, look at this great thing I wrote; I'm an amazing writer! Try to be like me [Laughter]. And I don't want to do that at all, but doing it in a way that benefits the students by exemplifying vulnerabilities I think is so valuable.

Darren admitted that sharing unpolished writing, even to secondary students, is "scary," but he believed that "sharing writing is healthy for the writer and the people you're sharing with." Darren's belief that sharing writing is "healthy" for secondary students can lead to powerful pedagogical opportunities because highly effective writing teachers share their writing habits and experiences with students, making clear that they compose in ways that enrich their lives. Mindful of such benefits, Darren approached the opportunity to share his writing with students as an act of vulnerability. He noted that his personal writing experiences "encourage[d] [him] to think about sharing [his] own work as a teacher in [his] classroom with [his] students just as a model of vulnerability." To that end, a significant component of Darren's writer identity *is* sharing his writing experiences and purposes.

Darren's Writer Identity as Pedagogy

Darren's growth as an ELA teacher is connected to his willingness to write and share his writing experiences. However, he recognized that such practices require vulnerability and bravery. He envisioned sharing personal writing in his classroom by introducing it as follows:

This is a piece that I wrote and I haven't had any feedback on it, but I want to share it. And saying this is scary for me—it's okay when you write and

you want to share. It will be scary.

Darren even pondered aloud whether he might share the poetry he considered writing in response to the teacher allegations with his class by saying, “this is a difficult situation that is happening at our school and this is how I process it, and I think it’s healthy in my life. Maybe it’s a strategy that you can incorporate in your life.” It is unclear whether this writing and sharing came to fruition; nonetheless, this poignant example demonstrated Darren’s belief towards reflective writing and opportunities to capitalize on his writer identity to add authenticity and vulnerability to his writing classroom.

Darren also discussed his personal writing purposes during informal conversations with students. Darren claimed that students asked questions during class such as “why do we have to write all the time?” Darren responded by highlighting his personal experiences: “Oh I write so I can process emotionally. Maybe that’s something you can use in your future.” Similarly, Darren illustrated how his past writing experiences influenced his pedagogy:

I’ll sit down with individual students and they’ll say, I’m just struggling with this part of the research paper, or I can’t do this, and so I’ll tell them an experience I have with writing a research paper, and I had to write this big one for college. And I was stuck on the same thing and this is how I got through it.

Illustrating personal writing beliefs and experiences within classroom conversations was an important pedagogical strategy for Darren. Students discovered Darren was a successful writer who learned how to implement writing strategies for specific writing occasions. These informal conversations also underscored Darren’s personal writing habits, and the strategies he implemented whether to cope through emotionally challenging situations and/or to reflect by composing poetry.

Darren’s rich writing practices and his willingness to be vulnerable amplified his position as a writer leading a writing classroom. His strong writer identity combined with his desire to be vulnerable offered pedagogical possibilities that many secondary writing teachers cannot offer. He became a more effective writing teacher because he could draw from his own writing practices to offer potential ways to navigate difficult moments for students, and to offer sincere writing purposes and experiences. Such instruction not only added authenticity and empathy to his writing classroom, but it offered possibilities to normalize how writing can be utilized for functional purposes beyond academia. Indeed, Darren enriched his writing classroom only because he had so many robust experiences as a writer.

Writing with a Powerful Voice: Gwen

The interviews I conducted with Gwen led me to believe that she primarily wrote to calm anxiety and clarify thought. She believed writing was a “safe space,” and one she can turn to during challenging life moments. Gwen described an experience early in our interviews that gave me insight towards the value she placed on writing, and how she used writing as a therapeutic tool:

Last night I woke up in the middle of the night and I was really panic-y, so I just got on my journal and I wrote for a little bit, and sometimes when I have these panic attacks, especially being further away from home, I’m really close with my mom, so usually when I’m at home I’ll just go talk with her, but when I’m here and I can’t do that I have my journal and I’ll write.

Gwen’s awareness to write during such moments was a powerful tool, opening therapeutic possibilities when little else was available. Writing allowed Gwen to explore her thoughts when she “[did not] know what to think necessarily,” and when she was away from family. Writing to acknowledge and express her anxiety served as an opportunity to assess her feelings and come to peace with them. In an interview the following year, Gwen described her writing as a “stream of conscious” style. My analysis of the data led me to believe that her therapeutic writing was also stream of conscious, a genre she later confirmed she composed in frequently. She described her preference for stream of conscious writing:

I like that voice going through it. And toning things back isn’t necessarily something [I] need to do when I’m writing for myself . . . I think writing exactly what you’re thinking is something I believe in very strongly especially when you’re thinking through something.

Gwen wrote the thoughts of her heart unencumbered by grammatical rules or stylistic requirements, enabling her to compose raw feelings at multiple points in her life. Gwen’s proclivity to compose in a stream of conscious style was effective for her. She composed honestly about her anxiety until she reached a point where she felt safe. She also utilized the powerful voice in the stream of conscious writing to compose letters, both sent and unsent, to friends and colleagues:

I’ve been writing letters to people. Sometimes I give them to them, sometimes I don’t—sometimes I just get this urge to write a letter to someone [laugh] and then I think better of it. That’s the way I’ve been writing recently because I can’t quite think out in any other form . . . I just can’t get through a problem without writing out my thoughts.

Regardless of whether Gwen formally gave the letter to her intended audience, she believed writing was a vehicle to think before acting:

Writing for me gives me the opportunity to write things down and look at it and say if I said that to that person that would not go well, but it’s on a piece

of paper. And I don't have to feel bad about putting it there. And I don't have to show anyone and no one's going to get mad at me for [writing] it.

Significantly, Gwen illustrated writing is also a tool to express her thoughts in a safe space. Composing in instances such as this in a stream of conscious style is important to Gwen because she can spend less time wrestling with grammatical or other structural components of the writing and focus more on the voice she sought—a voice that is honest, urgent, and therapeutic. Her voice was honest because it sincerely reflected her struggles and anxieties, and it was urgent because she needed immediate help when she composed. Perhaps, most importantly, it was therapeutic because it offered respite when little else was available. Indeed, writing was Gwen's only relief in the sleepless moments of the night.

The writing experiences Gwen highlighted all have one powerful component in common: She wrote with a powerful voice in a stream of conscious style. Truly, Gwen illustrated her compositions were “focused on the personal impact of writing and [emphasizing] voice.” This habit aligned with her belief that “writing is a work of art” in that there is no “right or wrong way to do it.” To that end, writing with a powerful personal voice was the foundation of her writing pedagogy.

Gwen's Writer Identity as Pedagogy

Gwen's practice to write frequently utilizing a personal voice guided her writing pedagogy often. She narrated powerful experiences when she advised students to “just write,” without fear of being wrong. In fact, Gwen used the phrase “just write,” so frequently I adopted the title *just write* to describe her writing pedagogy. The following narrative exemplified such pedagogy:

I have a student who would just sit with his head down and I'd be like well can you just write what you're thinking? . . . Just write. If you just write then we can go back and find the substance, and we can cut out the things that don't matter or that you don't want to have in your composition.

Inspiring students to write with a powerful voice set the stage for her writing instruction like the way it influenced her personal writing. One of the aspects of her *just write* pedagogy I found engaging was the possibility to work with student writers on multiple drafts. Gwen emphasized she could help students revise their work if they *just write*. These statements reflected her philosophy that “it doesn't matter how you write—just write.” Gwen documented an experience when her *just write* pedagogy engendered student growth. Specifically, she continued the narrative of the student who she encouraged to *just write*:

That student who was sitting with his head down, the paper I ended up getting from him was beautiful, and he doesn't turn things in: He hates writing. I've been working with him specifically because he's been so

reluctant, but his paper was beautifully done. And it was very stream of consciousness. . . . it made me cry [laugh]. I was like, *well, you've got something*. My whole thing with him is to get him to send *something*, and it was gorgeous. It was a beautiful point.

Though I found it interesting Gwen's *just write* pedagogy engendered student growth, I found it even more insightful that this student wrote in a stream of conscious format. Significantly, this reflected Gwen's personal writing habits. It was unclear whether Gwen specifically recommended this or if the student chose to do so independently. However, my analysis confirmed Gwen's personal writing habits and experiences influenced her pedagogy, and this student discovered writing possibilities that helped him write and submit writing when he traditional did neither. Gwen's commitment to design writing activities to reflect her writer identity and intentionally encourage students to compose with a powerful voice resonated. She recognized this in herself as she analyzed her own pedagogy, noting her writing instruction was

Different than the typical way of writing, especially [in] response to prompts or short answer writing [because] people don't generally want that kind of stream of consciousness. But because that's such a way that I write, it's important to me I feel that people see the connection between personal writing and writing for school

Gwen found familiarity teaching writing by drawing on her own writing experiences and purposes for writing. By capitalizing on these experiences, Gwen created meaningful writing opportunities for students. I give pause to reflect on the student with his head down who did not have a strong history of submitting writing. Gwen's *just write* pedagogy, unencumbered by stylistic requirements or grammatical rules, enabled him to be successful in ways that were not possible with other teachers. Specifically, Gwen's approach to writing instruction was conducive for this student and created meaningful opportunities to compose.

More than that, though, she was prepared to offer pedagogical strategies and help students write without fear of being incorrect. Gwen's stream of conscious writing and *just write* pedagogy—engendered by her personal writing—created space for literacy growth for secondary students in ways that may not have been possible otherwise. This pedagogy enabled her to be a more effective writing teacher, setting her apart from others who were unable to draw from their writer identities because they did not attend to it as carefully as Gwen did.

Writing for Relief and New Perspectives: Joe

Joe has a rich history as a writer that led him to be proactive about his current writing goals. He wrote often and drew inspiration from significant life events. For instance, he shared two poignant stories when writing was therapeutic:

When I was in Vietnam it was very stressful in a weird way. It was a weird living situation. I lived with 20 other people in this townhouse, and I shared a room with five other people, and it was always hot. It was always 108 degrees. I lost 15 pounds in two weeks. It was a weird kind of environment, so it was stressful in a way. So that's when I started journaling.

Joe did not elaborate on what he wrote during this time, but I do not believe that the topic or content was important. Like Gwen, writing was a therapeutic activity that afforded him peace in moments he needed it most. His writing purposes in Vietnam were not isolated either. Joe described how he continued to write as a form of therapy during unsettling life moments: "Last December one of my good friends died, and I wrote about that and I feel like writing helped in like, I don't know, just helped in therapeutic kind of way." In both instances, Joe found peace while writing.

These two experiences highlight Joe's beliefs that writing is a mechanism for "understanding the human condition." Joe's penchant for writing in such situations enabled him to explore significant socioemotional experiences that were life altering. By examining his feelings through writing after such significant events, Joe exemplified his belief that "writing is an attempt at expressing things that are almost inexpressible."

Joe's writing purposes moved beyond therapy as he described specific writing goals to strengthen his writing ability. "One of my new year's resolutions is to write 2,000 words per week . . . I've been trying to write every night." Joe noted on multiple occasions he enjoyed writing creatively. In fact, when I asked him about his writing goals, he responded that his goals were directed towards composition that "gets [him] writing something creatively." In this sense, creative writing typically fell into the category of composing a book and writing short stories. "I want to write a book. Right now it's horrible. I have 15,000-16,000 words . . . and hopefully we keep [revising] until it's beautiful: A *New York Times* best seller." By all accounts, the writing he composed for this book will strengthen him as a writer (e.g., Fecho, 2011).

Joe's writing goals also extended to unplanned writing opportunities, especially in writing short stories:

I was reading randomly about the Rocky Flats Plant where the US government was making plutonium bombs, or cores to atom bombs. And I thought there'd be like a cool short story idea there. There was a bunch of waste there, so now there's like radiation in the ground water potentially. I changed it so it's like a Twinkie factory essentially now and it's comparing Twinkies to nuclear waste because they never expire; they never degrade.

Rewriting the story about the Rocky Flats Plant in a humorous light exemplified multiple components of Joe's writer identity. Foremost, it

demonstrated his commitment to writing and meeting his writing goals. It also illustrated his claim that, by writing, “I feel like I was learning a lot or thinking about things in a different kind of way.” In other words, writing about the Rocky Flats Plant as a Twinkie factory amid a nuclear waste facility altered his perspective on the story.

I found it interesting that Joe wrote to “think about things in different kind of way.” This was evident during his creative short story about a nuclear waste facility, but I also found similar connections during other writing activities. For instance, his writing experiences in Vietnam and at the time one of his friends passed away were both therapeutic experiences, influencing the way he considered and responded to these events. This principle of writing to discover is one of the key components evident in his writing pedagogy. Such writing opportunities combined with his commitment to write regularly amplified his writing pedagogy.

Joe’s Writer Identity as Pedagogy

Joe’s writer identity was manifested in his commitment to daily writing with secondary students. Joe projected this aspect of his writer identity in his teaching writing philosophy: “I feel like the only way for [students] to actually get better is to write a lot.” Part of this involves the routinized “bell ringer” activity, where students compose in response to a question to start the class. Not only does Joe project his writer identity in such instances, but he also added depth to the way his writer identity influenced his pedagogy based on context.

Joe poignantly exemplified how his writer identity influenced his writing pedagogy when he invited students to compose poetry to a friend after multiple students at the high school tragically passed away in a car accident. Since writing helped Joe navigate a similarly emotional experience, he utilized his writing experiences to help those in his class continue their healing process through writing.

Joe also designed creative writing activities for students. Specifically, one of the assignments that he required students to complete was an “epistolary kind of novel or short story” in connection with science fiction and technology. As Joe mentioned his penchant for writing creatively himself, including short stories, his desire to design creative writing opportunities for students was not surprising. On one day of instruction, Joe mentioned he emphasized “how technology affected different things.” Specifically, Joe shared his understanding that the Tesla company needs cobalt to produce batteries. However, they receive the cobalt from children who work in mines in Africa. Simply put, he emphasized that he wanted students to “think about how the technology affects these random different groups of people.” Or, in other words, he designed a writing activity to help students “[think] about things in a different kind of way,” similar to his personal writing experiences.

Similar to Darren and Gwen, Joe offered writing opportunities to secondary students that were driven by his writer identity. Joe's robust history writing creative short stories, a book manuscript, and informal journals, among other writing opportunities, enabled him to have a nuanced understanding of writing that is only available to those, like Joe, who composed frequently and for a variety of purposes and audiences. To that end, his writing instruction was authentic and effective because he drew from his writerly life.

Discussion

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) make clear when a researcher decides to engage in narrative inquiry that the researcher needs "to be prepared to give an account of what we learn about our phenomenon that is special, something that could not be known through other theories or methods" (p. 123). The abundance of interviews specific to narrative inquiry afforded unique insight, understanding, and discovery that I do not believe would have occurred through another methodology. Foremost, I learned participants' rich writer identities influenced their writing pedagogy profoundly. Writer identities often drove the design, beliefs, and goals that shaped the writing activities. Indeed, they embodied how "the identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, [and] where they place their effort" (as cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Darren, Gwen, and Joe have a living writer identity in that they are confident writers who find value in writing. Their writing strengthened the quality of their lives as such practices helped them navigate life's difficult moments. A living writer identity is ideal for writing teachers because such identity imbues intentional writing opportunities regularly, and is foundational to teaching writing with nuanced understanding as active learners and writers. Significantly, their living writer identity set the foundation for them to project their writer identity as writing pedagogy, drawing from their robust writing experiences to inform classroom instruction. Their ability to draw from their writer identities often and in unplanned moments enabled their writing instruction to be more vulnerable, authentic, and ultimately effective. I argue their writing instruction would not have been as rich had they not prepared themselves through consistent writing.

Significantly, Darren's writer identity *became* his writing pedagogy when he shared his personal writing purposes and strategies. He amplified bravery and vulnerability by sharing writing strategies and writing purposes with secondary students. In doing so, he offered valuable insight that is not available otherwise. In such pedagogy, Darren removed barriers so student writers could understand his writing purposes and experiences (Gallagher, 2011). Darren found that he could "share [his] own writing or even simply what it was *like* to write" (Whitney, 2017, p. 72, emphasis in original). By engaging in and sharing his writing experiences

with students, he not only positioned himself as a writer, but he allowed his experience to act as a powerful form of pedagogy (Whitney, 2017). Such writing instruction brought an element of authenticity and vulnerability that secondary writing instruction desperately needs.

Gwen was intentional about the way she pursued personal writing to honor her voice. Inspiring students to compose with a powerful voice set the stage for her writing pedagogy. Inspiring students to *just write* not only reflected her writer identity, but it specifically helped the student with his head down compose something “beautiful” even though he had a history of not writing or submitting work. Gwen’s persistent and encouraging *just write* pedagogy positively influenced this student to write, providing him with an effective drafting strategy (Dean, 2017). Ultimately, this experience is a microcosm of Gwen’s writer identity and the possibilities available when she projects her writer identity as pedagogy.

My interviews with Gwen undoubtedly informed me that she wanted students to consider their voice as works of art, reflecting her writing beliefs. This approach reflected Yagelski’s (2011) experience observing 5th grade students: “During those few moments they were, almost literally, freed from typical school worries about getting it right” (p. 141). Gwen’s projection of her writer identity encompassed a similar pedagogy in that students can write without fear of being wrong. And that writing—whatever students choose to write as their personal works of art—helps them become better writers (e.g., Fecho, 2011).

Joe’s writer identity, too, also played a significant role in his writing pedagogy. He made clear his intentions to write daily, and this aspect of his writer identity was manifested as a writing teacher daily during writing he invited students to compose. These were either short prompts to start class, or extended writing activities such as the short stories he is wont to write. Joe made clear his own experiences drove his writing pedagogy. He contended “knowing what has worked for me also pushes me towards certain activities that I think will help students, too.” In other words, writing as therapy and to consider different perspectives was personally valuable for Joe, so he designed writing activities to reflect these philosophies and experiences.

Likewise, Joe’s pedagogy reflected his belief that writing can help students to “understand the human condition.” When Joe invited students to compose shortly after multiple students at the high school passed away, he did so primarily because he had a similar experience where writing was therapeutic. Importantly, he was prepared to offer writing as a strategy for reflection and relief only because of his personal writing beliefs and experiences. Moreover, this same writing prompt to help students heal after their peers passed away reflected his belief that writing is a mechanism to understand the human condition.

A common thread that connected participants' writer identity and writing instruction was their ability to make their writing instruction more vulnerable, effective, and authentic because they were able to draw from their writing experiences. For Darren, modeling his writing purposes to process life events was a vulnerable act. Gwen's consistent desire to help students compose something—anything—through her *just write* pedagogy along with Joe's desire to design daily writing activities, including those modeled after his own writing beliefs and experiences, was authentic. In doing so, Darren, Gwen, and Joe offered valuable pedagogical strategies and insights to their planned and unplanned teaching opportunities *only* because they had rich writer identities to draw from. In other words, they were effective writing instructors because they lived a writerly life and drew from such experiences in their teaching.

However, ELA teachers who draw from their writer identity must be careful not to overemphasize such identity, creating the illusion that there is only one correct strategy or purpose for writing. Woodard (2015) pondered how two teachers' dominant writer identities may have influenced secondary student writers. She argued one teacher's writer identity may have better prepared students to compose traditional school writing activities while the other may better prepare students for digital networked opportunities. In the context of the present research, secondary students in Darren and Joe's classes may be more prepared to write to navigate life's challenges and be vulnerable whereas students in Gwen's courses may be empowered to draft and redraft without fear of failure. Regardless of the dominant writer identity, ELA teachers must effectively talk about and demonstrate a variety of effective writing purposes, strategies, and occasions beyond their unique writer identity. This need not mean that ELA teachers must suppress their writer identity when designing writing curricula. ELA teachers can—and I argue should—draw heavily from their writer identity as writing instructors. In doing so, however, they must be mindful to unpack their approach to writing activities given their experience and beliefs as writers in addition to diverse possibilities and thought. Such instruction is more likely to position teachers as writers and leaders in the classroom.

Ultimately, the data and analysis presented in this research underscore the tremendous value for teachers who draw from their writer identity in designing and implementing writing pedagogy. Specifically, participants' living writer identity effectively launched their careers as they projected their writer identity as writing pedagogy. However, I argue their approach to the teaching of writing is not yet ideal. They must further capitalize on their writing experiences to share freely how writing works in their lives: How and when they find the most value through writing, their tensions as writers, their writing goals, and, indeed, their drafts in all phases of the writing process.

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