
Extending the Conversation

Writing as Praxis¹

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In 2003, the National Commission on Writing released *The Neglected “R,”* its report on the state of writing instruction in the nation’s schools. The report identified an apparent paradox: writing, which the Commission defines as “an essential skill for the many” (p. 11) that “has helped transform the world” (p. 10), is nevertheless “increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years” (p. 3). To state that paradox a bit differently, if writing has indeed helped transform the world, it seems to have had little transformative effect on most of our students. The question is, Why?

An examination of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and similar measures of student writing seems to indicate that we need a revolution in the teaching of writing, as the National Commission on Writing maintains.² Recent NAEP data reveal, for instance, that although better than 80 percent of high school seniors achieve a *basic* level of writing competence on the NAEP writing assessment, less than a quarter write at a *proficient* level and a measly 1 percent write at an *advanced* level (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008); these numbers have been remarkably consistent over the past decade and a half. In their review of the NAEP results, Applebee and Langer (2006) conclude that “while most students have mastered the basics, few can produce prose that is precise, engaging, and coherent, approximately equivalent to what NAEP calls ‘proficient’” (p. 2). Not surprisingly, ACT’s (2010) latest study of college readiness indicates that more than a third of high school juniors are not prepared for college-level writing.

But the core of the problem is not that students can’t write well; clearly, some schools do an excellent job of teaching writing (for example, see Langer, 2004), and many students in many different kinds of schools

write very effectively, in part because of the quality of instruction they receive. Every teacher can point to students who dazzle with their writing, but more important, the data I cited suggest that the vast majority of high school students are at least competent writers. Despite compelling evidence that “[e]ven in English class, on average, students are not writing a great deal” in secondary schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 15) and that the increasing emphasis on standardized tests continues to narrow the focus of writing instruction (for example, see Hillocks, 2002; Murphy, 2008; Scherff & Piazza, 2005), we *do* know how to teach kids to write effectively (see Graham & Perin, 2007). And most of us, I think it’s safe to say, believe that just about all our students, given the chance, *can* learn to write well. Yet writing remains a vexing problem in schools. Why? Why does writing seem to matter so little to most of our students, even the successful ones—and, sadly, to many of their teachers? The answer to that question, I believe, lies in how writing is conceived in mainstream schooling and in the culture at large: For all the attention it receives in discussions about school reform and literacy achievement, writing remains poorly understood. Writing instruction at all levels of education continues to be informed by a narrow conception of writing as procedure and by persistent misconceptions about writing.⁵ This, I think, is the greatest obstacle to substantive reform in writing instruction.

In general, we simply don’t teach writing in ways that give students access to its transformative power; we don’t allow them to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them. And I think that’s primarily because most educators don’t understand writing. Most teachers of writing, especially in secondary schools, are not themselves writers. Most secondary English teachers do not think of themselves as writers, nor do most school administrators. And in teacher certification programs, writing is often subordinated to literature and reading. As a result, in mainstream writing instruction, writing is not a transformative experience for most students. It is not even a practice, as we tend to think of writing as a practice (see Elbow, 1998; Goldberg, 1986). Rather, it is a procedure—and usually a tedious one at that.

But what exactly would it mean to harness the transformative power of writing in mainstream schooling? What if writing in schools could be reconceived as something other than a procedure for textual production, a means of producing sanctioned textual forms that conform to the kinds of criteria for written texts that we see in the new Common Core State Standards? What if we understood writing as more than the production of text? What if we understood writing as *praxis*?

In this essay I address that question. I want to explore the possibility of

writing as praxis because I believe that writing can—and should—be a vehicle for individual and collective transformation. And writing instruction at all levels of education can and should be about imagining and creating a better world together. But writing can become a vehicle for genuine change only if we understand it as something more than a process of textual production or a means of communication or even a form of thinking that can support learning—all of which are valid and common ways of understanding writing that are, nonetheless, limited and limiting. These ways of understanding writing don't sufficiently capture the complexity and power of writing as a way to understand ourselves and the world we share, as a way of living our lives more fully. The common understanding of writing as a procedure for textual production is essentially teleological, conceiving of writing in the service of content learning or the development of communicative skills or even the sorting and norming of students. By contrast, I am proposing that we understand writing ontologically, as a way of being in the world, as an act of living. In this regard, the purpose of writing is simply to live more fully. And that can be a step toward living together more peacefully, more humanely.

I want to understand what it means to engage in writing as a practice of being, as a way of living together on the earth we share. I want to explore the idea of writing as praxis.

Understanding Writing as Praxis

Paulo Freire (2005) defined praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). In Freire's formulation, language and literacy are integral to—indeed, essential to—that process of action and reflection. According to Freire, “to say a true word—which is praxis—is to transform the world” (p. 88). Significantly, the world does not exist as a reality apart from us (p. 81); we exist in dialectical relationship with the reality we help create. For Freire, then, reality is not static, and human beings are always “in the process of becoming”; we are “unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 84). Thus, praxis is an ongoing process of transformation—of both self and world. And because literacy is part of the process of action and reflection that is necessary for praxis, writing also can be a process of transformation. In this sense, writing is fundamentally an act of living more deeply, more intensely; it is a process by which we become more “fully human,” as Freire puts it. Or at least it should be.

I am not referring to writing as we typically understand it—that is, writing as a means to produce a text, in which the act of writing and, significantly, the *experience* of writing are mostly ignored. In mainstream

writing instruction, the text is what matters, not the act of writing. But I am interested in understanding what happens *as we write*; I am interested in the act of writing *in the moment*. Understanding the experience of writing requires making a key distinction between writing as textual production and writing as a way to experience ourselves in the world; it requires distinguishing between the writer's writing and the *writer writing*—that is, between the text and the act of writing. But what would a pedagogy based on the idea of writing as praxis look like? How do we teach writing as praxis in view of the pressures facing teachers to focus on specified skills and improve student achievement on writing tests? Can we? Should we?

These questions are especially poignant at a time when education policy is pushing us further down a path to standardization, a time when student learning is increasingly defined in terms of market values, when powerful new digital technologies seem to open up possibilities for expressing ourselves, yet political and economic developments leave so many of us feeling increasingly powerless. In 1973, Peter Elbow wrote that “[m]any people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words” (p. v). I think the same is true today. And like Elbow, I believe writing might help us claim a sense of control in our lives by enabling us to gain a better understanding of ourselves and our experiences. But unlike Elbow, I am less interested in the texts we produce as writers than in the experience of writing itself. I am less interested in what happens *to* our writing than in what happens *as we write*. Therein lies the key to opening up the transformative possibilities of writing.

Elsewhere I have argued that writing is an ontological act:

When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us. . . . A truly transformative pedagogy of writing, therefore, begins with an understanding of the act of writing not as the writer thinking (as in a cognitive view) or communicating (as in a social view) or constructing himself or herself (as in a poststructuralist view)—all of which are valid but limited ways of understanding writing—but as the writer *being*. (Yagelski, 2009, pp.7–8)

This analysis of what happens as we write relies on a phenomenological understanding of the relationship between language and being. Such an understanding helps explain what seems to make the experience of writing different from other intense experiences of being in the world:

The writer at the moment of writing is experiencing him or herself *through language*. The use of language—the effort to articulate something (it doesn't really matter what) in written language—intensifies the writer's awareness at that moment. Writing, as an act of meaning-making through language, goes beyond the intensity of focus that characterizes an activity such as [rock] climbing; it is an enactment of embodied speech, in Merleau-Ponty's formulation, in which the writer expresses his or her being in the moment of writing. (Yagelski, 2011, p. 117)

Janet Emig (1985) illuminates this unique capacity of writing to engage our consciousness, pointing to the slower pace of writing as compared to listening, speaking, and reading: “this slower pace allows for—indeed, *encourages*—the shuttling among past, present, and future. Writing, in other words, connects the three major tenses of our experience to make meaning” (p. 127).

This is a remarkable assertion: that writing somehow brings together past, present, and future. Not the text we produce as a result of writing, but the act of writing in the moment. When we write, no matter what we are writing about, we call on the past and anticipate the future even as we inhabit the present; at the same time, we engage in an act that is both deeply intellectual and overtly physical.

Emig's analysis points to the complex relationship between language and our sense of being. She suggests that as we write, we are intimately connected to the present in the sense that we are focused intensely on the here and now; at the same time, we are also connected to something larger that is *not* here and now—something that includes the subject we are writing about, whatever that is; something that includes our past experiences as writers and language users and human beings; something that includes our shared history as part of a culture or perhaps several cultures, which have shaped what we know about writing and how we engage in it; something that includes readers, real or imagined, whom we might expect to read our writing at some point in the future. All of this—and more—is somehow contained in the moment of writing.

So as we write, we inhabit the moment so thoroughly that the act of writing becomes almost synonymous with our consciousness and shapes our awareness of ourselves *as our selves*, selves that exist at a moment in time that is connected to other moments in time through the act of writing, selves that exist *both separate from and yet part of* what is around us. In this way, writing has the capacity to intensify our sense of being. We do not exist because of writing, but writing can bring our being more sharply into focus; it can make us more aware *that* we exist. Significantly, from this awareness of self emerges not a sense of our separateness, our existence as autonomous

thinking beings, but rather a sense of self as existing in that moment and at the same time inhabiting the physical place where we are writing as well as whatever we are writing about and whomever we might be writing to, all of which is removed from us in time and space at *that* moment but at the same time connected to us *at that moment* because of the act of writing. In other words, writing is inherently an act of connection. What emerges as we write in the moment is a multifaceted sense of self that is connected, through language, to other selves and to the world we share.

It is in this sense that we *are* as we are writing. The act of writing, in other words, is an ontological act, an act of being.

Why does any of this matter? Because if writing is more than communication through text, if it is also an ontological act, then it can shape us as beings in relation to the world around us in ways that writing as mere textual production does not. The transformative power of writing lies in its capacity to shape our sense of ourselves as beings in the world, to foster a deeper awareness of ourselves in relation to the world around us.

I want to emphasize here that I am not suggesting that we ignore or diminish the importance of writing as a communicative and rhetorical act. Writing *is* a powerful and essential means of communication, and students must learn to write effectively for various purposes and audiences. They should master the rhetorical skills needed to write effectively in various contexts. But writing is more than communication. It is a vehicle for sustained inquiry into our experiences, a means of understanding who we are. Ultimately, writing is a deeply human act that can help us better understand what it means to be human. It is this dimension of writing—of the *experience* of writing—that we must open up for our students and for ourselves.

Writing as a Practice of Living

We live in a time that does not seem given to reflection, and certainly recent developments in education policy seem to be moving us in a direction away from the kind of literacy practices that Freire advocated. Look, for example, at the Common Core State Standards and you see a somewhat updated version of the traditional emphasis on form and technique when it comes to writing. There are obligatory nods to the importance of audience and purpose and the idea of writing as inquiry, but the focus of the standards is on producing sanctioned textual forms that meet increasingly detailed yet traditional criteria regarding matters such as organization and style: “write arguments to support claims”; “write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information”; “write narratives . . . using

effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences” (pp. 42–43). These standards seem reasonable enough. But nowhere in the standards is there any mention of writing for an ethical purpose, or writing to understand ourselves as human beings, or writing to foster individual or collective well-being. Instead, the standards state that “the overwhelming focus of writing throughout high school should be on arguments and informative/explanatory texts” (p. 5). As they move through the secondary grades, then, students should write fewer narratives “to convey experience” and more texts that are informative and argumentative, as Figure 1 shows. By 12th grade only 20 percent of the students’ writing should be narrative writing about their own experiences, as compared to 30 percent in the eighth grade.

Consider what such a recommendation reveals about the purposes of writing as they are encoded in the standards. As students gain competence, their writing should be more “objective,” more distant from their experience of themselves in the world. Apparently, it would deviate from the standards to encourage students to write more deeply and reflectively about their experiences as human beings as they get older and more aware of the complexities of living. Granted, students’ argumentative or informative writing can be based on their experiences; for example, a student who has volunteered at an animal shelter might write an argument in favor of a new law to combat animal abuse or an informative essay about the important services performed by animal welfare organizations. But such writing is not the same as writing to explore and understand the experience of working with abused animals or of volunteering for an animal welfare organization. Clearly, the emphasis in the standards is on developing technical competence: the ability to produce a certain kind of text. Students might choose to write about a subject that relates to their experience, but the specific nature of that subject or, more importantly, what students might have learned about themselves and the world they live in as a result of writing about that subject is largely irrelevant (except in a vague way) when it comes to meeting the standards.

Grade	Writing to Persuade	Writing to Explain	Writing to Convey Experience
4	30%	35%	35%
8	35%	35%	30%
12	40%	40%	20%

Figure 1. Percent Distribution of Communicative Purposes by Grade in the Common Core State Standards (National Assessment Governing Board, 2010, p. 9)

Yet our students routinely tell us how much they value writing about their lives, their struggles, their joys, their hopes. I hear constant complaints that students are reluctant to write: they're too distracted, too connected to instant-access social media, too unfamiliar with the experience of sustained engagement with a book or an idea, too oriented toward multitasking to engage in the focused intellectual work of writing. But who wouldn't be reluctant to write the tedious, meaningless drivel that we so often ask students to produce in school?

My own students have a lot to say about how little writing in school means to them. In a course on literacy across the curriculum, I ask the students, all of whom are enrolled in the graduate teacher certification program at SUNY-Albany, to write about an important experience involving writing or reading. Not surprisingly, most write about their experiences in school, since school is where most students do most of their writing and reading. These essays are revealing. Semester after semester, they underscore how little meaning school-sponsored writing has had for these students. Vinny, for example, a preservice social studies teacher, wrote that "I never took pride in my writing [in school] because most of the time I did not believe in what I was writing about." Kelly, a preservice English teacher, confided a similar lack of engagement: "I moseyed my way through middle school English class by pretending I liked to read and write and then finally ended up in high school, where you were almost always guaranteed to read and write about the same book more than once (which I took full advantage of) in your years there." These statements are typical of the way my students describe their experiences with writing. Year after year.

Ask students to write meaningless texts, and writing will be meaningless for them. But let them write in ways that matter to them, and they will embrace the opportunity; they will take advantage of the capacity of writing to help them make sense of their lives. We see this all around us, both in school and in our lives outside school.

Recently a relative of mine and her husband of 15 years split up. My relative confided to me that her 12-year-old daughter, whom I'll call Jillian, struggled to adjust to the breakup and, in the midst of the upheaval, began writing about it in her journal. According to my relative, Jillian's writing is full of emotional and heartfelt questioning about her parents' separation. She seemed to be writing not only to cope with this difficult situation but also to understand it. What is striking is that no one encouraged Jillian to write about what's happening in her life—not her mother, not her father, not her teachers. She just did it, and it seemed to help her live her life at a difficult time. She was not writing to produce a text. She was just writing.

Around the same time that I learned about Jillian, I happened to talk to a friend who recently lost her husband. They had been married for many years. Her husband retired some years ago and sometime later was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. In the past year or so, he deteriorated. When he finally succumbed to his illness, it was no surprise, but it was terribly difficult for my friend, especially because she witnessed his slow demise. When we spoke recently, she told me that she had begun writing every morning. It isn't really a journal or a diary, just a practice. Each morning before breakfast, she says, she writes, usually about the previous day's events and about her ongoing effort to cope with her husband's absence. She does so, she told me, because it helps clarify her feelings about what is happening in her life. She has had an especially difficult time dealing with the vivid memory of her husband's painful last hours, and she confided to a grief counselor about that struggle. The counselor tried to help her see that being present at her husband's passing was a privilege of the most intimate and profound kind. My friend admits that she has had to work hard to see it that way, but her daily writing, she says, has helped her embrace the idea that it was a special gift to be present for her husband's last moments. In this regard, her writing is transforming her life.

This is a woman, by the way, who has written many kinds of documents related to her work. She has a great deal of experience producing professional texts, but the writing she is doing now has nothing to do with text. It is about living her life.

To my mind, these are powerful examples of writing as praxis. These are examples of writing not just to understand or cope with difficult experience but to transform oneself in the process. This is writing to live life. Significantly, what matters in these instances is the *experience* of writing, which is distinct from any text that might be produced as a result of that writing.

I am arguing here that the impact of that experience of writing is separate from the text itself and whatever might happen to that text later. The writing matters even if the text does not. But these two things—the experience of writing and the text that might be produced as a result of that writing—are not mutually exclusive. Even when part of the point of an act of writing is to produce a text, the experience of writing that text can be an act of living, a praxis. And in that regard it can be transformative, no matter what happens to the text itself. That text is a record of sorts, but it is not a record of the experience of writing it; it is a record of something else. Nevertheless, those two experiences—that is, the experience about which we are writing and the actual experience of writing—can be brought together

such that the act of producing a text need not undermine the power of the experience of writing in the moment.

To illustrate what I mean, let me share another instance of someone writing to make sense of the experience of losing a loved one. Katie was in the seventh grade when she was given an assignment in her English class to produce a digital story about something important in her life. She chose to write about losing her mother. Over the week or two that her teacher devoted to this assignment, Katie learned to use Photostory, a computer program for producing rudimentary digital texts that include both sound and images. She collected photos to use in her digital story, and she selected music and design features for the transitions from one image to the next. Most important, she wrote the text of her story. That process included composing and sharing her draft as well as revising it to produce the final version that would become the voiceover narration for her digital story, which she titled *My Mom's Side*. Here's what she wrote:

I sit here and I read. I write. I sleep and remember. Just like she used to do. A new world, yet so closed up. My dreams are here, my love is here, my everything is here.

My heart belongs to my mom. My mind belongs to my dad. And my soul belongs to truth: truth of realness, the realness that I seek through the cracks on my Mom's side.

We were together always. We were a special kind of thing, a thing bound together by love. There was no "without me," and there was no "without her." It was that simple.

My mom's side. It still smells like her. The warmest blanket on the bed rests on my mom's side. Here is where I am at peace. Here is where I understand. I love being there, sleeping. I can close my eyes and think about nothing. That's what I love about my mom's side. I fit perfectly into her spot. We would cuddle up close, and she would breathe into my ear. There was nothing but love. No sound, no light, no hate. Just love.

I can still see her reading, glasses on, focused on the book, of course on her side. I can still see her drip soup onto her clothes, wiping it off with one swipe of the napkin. I can still see her playing Monopoly with me, swearing she will never play again because I cheat. I can still see her talking to my dad, on the other side, telling him he's her own little furnace. I can still see her on her side.

When I got older, my head was getting too heavy to put on her shoulder. I was getting too heavy, or she was getting too weak—weaker and weaker, until finally she wasn't in her bed any more. She was in a hospital bed.

The Ugly. That's what I called it. The Ugly had come back. It hid for seven years, but it had come back to my mother. She was crying, but we talked and talked. We were thinking about what we would do to defeat the Ugly within her. Other than the sickness, she had no other ugly. She

was a beautiful person, no hatred inside her, just love. We talked all day, until finally she wasn't her any more. She was the Ugly. It had overcome her. She was always confused. I didn't know where she went. My mom was taken by the Ugly. She tried to talk but fell asleep mid-sentence. She couldn't walk around, and she couldn't be my mom.

Then one day I came home. It was quiet. It smelled clean and fresh, almost like new. My dad was sitting in a chair and said hello in a small voice. He told me to sit on his lap. I was very confused, but I did what I was told. He told me that my mom had passed away with the angels that day. My heart jumped up and I couldn't breathe. I cried into his shoulder, and he told me we were going to be OK. I cried until it was time for bed, and for the next three months I slept on my mom's side.

My mom's side is very important to me. It represents everything that was good about my mom. In a way, my mom's side is missing, because she was missing. My heart broke here and was fixed here. This side is now our side, shared between our love.

This printed page cannot convey the experience of watching and listening to Katie's digital story, with its powerful, carefully selected images and Katie's somber yet strong voiceover narration. It is a moving, beautifully produced digital presentation. When I shared it at the 2011 CEE Summer Conference, more than a few members of the audience wept. It has never failed to move me to tears when I have viewed it. But even without that experience, you can appreciate the quality of Katie's written text, which is a beautiful piece of writing in its own right. It reflects Katie's mastery of the skills that we associate with effective writing. There is little doubt that in composing this text (and in producing her digital story) Katie learned something valuable about how to write effectively; about how to address an audience to achieve a specific purpose; about technical matters such as diction, structure, style, and tone; about the kinds of design considerations related to the uses of sound and image in a text that Gunther Kress (2005) has argued should be a focus of literacy instruction. These are essential skills, and we must help our students develop them. Assignments like the digital story in Katie's seventh-grade English class can be effective vehicles for such learning.

But none of these aspects of Katie's act of textual production necessarily captures the impact of the experience of writing that text on her sense of herself as a being in the world. Katie's digital story is a text that can move us, which is a reflection of the astonishing power of writing to communicate and connect us across time and space, but it was the *act* of writing her story that potentially had the greatest impact on Katie as a human being. And that impact is separate from anything that might happen to her text. In other

words, what happens to Katie’s digital story does not change her experience of writing it. It is the writing itself, not her text, that I believe truly matters in her effort to live her life without her mother. In that sense, the “quality” of her digital story is far less important than the experience of writing it. For that act of writing it, no matter how “good” her finished text might be and no matter how much it might move her readers, was an act of living; it was part of Katie’s effort to find happiness in the midst of terrible sadness.

I do not mean to dwell on death and loss in sharing these stories, but little else connects all of us as profoundly as death. Our individual and collective struggle to confront and make sense of death is a big part of what makes us human. Is it any wonder that people often turn to writing at such a time? Of course, we also write to express joy and to share the happiness in our lives. But pain and joy are two sides of the same coin. Learning from loss contributes to joy. Katie wrote to cope with loss but at the same time to reaffirm life. Is there a better reason to write than that?

Writing should be about seeking happiness. It should be about well-being. It should be a practice of living, a part of what Freire (1994) called the struggle to improve human life. And it can be such a practice—it can be a praxis—if we value the *experience* of writing as much as we value the text. A text *can* connect us to one another, and it can do so powerfully, as Katie’s story illustrates. But the act of writing—the experience of writing—can connect us even more deeply, more intimately, for in that experience of writing we reaffirm what makes us human. I propose that writing in schools should be about becoming more fully human in precisely this way.

Teaching Writing as Praxis

As I noted earlier, it can be difficult for teachers to reconcile this sense of the purpose of writing as praxis with the daunting pressures to teach students the technical writing skills they need to perform well on increasingly ubiquitous high-stakes standardized tests and to help them develop the rhetorical skills needed to negotiate the variety of writing tasks they are likely to encounter in school and beyond. But the digital story assignment for which Katie wrote her essay about her mother points to the kind of pedagogical approach that enables teachers to teach writing as praxis while at the same time addressing the conventional goals of school-sponsored writing instruction. And I have encountered other compelling examples of teachers who approach writing in this way without feeling as though they are shortchanging their students when it comes to helping them develop technical skill in writing. These goals are not mutually exclusive. Many of my colleagues in the National Writing

Project have developed rich, rigorous writing pedagogies that rest on the idea of writing as praxis and yet fit quite well into their schools' curricular guidelines or mandates.

For example, Alicia Wein, a high school English teacher in a large district in upstate New York, developed a unit to accommodate her school's requirement that all seniors read *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's (1990) novel about his experiences in the Vietnam War. But instead of constructing the unit around the reading and analysis of O'Brien's book—the conventional approach to teaching a required literary text—Alicia engaged her students in a month-long inquiry into telling “true war stories” about important experiences in their lives, using O'Brien's text as one catalyst for exploring what a “true story” is. That inquiry included many conventional activities that we associate with English classes: reading various fictional and nonfiction texts, including *The Things They Carried*, other short stories, and magazine and newspaper articles; viewing videos, including movies and documentaries about war; analyzing other cultural texts, including popular music and advertising; writing responses to these texts for various in-class exercises and out-of-class assignments; discussing these texts in small groups and as a whole class; and writing a “true war story” as the culminating assignment for the unit.

On the surface, Alicia's unit looked conventional, and it met the guidelines of her school's ELA curriculum. But the foundation of her unit—indeed, her entire pedagogy—was the view that writing and reading are vehicles for exploring and understanding our experiences in the world. In this case, writing became a vehicle for identifying and addressing some of the complex questions that characterize human life, including how we tell stories to make sense of difficult experiences. The unit was not defined by a focus on technical writing or reading skills or the technical features of narrative writing, but the students did engage in various activities, many of them challenging, that helped them practice and develop these technical skills. Nor was the unit focused on a literary text, though the students read and discussed O'Brien's book as one of many texts that became tools in their larger inquiry. Finally, the culminating assignment was not intended exclusively to be a means for students to demonstrate what they learned about writing or O'Brien's book or literature or narrative; rather, the assignment was itself an act of learning: students wrote about their own experiences in ways that fostered inquiry into those experiences and (Alicia hoped) led to genuine learning about themselves and the world they live in. Some of the students' “war stories” were well-written narratives that meet the standard criteria for “good” writing; some weren't. Much of the writing was power-

ful, and some of it was as compelling as Katie's story. But the point of the writing wasn't limited to developing competence in writing or to producing "effective" texts. Ultimately, the point was to learn about life, to live. The writing Alicia's students did to tell their "war stories" was about being human, about confronting life in all its terrible pain and magnificent joy. Whatever else that assignment accomplished in terms of the conventional goals of writing instruction, Alicia's students were writing to live more fully, more mindfully, together.

For teachers like Alicia, the conventional goals of school-based writing instruction are not irrelevant. Such teachers understand the pressures facing students in this age of "accountability." But their teaching is not defined by standards, achievement, or outcomes. Instead, it is defined by a belief that school should be about learning to live life. Accordingly, they invite students to engage in writing as a practice of living, to write in ways that might help students live together more fully, more reflectively. Teachers like Alicia value the writer writing as much or more than the writer's writing; they value the experience of writing as much as or more than the text.

I do not believe we should apologize for allowing students to write in these ways. We do not need to define the value of such writing in terms of the Common Core State learning standards or the development of writing skills that will be assessed on standardized tests. We should not have to explain the practical value of writing about the most important experiences we share as human beings. We should not have to justify writing as a practice of living by connecting it to academic achievement.⁴ To do so, I believe, denigrates the act of writing. To evaluate a work like Katie's digital story exclusively on its technical merit or against academic standards is to diminish its value as an experience of living. When we ignore the experience of writing and focus only on the quality of a text, writing is reduced to little more than a technical procedure. Why should we explain the value of assignments like the digital story in Katie's seventh-grade ELA class or the "war story" in Alicia's 12th-grade English course only in terms of their utility as pedagogical tools? Shouldn't the writing that those students did be valued just as much as ways of living more deeply, of becoming more fully human, of being happy?

Yet in the ongoing debates about literacy instruction and education reform, we seem to talk *only* about writing as technique, as procedure, as a measure of a student's merit or achievement, as a necessary tool for success in the job market. Powerful experiences like Katie's or Alicia's students' are dismissed as somehow tangential or even irrelevant to the real work of schooling—as if schooling should not be about living life, confronting the complexity of life, understanding our experiences in the world, being human.

So let us challenge the current discourses of education reform and literacy instruction, which focus on “standards” and economic competitiveness. Let us reshape these conversations to emphasize the humanness of schooling and the capacity of writing to help us live our lives more fully and mindfully and to seek well-being. We English educators are in a uniquely important position to take up this challenge, for we are charged with helping to prepare the next generation of English teachers. And what we teach them about writing can ripple through the lives of the many thousands of students whom our students will teach. If writing is praxis for us and for the teachers with whom we work, it can become a practice of living for their students—as it was for Alicia’s students, as it is for Jillian, as it is for Katie.

Notes

1. This is an adaptation of the talk I gave at the 2011 CEE Summer Conference at Fordham University.

2. Obviously, we must view these test results with a grain of salt. Any standardized writing test, even one as sophisticated as the NAEP, is limited in what it can tell us about student writing ability. This is especially true of timed writing tests, which provide little or no opportunity for the kind of revision that most writing teachers would encourage students to do. Nevertheless, standardized writing tests can provide a useful, if partial, picture of what students can do as writers within the narrow parameters set for them by the testing situation. I am arguing here primarily that the consistency of the NAEP results over time seems to reflect a weakness in conventional approaches to school-sponsored writing instruction in terms of the usual goals of such instruction. In other words, these test results seem to suggest that we are not teaching students to write in ways that enable them to produce the kind of sophisticated prose expected in college and many workplaces.

3. Thirty years after it was published, Frank Smith’s “Myths of Writing” (1981) remains a provocative and, I think, accurate description of the common misconceptions that influence writing instruction—which seems to say something about the resilience and power of these “myths.”

4. However, if we have to, we *can* justify in practical terms the approach to writing that I am advocating here. There is abundant research to support the social and psychological benefits of writing (Whitney, 2008). There is also evidence that using writing to foster a sense of self-efficacy leads to greater academic achievement (Schaffer, 2010).

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CEE Awards Announced

A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago. **The 2011 James N. Britton Award** for Inquiry within the English Language Arts was not awarded in 2011. **The 2011 Richard A. Meade Award** for Research in English Education was presented to Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, Lauren M. Kenney, and Jill M. Smith for *Acting Out! Combating Homophobia through Teacher Activism* (Teachers College Press, 2009). **The 2011 Janet Emig Award** for Exemplary Scholarship in *English Education* was presented to Glynda A. Hull, Amy Stornaiuolo, and Urvashi Sahni for their article “Cultural Citizenship and Cosmopolitan Practice: Global Youth Communicate Online” (*English Education*, July 2010). **The 2011 Cultural Diversity Grants** went to Delicia Tiera Greene for her proposal “Concrete Roses: A Case Study Exploring the Reading Engagements of Black Adolescent Girls in an Urban Fiction Book Club” and Elaine L. Wang for her proposal “Teacher Understanding and Facilitation of High-Level Thinking as Components of Instructional Quality: Reaching for High-Level Cognitive Demands in Text Discussions.” **The 2011 James Moffett Award** for Teacher Research was presented to Marianne Forman and Melissa Yip, MacDonald Middle School, East Lansing, Michigan.
