

# A Thousand Writers Writing: Seeking Change through the Radical Practice of Writing as a Way of Being

Robert P. Yagelski

**I** **mag**ine 1,000 people gathered in the same place, all writing at the same time. When they are finished, they put aside the product of their writing, though not the effects of the experience. It is possible that not one of those 1,000 texts will be read by anyone other than the writer. Yet the experience for each of those 1,000 writers was real and, in some cases, powerful.

Now imagine that you are one of those 1,000 people writing. Imagine that the *writing* you have just done, distinct from the *text* you have just produced, is as important to you, at this moment, as any other writing you have ever done, no matter what happens to the text itself. That text may be important in any number of ways, but it is also largely irrelevant to the experience of writing that you have just had. As an artifact of that experience, the text is now separate from that experience. Writing, not the text itself, is what matters.

Like many other writing teachers, I have for many years been asking students in my classes and teachers in workshops to write in response to prompts I give them. These brief (5- or 10-minute) writing activities serve various purposes: spark discussion, solicit reactions to a question, explore ideas, foster reflection, and generate material for longer writing tasks. Typically, the texts produced during these exercises aren't used beyond the exercise itself. Still, they are integral to the exercise, even if only as reference points during subsequent discussion. In other words, the production of a text is part of the purpose. Why write at all if not to produce a text of some kind?

For most of my 25-year career as a writing teacher, I had never seriously thought of an act of writing as separate from the text produced. More to the point, rarely had I considered simply discarding the text once the period of writing was over—in effect, ignoring the text and simply writing. I had always

assumed, like most English teachers I know, that writing should produce a text to be used for some explicit purpose—to keep a record, promote learning, communicate ideas or information, or demonstrate writing ability (as in the context of assessment). It was not until I attended the opening session of the National Writing Project’s annual conference in 2004 that I began to consider the *experience* of an act of writing as separate from—and as valuable as—the text produced as a result of that act of writing. Some 1,000 educators from around the United States gathered in a hotel ballroom in Indianapolis, and they were writing for its own sake. As the new director of a National Writing Project site in Albany, New York, I quickly learned that almost all NWP events, whether local or national, large or small, begin with writing. And almost never is the purpose of that writing to produce a text to be read or used by someone other than the writer. We write—together—for other reasons, because writing as an activity matters, separate from any text that is produced. In that Indianapolis ballroom, writing was in fact an act of being, an intense awareness of ourselves in that moment: 1,000 individuals writing, together, in a moment in time and space. In this sense, writing is a potentially powerful vehicle for transformation, for it opens up possibilities for awareness, reflection, and inquiry that writing as an act of textual production does not necessarily do. Writing *in the moment*, I have come to realize, has the capacity to change us.

**When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world.**

Writing in schools should be more like those 1,000 writers writing together in that ballroom. When it is, writing’s transformative power is more likely to be realized, and it ceases to be merely a matter of procedure, a tool for communication, an exercise in control, and a means of sorting and norming, as writing tends to be in formal schooling. Instead, writing becomes a way of being in the world.

In this article I will propose a pedagogy based on the idea of writing as a way of being. English education, a field whose focus is the preparation of secondary English teachers and inquiry into the teaching and learning of the English language arts, should embrace this idea of writing as a way of being—both in preparing and working with secondary teachers and in the research and scholarship that define the field. English educators, in other words, should harness the transformative power of writing and place it at the center of their work.

## **Why We Need an Ontology of Writing**

Whatever else it may be (and it is many other things, too), 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. Therein lies the transformative power of writing, for when writing is practiced as an act of being, it opens up possibilities for individual and collective change that are undermined by conventional writing instruction, which is often characterized by an obsession with textual form and adherence to convention. 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*.

We need such a pedagogy, I believe, if writing is to become the “truth seeking practice” (63) that rhetorician Barbara Couture (1998) calls for, within which “we see purpose . . . in participating together in *writing* the world”; it is in writing the world together, Couture asserts, “that we move together toward writing truth” (83). Writing, as it is usually understood and taught in mainstream education, is neither a vehicle for change nor a truth-seeking practice; rather, it is most often a rule-governed procedure for communication informed by the same dualistic Cartesian worldview that is implicated in the looming social, economic, environmental, and spiritual crises facing humanity in the twenty-first century that David Orr (1992) refers to as the “crisis of sustainability” (p. 83; see also Yagelski, 2001). In my view, the purpose of teaching writing should be defined by this crisis, which Orr (1992) sees as a problem of the “fit between humanity and its habit” (p. 83). If the overriding purpose of formal education is to enable us to imagine and create just and sustainable communities that contribute to our individual and collective well-being, as I believe it should be, then teaching writing cannot be defined exclusively by the widely accepted but limited goals of producing effective communicators and academically successful learners for the existing consumer-oriented culture and for workplaces defined by economic globalization—that is, for the status quo that has helped give rise to the crisis of sustainability in the first place. Rather, writing instruction, like schooling in general, should ultimately be about creating a better world. Teaching writing as a way of being may bring school-sponsored writing instruction more clearly into line with that goal by enabling students to harness the power of writing not only as a technology for communication but also as a way of understanding and transforming themselves and the world around them.

In his insightful essay, “Changing the Way We Think in English Education,” Robert Tremmel (2006) calls for a new kind of “integrated thinking” (p. 30) to push English education beyond what he calls the “Cartesian-

Newtonian thinking” that dominates school reform in the United States (p. 38). He rightly points out that “if the way we think has hampered us in the past and is still hampering us now, it will continue to do so until we succeed in achieving a fundamental change of mind, or at least defining what that might mean in terms of our professional practice” (p. 11). Drawing on the work of physicist David Bohm, Tremmel advocates an open-ended, “deliberative” kind of dialogue whose objective “is not necessarily to accomplish a collective task, but to use the energy and diversity of views in a group to collectively move in the direction of new ideas” (p. 27). To my mind, in defining a mechanism for change (in the form of this Bohmian dialogue), Tremmel is also calling for a different way of being in the world, one based on a sense of connectedness that would replace the radical individualism and its associated binaries inherent in the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm. Writing can be a path to this “fundamental change of mind,” but only if we can realize the transformative possibilities of the *experience* of writing. In other words, we need to focus on the *writer writing* rather than on the *writer’s writing*. This focus can move us toward an understanding of writing that illuminates the potential impact of the experience of writing on the writer and on all of us. And as professionals charged with preparing the next generation of English teachers, English educators should abandon their complicity in formal education’s obsession with the writer’s writing and focus their professional attention on the *writer writing*.

## Understanding Writing as a Way of Being

What does it mean to conceptualize writing as an ontological act, as a way of being? It means, first, distinguishing writing as an act of meaning-making from the text that is produced by that act. This distinction allows us to explore the *experience* of the act of writing, which, ultimately, is to confront the complex relationship between writing and thinking and to revisit the age-old philosophical question about the connection between language and being.

English educators have readily embraced the idea of writing as a cognitive activity, a unique “mode of learning,” in Janet Emig’s (1985, p. 23) well-known phrase. Educators have also recognized the far-reaching impact that writing (and literacy more generally) has had on human society (see Graff, 1987; Martin, 1994), a recognition that has informed prevailing ideas about the social purposes of writing instruction, if not pedagogies. But some scholars, notably Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, argue that writing has a profound impact on how human beings understand themselves in relation to the world around them—on their sense of themselves as beings in the world.

According to McLuhan (1962/1995), writing (more specifically, alphabetic literacy) transforms speech from a primarily oral and aural phenomenon into “a visual enclosure of non-visual spaces and senses . . . an abstraction of the visual from the ordinary sense interplay. And whereas speech is an outing (utterance) of all our senses at once, writing abstracts from speech. . . . The phonetic alphabet reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code” (pp. 138–139). In other words, writing has the capacity to separate speech from the speaker and an utterance from its context; in this regard, writing can be said to transcend time and space. The implications of this capacity of writing are profound. According to McLuhan and Ong, for example, writing enables a kind of conceptual and analytical thinking that can give rise to a conception of the self as autonomous and intellectual and thus may fundamentally change the relationship of humans to the world around them.

These analyses, as controversial as they have been,<sup>1</sup> underscore the complex connections among language, thinking, and being. If language somehow figures into our sense of ourselves as beings in the world, as some philosophers have argued (e.g., Descartes, Heidegger), then writing, as a technology for language, is also bound up in our sense of being in the world. Indeed, Derrida, perhaps the most innovative philosopher of language in the modern era, challenges Heidegger’s view that writing is a mere supplement to language and argues that writing is fundamentally the same as

**In short, because language is  
integral to our awareness of  
ourselves as beings in the world,  
so is writing.**

oral language. As Jasper Neel (1988) sums up this analysis, “Derrida has tried to show that all the characteristics of writing in the narrow sense—all the deficiencies that make it tertiary, repetitive, metaphoric, and metonymic—also exist in speaking, also exist in thinking, exist even in Being. In other words, what Derrida calls writing-in-general . . . already constitutes everything that would present itself as prior to and purer than writing” (pp. 112–113). Thus, there is essentially no difference between writing and language in general or even between writing and thinking and writing and being. In short, because language is integral to our awareness of ourselves as beings in the world, so is writing.

As Neel notes, such an audacious position “invites scorn, if not contemptuous ridicule” (112). Yet Derrida’s conception of writing as implicated in our sense of being is not a terribly long step from Descartes’ view that the human mind contains all reality; it is a daring but not entirely surprising answer to Descartes’ question of “whether any of the object of which I have ideas within me exist outside of me” (qtd. in Bordo, 1987, p. 55).

Part of Derrida's answer is that it doesn't matter whether that object exists independent of us. That is, if we require language to know ourselves and the world around us, then all we really have is our representation of the world, which is to say language. In other words, an object exists only as a representation, a sign. For Derrida there is no alternative to representing that object through language, and the expression of the thing (language) is always already removed from the thing itself: "The representative is not the represented but only the representer of the represented; it is not the same as itself" (Derrida, 1976, p. 297). The result is the now-familiar endless play of signification. The key point is that language is necessary for us to know the world and to know ourselves; in this analysis there can be no self, no sense of being, without language.

Note that this analysis rests on a fundamental separation of the self and the "external" world. The self attempting to know itself, in Derrida's formulation, exists apart from the world, just as it does for Descartes. In fact, the relationship of that self to any sort of external reality, physical or otherwise, is largely irrelevant to Derrida's analysis of the role of language in being, since for him, being is an intellectual (indeed, a *linguistic*) matter. Thus, the Cartesian separation between self and world and between mind and body is a foundational assumption that enables Derrida to pursue his analysis.

The import of this assumption extends beyond the philosophical arguments about language and being, for the Cartesian mind-body binary and the concomitant notion of the self as intellectual and fundamentally separate from the physical world are encoded in the curricula and pedagogies of mainstream education. In large measure, the student is implicitly (and in some cases explicitly) defined as an intellectual entity, a set of observable (and measurable) cognitive abilities; schooling, therefore, reinforces a Cartesian sense of self. In other words, the most basic lessons of schooling have to do with coming to understand who we are as (intellectual) beings in the world and how we know and relate to the world around us. Through the conventional curriculum and pedagogies, students come to understand themselves and the wider world largely in Cartesian terms. They learn a dualistic way of understanding—and *being in*—the world. And writing instruction is a central part of this process.

Mainstream writing instruction reinforces this fundamental sense of separation between self and world in two ways. First, our obsession with form and correctness, especially in standardized writing assessments, implicitly separates the form of a text from its "content" as well as from its rhetorical purpose or actual use by a reader (other than a teacher or other evaluator). Commonly taught strategies for drafting, revising, and editing tend to focus

on matters such as clarity and precision, emphasizing form as if content and meaning are somehow separate from it.<sup>2</sup> Even our efforts to emphasize the social nature of writing, such as peer response activities, focus largely on helping students produce a “better” text that conforms to conventions of academic writing. Second, although a student’s writing ability is usually equated with the quality of his or her texts (especially in formal assessments), the text is ultimately separate from the writer: the writer’s words or ideas are transformed into a physical form that exists apart from the writer (and used exclusively for the purposes of evaluation rather than communication). The text thus becomes a kind of artifact of an act of writing, “an abstraction of the visual from the ordinary sense interplay,” in McLuhan’s (1962/1995) phrasing. As an object used for the purposes of evaluation rather than communication or inquiry, the text serves as a physical manifestation of the writer’s ability. And it is in that regard that a student’s text, as an item separated from the student writer, has value in schools; the act of writing, as an experience separate from the text, is ignored and thus disappears.

In these ways, writing, as conceived, taught, and practiced in schools, enacts the Cartesian dualities of subject-and-object and mind-and-body. Writing, practiced primarily as the production of sanctioned texts, which in turn are conceived as “containers” of meaning that reflect a writer’s ability (which in turn equates to the writer’s mind), reinforces the Cartesian idea of the self as fundamentally intellectual (“I think; therefore, I am.”). To write in schools is to *be* in the Cartesian sense.

## Phenomenology and the Experience of Writing

The Cartesian view of writing is not the only framework within which to understand the connection between writing and being. Phenomenology—“a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get at the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever happens in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer” (Moran, 2000, p. 4)—offers an alternative to a Cartesian view of the connection between writing and *being*. As Couture (1998) notes, phenomenology “rejects a dualistic distinction between the world as it exists and the world as we interpret it,” instead locating truth “in subjective experience through equating the study of being with the study of meaning” (p. 64). To put it somewhat differently, our experience of ourselves in the world and the meaning we make of that experience are not separate; an act of meaning-making is in effect an act of being. Furthermore, human *experience* in the world, rather than language

itself, is “the only possible origin of absolute being, truth, and objectivity” (p. 65).

Phenomenology defines knowledge “as a relation between self and other resulting in meaning” (Couture, 1998, p. 65), and meaning “always implies a relational structure, a reciprocal reference between consciousness and world” (van Peursen, 1972, p. 30, qtd. in Couture, 1998, pp. 65-66). This reciprocity between consciousness and the world can help explain the experience of writing as both an act of meaning-making and an act of being. As we write, we engage in a moment of intensive meaning-making related to the larger process of making meaning as we experience ourselves in the world. Thus, the act of writing underscores—indeed, *enacts*—the deeper relationship between our consciousness and the world around us. In an act of writing, our consciousness and the world (in terms of the subject of our writing as well as the rhetorical and physical situations within which we are writing) become one. If language is “a symbolic medium reflecting a relationship between individuals and their environment that is developed in subjective consciousness,” as Couture (1998, p. 66) defines it, then writing, as an act of meaning-making through written language, is an enactment—physically, intellectually, and ontologically—of that relationship. Writing, then, becomes an expression of the self (as distinct from the common understanding of writing as self-expression), in a reciprocal relationship with the world, as the locus of meaning-making; it is an expression of the self *being*.

As a technology for language, writing can be understood in terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/2002, 1964) idea of speech as embodied thought. Like other phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty sees no significant distinction between mind (thought) and body (speech). In rejecting the traditional idea of language as representation of thought and words as representations of things, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) insists that “the word or speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become *the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world*” (p. 211; emphasis added). In this sense, writing, as a unique and uniquely powerful technology for linguistic expression, is an act of the self becoming more fully present in the world at the moment of writing; it is an enactment of embodied speech, in which the writer expresses his or her being in that moment.

The idea of speech as “embodied” grows out of Merleau-Ponty’s view that the “perceiving mind is an incarnated mind” (1964, p. 3): “the body is much more than an instrument or a means. It is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions” (p. 5). Because body and mind are coterminous, our sense of ourselves as beings-in-the-world is inseparable from our bodily, or perceptual, experience. The subject/self is a function of

the “interference of its body and history” (p. 6); in other words, our sense of self as subject, as a being-in-the-world, encompasses mind and body as well as our experience of the world at that moment in addition to our prior experiences. Writing, as a technology for language that requires physical activity (moving pen across paper or tapping the keys of a computer keyboard), can bring this intimate connection between the physical and the intellectual, between mind and body, to the fore; through writing, thought becomes visible, the intellectual physical. The inseparability of mind and body and self and world is encoded in the act of writing.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the unity of self and world helps to explain the inherently social nature of meaning-making through language. The word, as “a passive shell” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 206), acquires meaning only through its use in communication with others, and indeed thought itself, to have meaning—to be intelligible, to become knowledge—requires expression, which in turn requires an other: “A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself” (p. 206). In other words, a thought needs an *other* mind to exist. Moreover, because the word is not a mere sign but a “vehicle of meanings, . . . speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but *accomplishes* it” (p. 207; emphasis added). In this sense, thought and speech, as components of the process by which we make meaning of our experience of the world, are always social: “There is, then, a taking up of others’ thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts” (p. 208; emphasis added). As a result, speech is always an enactment of our inherent connection to other selves, with whom we make meaning together through expression. Writing is therefore not only an expression of the self as a being-in-the-world but also an act of meaning-making that inherently involves other selves. In this regard, *the experience of writing is an experience of our being as inherently social; it is the experience of the interconnectedness of being.*

In mainstream schooling, writing is rarely conceived of as this kind of ontological act nor is it practiced as such. Rather, conventional instruction focuses on the production of a text, and the writer’s experience of writing that text—the experience of writing in the moment—is usually ignored. But what if we shift our theoretical and pedagogical gaze from the written text to this *experience of writing*, from the writer’s writing to the *writer writing*? Such a shift might open up the transformative possibilities of writing that are invisible within a Cartesian view of writing that informs mainstream instruction. In this regard, a pedagogy based on the idea of writing as an

ontological act might free writing instruction from the shackles of convention that prevent most students from experiencing, and wielding, the true power of writing.

## The Transformative Power of Writing

It is a cliché to say that writing has the power to change the world, that it “has helped transform the world,” as the National Commission on Writing (2005, p. 10) put it. Conventional thinking about the power of writing tends to focus on the text and its impact on readers. If, however, we understand writing in ontological terms and shift our attention to the *experience* of writing, as distinct from the text, we begin to see different dimensions of the power of writing. Understood ontologically, writing can become a vehicle to a deeper, more nuanced sense of ourselves as beings in the world. As an example, consider poet Jimmy Santiago Baca’s (1992) description of his experience of writing as a young prison inmate:

Whole afternoons I wrote, unconscious of passing time or whether it was day or night. Sunbursts exploded from the lead tip of my pencil, words that grafted me into awareness of Who I was; peeled back to a burning core of bleak terror, an embryo floating in the image of water, I cracked out of the shell wide-eyed and insane. Trees grew out of the palms of my hands, the threatening otherness of life dissolved, and I became one with the air and sky, the dirt and the iron and concrete. There was no longer any distinction between the other and I. Language made bridges of fire between me and everything I saw. I entered into the blade of grass, the basketball, the con’s eye, and child’s soul. (p. 9)

In this passage Baca is describing his experience of writing while in solitary confinement after suffering unspeakable abuse at the hands of his jailors. Significantly, he was not writing a text for someone else to read—for example, a letter to a relative or the warden.<sup>5</sup> He was simply writing. And it seems clear that his writing led to insights about himself that he might not have come to otherwise. His act of writing became a profound act of self-awareness, a deepening of his understanding of his own being-in-the-world.

Paula Gunn Allen (1989) describes her experience of writing in similar terms:

When I have gotten past the first twenty minutes or twenty pages—it varies—I reach a point (sometimes) when a deep, mysterious sense of being simply takes over, moving me beyond myself, beyond pettiness and distraction, beyond the noise and clamor of everyday thoughts and preoccupations into a psychic and spiritual space that is at once serene and exciting. When

I emerge from that place I feel renewed, centered, deeply grounded in myself and connected to all that is. (p. 23)

Like Baca, Allen describes a deep sense of connectedness that emerges *as she writes*. Even though she is ostensibly writing a text for others, it is her “deep, mysterious sense of being” that matters *at the moment of writing*.

This kind of experience is not reserved for poets or professional writers. (One of the fallacies we perpetuate in schools is that only a few special people are writers, as if ordained at birth to be so, while the rest struggle to put our quotidian thoughts into written form.) It is available to anyone—that is, to anyone who writes in a way that is not constrained by an exclusive focus on textual production. For example, in an article about encouraging regular writing practice among students, high school English teacher David Grosskopf (2004) describes the impact of his own regular writing practice on himself: “It is writing that has led me to feel most alive. This is the part that students never heard me tell because I misunderstood the secret for so long. It’s not merely the production of writing—even good writing, and the satisfaction this brings—that has powered my sense of vitality; *it is the act of writing itself*” (emphasis added). Here Grosskopf shares an understanding of writing as an inquiry into self and world, abandoning the obsession with form and correctness that characterizes school-sponsored writing. Instead of focusing on the text as object (in both senses of that term), he focuses on the *experience* of writing itself. And that experience shapes his sense of himself as a being in the world:

What does it mean to live life well? I know there is a purposefulness to asking the question, and I know the kind of writing that actually experiences the answer as it goes down. Writing is, for a moment at least, manufacturing this good life as it is lived. . . . Here’s what I did to do it: every week, almost every day, I made the time to write. And if you try it yourself, even if you’re a student about to leave home for the first time, or a worker jammed down by memo wars, or a parent dealing with kids who yell all at the same time, you too may find that you can write yourself awake.

What Baca, Allen, and Grosskopf are describing is the capacity of writing to enhance an awareness of ourselves and the world around us, both *in the moment* and over time. This capacity lies not in the text being produced but in the *experience* of writing. Significantly, in the act of writing the writer is intensely in the here and now; at the same time, the writer is also connected to something larger that includes the context of the writing (e.g., the prison walls surrounding Baca or Grosskopf’s classroom and students) and more: the subject of the writing and the history of that subject (whatever it

is), which encompasses layers of social and cultural and linguistic developments (or, to put it somewhat differently, *discourses*) that have somehow led to the writer using specific words and exploring specific ideas at that specific moment, not to mention the writer's past and all the previous moments of writing (and *being*) that might somehow have led to and thus are part of the present moment of writing. At the moment of writing, our consciousness (both of our self and of whatever we are writing about), our bodies (both in the sense of Merleau-Ponty's notion of speech as embodied thought and in the sense of the physical activity of writing), and the present moment all merge. And if we attend to this awareness-while-writing and focus attention on our attention during an act of writing, a sense of self as existing in this moment is intensified and at the same time "inhabits" the subject of our writing, which may well be removed from us in time and space at *that* moment of writing. Thus, as we write, we become connected to that moment and other moments we may be trying to describe and indeed to all those other selves who may somehow figure into our writing, including potential readers who are thus connected to the writer in a real way through a future act of reading, which means that the moment of writing encompasses that future moment of reading, too. As we write, we are "connected to all that is," as Allen puts it. It is in this sense that we *are* as we are writing. The *writing* does not create us, but in the act of writing we *are*; by writing we reaffirm and proclaim our being in the here and now.

This sense of being that I am describing is not the same thing as the widely accepted idea of writing as a social act that scholars such as Deborah Brandt (1990, p. 13) have advocated in their challenge to what Brandt has called the "strong text" theory of writing, in which meaning in a text is understood to be stable, portable, and autonomous. Brandt and like-minded scholars focus on writing as a social process of meaning-making *through* the text, rather than on writing as an act or expression of being in the world in the here-and-now. In other words, although these scholars challenge the strong-text theory of writing as asocial, their socially minded theories remain text-based; to the extent that they illuminate the experience of writing, they do so as a way to understand how the writer produces a text or how a text "means." But such a focus offers an inadequate account of what happens *as a writer writes*; it tends to neglect the effect of the *act of writing* on the writer's sense of being in the moment and over time. Whatever happens to a text *after* it is written does not affect what is happening to (or *in*) the writer *as she or he is writing that text*. And it is this experience that mainstream

**The *writing* does not create us, but in the act of writing we *are*; by writing we reaffirm and proclaim our being in the here and now.**

writing instruction—and English education as an enterprise bound up with formal schooling—usually fails to take into account, understand, appreciate, and value.

## **Reimagining School-Sponsored Writing as a Way of Being**

Baca, Allen, and Grosskopf suggest that the experience of writing may enable us to better understand and negotiate the experience of living. What better justification is needed for writing? Yet mainstream writing instruction largely ignores the capacity of writing to enable us to reflect deeply on the most complex and important dimensions of our experiences as human beings, focusing instead on technical aspects of writing as a reflection of writing skill.

Let me explore this point by sharing part of the story of Terry, a student I worked with while co-teaching a high school English class with Alicia Wein, one of my colleagues in the Capital District Writing Project. Terry was an earnest student whose polite, friendly nature seemed inconsistent with the daunting challenges she faced in her young life. Her parents were divorced and her mother was an alcoholic, which was why Terry lived with her father, who was sometimes abusive to her. Although she worked hard in school, at times Terry struggled academically. When I met her, she was enrolled in a senior English class that was part of a special program for at-risk students at the public high school where Alicia is employed.

For one of the essays that Alicia and I assigned that year, Terry wrote about a pivotal experience in her life in which her mother, in a drunken rage on an Easter morning, struck Terry and bit her on the shoulder. The two of them were supposed to be sharing a special holiday meal; instead, Terry wound up defending herself from her mother's fists and eventually had to clean up after her mother vomited and passed out on the sofa in her filthy apartment. For Terry, it was an especially heartbreaking experience, because she had looked forward to spending time with her mother in her effort to repair their strained relationship. As a result of that day, Terry made a decision that she described in her essay as "the single most difficult thing I ever had to do": "I had to tell my mother that she had a drinking problem and if she didn't stop and get help I would not be able to see her again until she did." Because of the difficulty of confronting her mother directly, Terry decided to deliver her ultimatum in a letter rather than in person. The essay she wrote for Alicia's class is the story of how she came to her decision and then carried it out. It is a story that no child should ever have to tell, but it is also the story of a young woman facing a kind of difficult challenge that many of us eventually have to face at some point in our lives—a challenge that characterizes human existence.

Most teachers have had students like Terry, whose circumstances can make school more difficult than it already is, and most teachers have seen the powerful writing such students sometimes produce. Typically, we value the honesty and the raw power of such writing but focus on *how* students tell their stories—that is, on the “quality” of their texts. Rarely do we assign value to the *experience of writing* that a student like Terry engaged in to complete her assignment. If we look more closely at what Terry’s writing—*not* her finished essay but the *writing* of it—might have meant for her, we can perhaps begin to see the value of the experience of writing and its potential impact on how students understand themselves and the world around them.

The truth is that, judged according to the conventions of narrative writing, Terry’s essay was not very good. It was heartfelt and powerful, yes, and it told a compelling story. But it was also relatively simple in its narrative technique, unsophisticated in its syntax and diction, and full of errors, including serious sentence boundary problems. I’d like to suggest, however, that the technical quality of Terry’s essay is ultimately irrelevant in view of what the experience of writing it might have meant to her. She worked hard to produce a “good” essay, but in the end producing the text didn’t matter much, because her writing was really about confronting life in all its wonderful and terrible pain and joy. It was about making sense of a crucial experience that continues to shape her life. It was about *being* in a challenging world.

Consider the messages conveyed to students when teachers effectively ignore the kind of experience Terry had in writing her essay and place value only on the technical “quality” of students’ texts or treat those texts as measures of writing skill. Writing, they are being told, isn’t about making sense of an experience in the world or finding a way through the complexities of living; rather, it is about following rules and creating “good” texts, about conforming to conventions and demonstrating a narrow kind of literate proficiency. In this sense, school-sponsored writing is about separating self from experience by changing an experience into a stylized textual artifact, for in trying to write a “good” narrative, a student like Terry may feel she must reshape her experience in ways that have little meaning for her but are necessary for telling her story more “effectively.” Thus, her focus as writer inevitably shifts from exploring the meaning of her experience for *her* to encoding meaning in a conventional narrative form for a reader.

I’d like to suggest how misguided this approach to teaching writing is—how wasteful it is to turn an act of writing like Terry’s into a vehicle for producing a certain kind of text, how utterly absurd it is then to judge a student on the basis of the technical skill (or on the presence or absence of

spelling or usage errors) exhibited in an essay that means so much to her. Yet this is ultimately what I do as a teacher if I value only the text, if I emphasize the so-called basics and evaluate student writing exclusively on the basis of structure, syntax, form, and correctness while lumping everything else into the nebulous category of “content.”<sup>4</sup> Terry’s pain and anguish and struggle and resolve are then defined as “content,” and no matter how much we say we value that “content,” in the end her writing is judged on its “technical” merit. Her experience of confronting, through the act of writing, her difficult relationship with her mother disappears under the weight of a collective belief that student texts that conform to convention equate to good writing skills. And in treating her writing in this way, I might throw away an opportunity to help her use writing to live her life more fully, to be transformed.

Whatever Terry learned about the technical aspects of writing, no matter how important they might be, paled in comparison to what she could learn, through writing, about herself and the complexities of living in an uncertain world. In writing her essay, Terry may have learned something about what it means to face up to grave challenges, about what it means to be the daughter of an alcoholic. Writing was a way into that painful Easter morning and then back out again with (one hopes!) a deeper understanding of who she is and what that experience might mean for her and her mother. Writing possesses a unique capacity to take us deeply into our lives and into the world around us, to see more clearly into our experiences—as Baca (1992) and Grosskopf (2004) suggest.

In an essay called “Listening to Writing,” Murray (1984) describes the process by which a poem emerged from his effort to write an article about the importance of revision. He was writing to try to understand his own experiences with revision, but, unexpectedly, he found himself exploring his subject through a poem. In the end, he learned about the importance of listening to his writing, which in turn taught him something about teaching: “While dictating the first draft of this article I did not expect to hear my voice developing the relationship between listening to writing and listening to students. But I did hear it, and I recognized its significance. It tied together some things I have learned about writing and teaching” (p. 65). Murray encourages teachers to allow students to write in whatever form seems most appropriate for what they have to say—something students are rarely allowed to do. But the important insight here is that the form of the writing doesn’t matter, for it is the *act* of writing that teaches, no matter the form, if we pay attention to it. An obsession with the *product* of writing, with the “quality” of the text, however, obscures the insight that might be gained from writing itself: “The experience of the poem also reminded me

that I must somehow, as a teacher, a husband, a son, a father, a friend, a colleague, a citizen, a professional, a busy-busy-busy man so proud of my busyness, find time to listen so that I will hear what I have to say. If I am able to be quiet within myself something may appear on the page which may become writing and, when that happens, my job is to listen to the evolving writing” (Murray, 1984, p. 63). Murray connects his experience as a writer to his life as a father, teacher, husband, and so on. He reminds us that what we learn through the act of writing is not just the skill of writing; we learn about ourselves as human beings. This is a crucial insight about the true power of writing. If we engage genuinely in the practice of writing, as Murray encourages us to do, we may learn something about living. Writing in this way can transform us—as I believe it did for Terry. The writer writing is a human being living. And the act of writing can give that writer the means to change her life.

Imagine if we taught writing in a way that focused on this power to help us understand and transform ourselves—individually and together. Imagine if we taught writing as a way to make a better world. I believe this is in part what Paulo Freire (1970/1993) meant when he wrote, “Human existence cannot . . . be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. . . . Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 88). In Freire’s formulation, “Education as the practice of freedom . . . denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; . . . consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it” (p. 81). Significantly, Freire assumes a reality that is not entirely a function of human interaction: “I cannot exist without a not-I. In turn, the not-I depends upon that existence. The world which brings consciousness into existence becomes the world of that consciousness” (p. 82). This dynamic provides the grounds for the kind of agency that is usually assumed to be central to Freire’s pedagogical project. But genuine agency—the capacity to change the world—requires not just action through language, but also reflection: “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis” (p. 87). Through reflection we can see a world that was previously invisible to us because our perception was distorted by received ways of knowing: “That which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications (if indeed it was perceived at all) begins to ‘stand out’” (p. 83). We can then act accordingly.

For Freire, then, literacy as the vehicle for changing the world begins with the individual human being using language to reflect on and name the world and thus claim the power to change it. That, I would argue, is what Terry may have been doing when she wrote her essay about her mother; she used writing to name her experience: to confront it, to understand it, to lay claim to it. In doing so she could transform herself from a victim of alcoholism to a young woman refusing to succumb to the effects of her mother's alcoholism. In writing about how she delivered an ultimatum to her mother after that terrible Easter Sunday, Terry may have been gaining insight into that experience and actually changing her life. Delivering her ultimatum to her mother took tremendous courage, and writing that letter was a great risk. She acknowledges this risk in the final sentence of her essay: "I hugged and kissed my mother not sure if that would be the last time I would see her." Terry's letter to her mother may have been the first step in a determined effort to change her life, and writing her essay about that experience became a way for her to confront her own fears about the troubled world she knew and to change that world—regardless of the perceived quality of her finished text. Writing may have helped her understand her experience and thus transform herself. I can think of no better example of the power of writing. And I believe we owe it to our students, and ourselves, to teach writing in a way that makes this power available to them and to all of us.<sup>5</sup>

## **English Education and Writing as a Way of Being**

Every year I teach a graduate seminar in the teaching of writing in secondary schools. In 2008, Tina, who had taught high school English for six years in South Central Los Angeles before returning to her hometown in upstate New York to start a family, enrolled in the course. After taking a job at a high school near Albany, New York, Tina began work on the master's degree that New York State requires for permanent certification. It was fortuitous timing, for Tina was in the midst of a profound questioning of her teaching, and she saw my course as an opportunity to rethink some of her beliefs about teaching writing. For her midterm self-evaluation, she described the struggle that working with adolescent writers within the mainstream education system had become for her:

I have always loved my job, but for the past four years, I have been struggling to reconcile the contradictions inherent in writing instruction. The increasing emphasis on accountability and standardization requires us to teach one way, but what we as writers know to be true of writing requires us to teach another way. As a result of these two conflicting approaches

to writing instruction, I find myself in an ongoing struggle to satisfy both the administration and my conscience.

While I had hoped this course, its required reading and writing, would help me find a middle ground, a workable compromise if you will, I am more and more coming to the realization a compromise is not what my students need. What they need is a writing teacher who is brave enough to stop “teaching” writing. As writing teachers we are simply responsible for providing our students opportunities to write in safe and constructive environments, and that is the teaching.

Tina went on to write, “The first writing assignment for this course reminded me how important it is that we write about what we need to write about.” For that class’ assignment, which was simply to write about something that mattered to them, Tina wrote about her experiences as a teacher in Los Angeles. Through that assignment and subsequent writing, Tina came to the realization that the enormous effort she devoted to form and correctness in her classes ultimately did not serve her students well, either as writers or as human beings coming of age in a complex world. Through her writing, Tina began to confront the possibility that an obsession with text ultimately prevented her students from realizing the power of writing as she experienced it. She eloquently articulated the struggle that so many English teachers I have met experience: how to reconcile the increasing institutional and cultural pressures to emphasize “standards” in writing with the nagging sense that maintaining these standards may not truly serve students’ needs.

In mainstream schooling, writing is most often assumed to be an essential tool for communication, and it is taught largely as a procedure for producing “good” texts. Mainstream textbooks and conventional pedagogical practices emphasize *how* to produce certain kinds of texts. State and district standards usually specify the textual forms that students are expected to master at various grade levels. State-mandated tests as well as most conventional classroom-based writing assessments focus on the form of student texts, sometimes with adjustments for “effort” or “process.” Even the so-called process movement, which ostensibly emphasizes what writers *do* when they write, is ultimately about helping students produce “better” texts. Despite all the attention paid to the process of writing, most teachers remain fixated on the text, like so many test-takers admonished to keep their eyes on their own papers.

This all seems to make sense, for writing is indeed a powerful tool for communication; it is a technology that extends the communicative capabilities of language. It is also a uniquely effective vehicle for learning as learning is defined in conventional academic contexts—that is, knowing a specified

content, grasping a concept, or performing a certain kind of cognitive operation. Students *do* need to develop the ability to communicate effectively in writing; they benefit from writing that fosters learning across disciplines. But as I have argued here, the mainstream Cartesian view of writing distances the act of *writing* from *living* in all its complexity; this mainstream obsession with text tends to separate writing from *being*. As a result, writing is treated *only* as a communicative or cognitive tool, even as theorists such as Freire illuminate the inherent connection between language and being.

We need to change that.

I suspect that most English educators (as well as most secondary English teachers) will be uncomfortable with the notion that they should, in effect, displace the text from the center of writing instruction in the English language arts and structure the teaching of writing around the *experience* of writing. Such a reaction is understandable, given the history of writing instruction in the United States, with its sustained focus on skills and correctness and its connections to meritocracy and corporate capitalism (see Berlin, 1984, 1987), and given the strength of the mainstream Cartesian view of writing—not to mention the inertia of our sprawling system of institutionalized education. For most of my history as a writing teacher, I shared that reaction. But as Donald Murray often reminded his students, it is the writing itself that teaches us, if we allow it. It took me 20 years to figure that out, and I figured it out only by paying attention to what happened as I wrote, which is something Murray spent his career doing. As a student, I was never exposed to the wisdom in Murray's seemingly simple dictum. That's primarily because I was never asked by my teachers to attend seriously to the *act* of writing. Nor were my classmates. We were required only to attend to the form of the finished text. And little has changed in the three decades since I finished college. Most students today are learning what I learned, which is to say that they are not learning to pay attention to the experience of writing as they write.<sup>6</sup>

We must change that.

The first step is to let students write. As Murray knew, as Tina discovered, we must provide opportunities for our students to learn *from*, *through*, and *while* writing. To do so is not to eliminate the text; rather, it is to place real value on the *experience* of writing, to abandon the prevailing obsession with textual form as a demonstration of writing skill, to reposition the text in writing instruction, and to redefine the purpose of writing in terms of the need to foster in students reflectiveness and an awareness of themselves in the world—to help them gain a deeper sense of the interconnectedness of their being with the wider world. In this way, the text can better serve the

purposes of writing, rather than writing having only the purpose of producing a certain kind of text.

As I have noted elsewhere (Yagelski, 2006), English education is uniquely positioned to promote a progressive vision for a more just and sustainable future, a vision founded on harnessing the power of the English language arts to help students imagine and create more equitable communities. But at the same time, English education is an integral part of the educational status quo that is implicated in the crisis of sustainability. In this regard, promoting a progressive vision that challenges the status quo is a great risk, for it may also call into question the basis of our professional authority. Yet it is a necessary risk, I believe. We have a responsibility to think carefully about how we are preparing the next generation of secondary English teachers, who will help shape the minds of American children and thus help shape the world we inhabit together. If we continue to prepare these teachers to deliver the conventional language arts curriculum, then we will continue to play a central role in reproducing a problematic status quo. If we wish to do otherwise—to change the status quo in our collective quest to create a better future together—we will need to rethink many of the foundations of our beliefs about writing and literacy; we will need to abandon the Newtonian-Cartesian mindset that Tremmel has critiqued and replace it with a more integrated, nondualistic view of the world.

If Freire is right that a true word can transform the world, then we must teach students to write true words about their lives and their world. We must focus on student writers *writing*. Together. And we must encourage teachers to teach writing so that students learn to harness its power to help make a better world.

**English education is uniquely positioned to promote a progressive vision for a more just and sustainable future, a vision founded on harnessing the power of the English language arts to help students imagine and create more equitable communities.**

## Notes

1. Deborah Brandt's (1990) critique of the so-called strong-text theory of writing is perhaps the best-known attack on the reasoning of McLuhan, Ong, and like-minded scholars. See also Roorda (2001).

2. A prime example is the SAT writing test, in which the criteria used for evaluating the students' essays focus almost exclusively on matters of form and correctness and ignore "content." See the College Board's sample essays and scoring guides at [http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/prep\\_one/essay/pracStart.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/prep_one/essay/pracStart.html).

3. Obviously, Baca subsequently wrote about this experience in his autobiography and presumably intended this description for an audience. The point here, however, is the experience of writing in his cell that he is trying to capture in this description. His

subsequent efforts to capture that experience in writing for an audience do not alter the experience of writing in that cell, which was separate from any text he produced at that time or from his autobiography, which was written later.

4. In this regard, consider the messages we convey to students when we assign separate grades for “content” and “grammar.”

5. I would argue that even when students write about subjects other than their own experiences, including conventional school subjects, writing can foster this kind of critical inquiry and awareness. See my discussion of Celina’s research paper in Yagelski (2000, pp. 95–111).

6. Available data suggest that although there seems to have been an increase in attention to the process of writing among teachers in the past two decades, high school students are asked to write relatively infrequently in their classes and the kinds of writing they are asked to do have remained fairly stable over time (see Applebee, 2000; Applebee & Langer, 2006). Moreover, federal education policy, especially as reflected in the No Child Left Behind legislation, and the increasing use of standardized writing tests by states (see Hillocks, 2002), seem to have narrowed the focus of much writing instruction (see McCarthy, 2008).

## References

- Allen, P. G. (1989). What I do when I write. *Women’s Review of Books*, 6(10/11), 25.
- Applebee, A. N. (2000). Alternative models of writing development. In R. Indrisano & J. R. Squire (Eds.), *Writing: Research/Theory/Practice*. Albany: Center on English Learning and Achievement. Retrieved from <http://cela.albany.edu/publication/article/writing.htm>.
- Applebee, A. N., & Langer, J. A. (2006). The state of writing instruction in America’s schools: What existing data tell us. Albany: Center on English Learning and Achievement. Retrieved from <http://www.albany.edu/aire/news/State%20of%20Writing%20Instruction.pdf>.
- Baca, J. S. (1992). *Working in the dark: Reflections of a poet of the barrio*. Santa Fe: Red Crane.
- Berlin, J. (1984). *Writing instruction in nineteenth-century American colleges*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Berlin, J. (1987). *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges, 1900–1985*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Bordo, S. (1987). *The flight to objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Brandt, D. (1990). *Literacy as involvement: The acts of writers, readers, and texts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Couture, B. (1998). *Toward a phenomenological rhetoric: Writing, profession, and altruism*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology*. (G. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Emig, J. (1985). Writing as a mode of learning. In *The web of meaning: Essays on writing, teaching, learning, and thinking* (pp. 125–131). Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook. (Original work published 1977.)
- Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970.)

- Graff, H. J. (1987). *The legacies of literacy: Continuities and contradictions in western culture and society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Grosskopf, D. (2004). Writing myself awake. *The Quarterly*, 26(2). Retrieved from <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/1789>.
- Hillocks, G., Jr. (2002). *The testing trap: How state writing assessments control learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Martin, H. (1994). *The history and power of writing*. (L. G. Cochrane, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1988.)
- McCarthy, S. J. (2008). The impact of No Child Left Behind on teachers' writing instruction. *Written Communication*, 25(4), 462-505.
- McLuhan, M. (1995). *The Gutenberg galaxy*. In E. McLuhan and F. Zingrone (Eds.), *Essential McLuhan* (pp. 97-148). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1962.)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). An unpublished text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A prospectus of his work. (A. B. Dallery, Trans.). In J. M. Edie (Ed.) and W. Cobb (Trans.), *The primacy of perception: And other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics* (pp. 3-11). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *The phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith, Trans.). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1945.)
- Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. New York: Routledge.
- Murray, D. M. (1984). Listening to writing. In *Learning by teaching* (pp. 55-65). Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook. (Original work published 1980.)
- National Commission on Writing. (2005). *The neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution*. New York: The College Board.
- Neel, J. (1988). *Plato, Derrida, and writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. New York: Routledge.
- Orr, D. W. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Roorda, R. (2001). Great divides: Rhetorics of literacy and orality. In C. R. Weisser and S. I. Dobrin (Eds.), *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and pedagogical approaches* (pp. 97-116). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Tremmel, R. (2006). Changing the way we think in English education: A conversation in the universal barbershop. *English Education*, 39(1), 10-45.
- van Peursen, C. A. (1972). *Phenomenology and reality*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Yagelski, R. P. (2000). *Literacy matters: Writing and reading the social self*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Yagelski, R. P. (2001). Computers, literacy, and being: Teaching with technology for a sustainable future. *Kairos*, 6(2). Retrieved from <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/6.2/features/yagelski>.

Yagelski, R. P. (2006). English education. In B. McComiskey (Ed.), *English Studies: An introduction to the discipline(s)* (pp. 275–319). Urbana: NCTE.

**Robert P. Yagelski** is associate professor of English education at the State University of New York at Albany and director of the Capital District Writing Project.

---

### **New Editors Named for *English Education***

The Conference on English Education is pleased to announce that Lisa Scherff, Associate Professor of English Education at The University of Alabama, and Leslie S. Rush, Associate Professor of Secondary Education at the University of Wyoming, have been named the new editors of *English Education*. They will succeed the current editor, Michael Moore, and publish their first issue in October 2010.

From now on, please send all manuscript submissions to the new editors at [englisheducationjournal@gmail.com](mailto:englisheducationjournal@gmail.com). Additional information on submission requirements can be found at the front of the journal and at [www.ncte.org/journals/ee](http://www.ncte.org/journals/ee).

---

---

### **Call for Submissions**

The editor of *Forum*, an NCTE/CCCC publication that highlights issues related to contingent labor, welcomes articles related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition. We are particularly interested in essays that complicate and extend our understanding of how contingency affects disciplinarity, pedagogy, the material lives of instructors, institutions, and the quality of instruction. *Forum* is published twice annually, in September *CCC* and March *TETYC*. For further information, go to <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/forum>; to submit, please contact Brad Hammer at 919-621-1000 or [bhammer@unc.edu](mailto:bhammer@unc.edu).

---