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### TEACHERS AS WRITERS: OPENING THE DOOR TO DIALOGISM

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TEACHERS AS WRITERS: OPENING THE DOOR TO DIALOGISM

By

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Professional Paper

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## Chapter 1

### Personal Backstory: First Forays into Practicing and Teaching Writing

I have viewed myself as a writer now for 20 years. My initiation into the cult of scribblers came later than some. Although I have memories of receiving elegant creamy-paged journals as gifts from well-intentioned aunts on at least two occasions, I never felt the urge to write in them as a child or pre-teen. On the few occasions during this time I was assigned to write either papers for school or thank-you letters at home, I never viewed composing as anything more than a perfunctory duty. As much as I wish it were the case, I was no child prodigy; I was no wunderkind publishing stories or poems in the newspaper at age eight like Robert Lowry or Sylvia Plath; I did not emerge from the womb gripping a ballpoint and a pad of paper ready to document my world or create new ones. Though I had a grudging respect for books, mostly due to the influence of the weekly chess games / private lectures with my retired school-principal paternal grandfather, I found baseball, bicycle cruises through streets of Red Lodge, Lego automobile engineering, and backyard insect experimentation all to be much more enjoyable and fulfilling activities than writing.

In Helen McKay's freshman English class, this changed. Early in the year, she assigned a short story, and I wrote scene, not much longer than a typed page, between a mother and her elementary-aged son in which the mother futilely implores her stubborn offspring to eat his mayonnaise and pickle sandwich. The scene ends darkly with the mother asking whether he would like to be locked in the closet again, an allusion to past abuse. Unfortunately, I remember nothing about the impetus that drove me to write such a grim story;<sup>1</sup> likewise, I recall little about

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<sup>1</sup> To assuage any concern, dear readers, the story was pure fiction. I was never locked in a closet or abused in any way though I have always felt a certain amount of ambivalence towards mayonnaise.

the models, scaffolding, or assignment parameters provided. The memory that remains most prominent, however, is Mrs. McKay's reaction. She heaped generous praise, describing my writing as "subtle," and read the piece aloud to the class as a model. Every teacher I'd had beforehand had placed primary "emphasis on correctness as 'the most significant measure of accomplished prose'" (National Writing Project & Nagin 20), and rarely addressed the actual content of writing or the process of composing.<sup>2</sup> Writing specialist Peter Elbow asserts that "Schools often reward boring and obvious writing" (72), and while Mrs. McKay also graded that particular piece of writing based on the number of errors, she gave me bonus points for original content. For the first time, I was rewarded for interesting and subtle writing, and I realized that writing could be much more than arbitrary composition only assessed based upon where the commas are. I recognized that I had the ability to interest or entertain an audience through the words I put on the page. From that point forward, I thought of myself as a writer.

Readers who know me won't find the confession that I was always a quiet kid a shocking revelation. I never volunteered answers in class, and when I was cajoled to speak, anxiety clouded my mind, making the words always seem to come out wrong. I remember once when I had to give a report in my sophomore biology class, my hands shook the page of notes I was reading from so violently that a friend later told me no one could hear a word I said over the sound of rustling paper. In contrast, when putting words on paper, I felt less anxious and more

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<sup>2</sup> The one exception where a teacher addressed the content of my writing came when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I had written a sensory-rich description of a character, suffering from digestive malaise, who soils himself while on a hike with his family. Like most 13-year-old boys, I found the piece to be not only a pleasure to write but also uproariously funny, but after submitting it, the teacher pulled me into the hallway and lectured me on the inappropriateness of scatological humor in the school setting and insisted that I write another sensory description that didn't involve poop, farts, vomit, urine, etc. So my only experience in which content was addressed further instilled the idea that when writing, it's preferable to play it safe and produce nothing but noncontroversial bland content.

adept at articulating my thoughts. This is still the case. Beginning with the experience in Mrs. McKay's class, I felt I had a voice, which was empowering.

When as an adult I reexamine that pickle and mayonnaise story or other things I wrote in high school, it's apparent that merely beginning to view myself as a writer wasn't like flipping a switch that suddenly made my writing amazing. Rather, it was the beginning of a gradual cycle of improvement: the compliment helped me to develop confidence in my written voice; this confidence made me more inclined to practice writing both in and out of school; with more practice, I felt increasingly comfortable taking risks such as exploring more complex ideas; as the complexity of the ideas I expressed in writing evolved, I became more passionate about my writing; this passion drove me to begin practicing what Katie Wood Ray calls "reading like a writer" – I started to more closely analyze how other writers use diction and syntax to effectively convey meaning; this study helped expand my vocabulary and improve my use of language mechanics; this improvement in usage won me more praise from Mrs. McKay and other teachers; these compliments, in-turn, boosted my confidence.<sup>3</sup> The very act of self-identifying as a writer functioned as something close to a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more I thought of myself as a competent writer, the more competent at writing I eventually became.

Although fiction was then and remains my genre of choice, I was able to transfer this sense of confidence and a willingness to take risks to other genres of writing both in and out of school. When tasked to write essays on subjects like literature or history, my self-identification as a writer transferred.<sup>4</sup> I would think to myself: "I may not be so great at algebra, running,

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<sup>3</sup> Keep in mind, this cycle was very gradual. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I really came to firmly grasp when and how to correctly use commas, and even now I write the occasional unwieldy sentence.

<sup>4</sup> There is some debate whether skills in writing can easily transfer across genres, but according to teacher-writer Alan Ziegler, the differences between creative (he uses the term "expressive") writing and functional or academic writing (i.e. "transactional") have more to do with content than with language skills (2). The essential difference,

jumping, throwing or catching balls, but putting words on paper is in my wheelhouse. I got this. I'm a word guy." This confidence not only helped me to overcome the fear of getting started, but it also enabled me to take liberties in experimenting with voice. I might have annoyingly overemployed the thesaurus at times, but I think the very act of consciously attempting to shape the language I was writing in clear, interesting, and sometimes even beautiful ways helped to engage my thinking about the topic, which presumptively made my prose more interesting to read than a paper from a student who dreads the act of communicating through writing.

While essays in my English and history classes were perhaps less painful for me than for other students, my most gratifying adolescent writing experiences all had one factor in common: a genuine audience that extended beyond a classroom teacher.<sup>5</sup> The first time I experienced writing for a wider audience came when I submitted a letter to the editor at the local Red Lodge newspaper, *The Carbon County News*. During the same years that my identity as a writer was taking shape, another complementary identity began to emerge as I discovered and became engrossed in punk rock music and radical anti-authoritarian politics. As in many U.S. cities, Red Lodge has a curfew law forbidding minors from being on the streets after midnight, and just as any number of adolescents in these communities might believe, my punk rocker friends and I viewed this law as discriminatory in giving the police grounds to stop, harass, search, fine and / or detain us arbitrarily manner solely based upon an attribute beyond our personal control: our age. So when I was out for a late-night walk in the summer between my sophomore and junior year and stopped by an officer, questioned, scolded, searched, and released with a warning, I put

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Ziegler asserts is that transactional writing requires a greater adherence to the objective truth than creative writing, but "the common denominator is that any kind of writing involves discovering exactly what you want to say and the best way to say it" (3).

<sup>5</sup> Recipient of the NCTE Award for the Excellence in the Teaching of Writing and professor emeritus Donald H. Graves, muses, "'Why publish?' is closely connected with 'Why write?' Writing is a public act meant to be shared with many audiences" (54).

aside my short story I'd been working on for the time being and funneled all of that immediate humiliation and rage I felt into a letter to the editor. The letter won me compliments from my teachers and the parents of my friends; it also prompted a phone call from the local chief of police, who didn't exactly apologize for the incident but was clearly a bit perturbed, which had really been my ultimate purpose in drafting the letter. Though the letter didn't change the law, it felt good to lash out with eloquence, escaping a feeling of voiceless impotence, and it felt even better to witness that rhetorical lash find and sting its target.

Though the purpose of my letter to the *Carbon County News* was an attempt to shame the police and advocate for myself as a minor, I soon began to employ rhetoric to advocate for the rights and dignity of others as I continued to discover radical politics and the worldwide struggle for social justice through mail-order subscriptions to punk rock zines. The piece of writing from my adolescence I am most proud of is an op-ed I wrote, which appeared on the front page of my high school newspaper in the fall of my senior year, arguing for changing the name of the school mascot from the pejorative term Redskins to something less offensive. Although the idea for the op-ed came from an article in one of my zines on the emerging national debate over Native American mascots, to my knowledge, the issue had not been raised in Red Lodge before – certainly not by any of the teachers or staff. And in spite of sparking enough of a debate in the school and the community to compel the school board into taking a vote on changing the mascot name, my voice wasn't strong enough alone (also, perhaps I hadn't made enough allies) to sway the board.<sup>6</sup>

Failing to persuade the school board didn't in any way relegate my reverence for writing; in fact, witnessing how a breeze as small as an op-ed in a high school newspaper had ruffled so

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<sup>6</sup> Eventually, after I was long gone from Red Lodge, the debate resurfaced, and the school board voted to change the mascot name to the Red Lodge Rams in the spring of 2011.

many feathers, I hoped to add squall-force to the winds of my writing. My self-identification as a writer led me to double-major in journalism and creative writing when I enrolled in the University of Montana the following year. During my time as an undergraduate I published a few dozen articles in the *Montana Kaimin* and the *Missoula Independent*; my short stories were praised by my workshop peers and professors; nearly without exception, the academic essays I submitted received positive feedback and high marks from my professors. By any measure, I assessed myself as at least competent and perhaps somewhat skilled as a writer, so I couldn't figure out why, half-a-dozen years after graduating and finding myself teaching English in South Korea, I was so dreadfully bad at teaching writing.

In 2010, I was working for a company called Pagoda Foreign Language Institute, a private language school for adults, in a high rise office building in the center of Seoul.<sup>7</sup> For the first two-year contract and the first six months of my second contract, I primarily taught English conversation classes. There were school textbooks with mini lessons on grammar, vocabulary, activities such as role-play scenarios, and discussion questions. I also supplemented the lessons with news articles, entertaining things gleaned from the internet like personality quizzes and jokes, as well as hypothetical questions I made up. The goal of each lesson was straightforward: building fluency through conversation. To keep conversations going, I tried to choose interesting topics for discussion, which were generally but not always lighthearted. On the advice of the head teacher, I kept a notebook in which I wrote down grammatical "errors" I heard during the conversation – things like the improper verb tense, missing articles, non-standard word order, etc. I would write these up on the board, and we would go over them at the end of class. I always tried to do this in the most encouraging and least stigmatizing way possible, saying something like, "That was a really fascinating conversation, and you all speak excellently, but there are a

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<sup>7</sup> The institute was in the neighborhood of Gangnam, made famous by the horse-trot-dancing pop star Psy.



couple little technical things we can look at. I know talking and thinking about grammar at the same time is tough, and you might know this already, but shall we take a look just to practice?” Then, I would ask the students to help me correct the “errors;” I sometimes offered a brief explanation or an alternate example for any sentence that seemed confusing, and then we would finish the class all feeling satisfied. The students were satisfied that they had been able to practice speaking and even usually correct their own mistakes, and I was satisfied that I could serve as a discussion moderator, an encouraging cheerleader, and an expert in grammar. It was a simple formula, but almost without fail, it met the needs of all parties involved.

When I was six months into my second contract with Pagoda, Brian, who had been teaching two specialized courses (“College Writing I” and “College Writing II: Research Papers”) that he had developed, announced he was leaving Korea to go to law school in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> He asked me to take over the courses, and I eagerly agreed, not knowing how challenging teaching writing could be. Though I wasn’t actively writing academic papers or news articles for fun at that time, I was a regular member in an ex-pat creative writing workshop and still considered myself a writer. Even though I might have preferred a fiction writing class, I thought teaching College Writing could offer me a few opportunities to share my passion for the written word.

Before examining all of the regrets I have regarding the way I taught the course, I’d like to elaborate on a few contextual details that made teaching writing at Pagoda possibly more challenging than might be the case at the high school or college-level in an English-speaking country. While students of all ages, anywhere from 18 to 70 enrolled in conversation courses for better business, travel, and sometimes even romantic communication, every student who took

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<sup>8</sup> Though I was often troubled that Pagoda was a large profit-driven corporation that by charging high monthly fees for courses catered primarily to students from upper-middle-class families, I appreciated that they gave teachers great latitude in developing not only daily lessons but whole new courses (provided, of course, that the courses drew enough students to make them profitable).

College Writing with me in the nine months I taught it had recently been accepted into or was back home on break from a university in an English speaking country. And since like all courses at Pagoda, each writing class was only a month long (more precisely, it was one hour each day, five days a week, for a total of twenty days), students felt a great sense of urgency to improve their writing quickly, which was far less common in conversation courses. The cost of the writing course was nearly twice as expensive as a speaking class, which only further increased expectations. Finally, although the South Korean education system is excellent in preparing students to take standardized multiple choice tests in math, science, and reading, most of the students I taught had very little experience writing even in their first language, so there was a lot of discomfort to overcome. Yet, there was also a lot of opportunity: the class size was small (a maximum of eight students), and unlike in a high school English class or university introductory composition course where most students' objective is simply to pass or perhaps earn a high grade, my College Writing students had chosen to be there and were actually determined to improve their writing skills without the incentive of credit or a grade. Studying pedagogy in my courses at the University of Montana and reading the research for this paper over the past two-plus years has made me realize that I often squandered this opportunity.

Although I still think a passion for writing is essential for one to be a good writing teacher, I now realize that I might have done more harm than good in trying to convey this passion by depicting writing as a sacred gift mystically bestowed on a chosen few rather than an accessible skill that everyone can learn. Looking back, I recognize that my ideas about writing can be characterized as what Stanford Psychology Professor Carol Dweck describes as a "fixed mindset" (6). In other words, I had interpreted Mrs. McKay's compliment as an authoritative recognition that I possessed a previously undiscovered innate knack for creatively stringing

words together. Now, I realize that my willingness to take risks and study techniques used by other writers had a much greater effect on my growth as a writer than any innate ability. This perception of skillful writing as a fixed trait indubitably came across in quite hyperbolic terms on the first day of the first four months of class when, as a class, we read the essay “Ghost Writers” by Cynthia Ozick. Her essay examines the difference between writers’ personalities when writing and interacting publicly, and the point I was trying to make comes in this passage:

For instance: this blustering, arrogant, self-assured, muscularly disdainful writer who belittles and brushes you aside, what is he really? When illicitly spotted facing the lonely glow of his computer screen, he is no more than a frightened milquetoast paralyzed by the prospect of having to begin a new sentence. And that apologetically obsequious, self-effacing, breathlessly diffident and deprecatory creature turns out, when in the trancelike grip of nocturnal ardor, to be a fiery furnace of un-opposable authority and galloping certainty. Writers are what they genuinely are only when they are at work in the silent and instinctual cell of ghostly solitude, and never when they are out industriously chatting on the terrace. (119)

I explained that like the second writer she describes, although I’m quite unassuming in person, sometimes a muse seizes hold of me and I write in a completely different and far superior voice than I’m able to access in everyday verbal communication.<sup>9</sup> What I hoped was that this example would inspire students to marvel at the power of writing and see that a powerful written voice is not hindered by one’s appearance, posture, or voice tone.<sup>10</sup> I hoped they would infer that when writing, the author is given more opportunities to take the time to think through complex ideas

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<sup>9</sup> On a bit of a personal note, in writing this paper, I feel more like the first example: boasting about my writing accomplishments but struggling to begin each new sentence.

<sup>10</sup> By “voice tone” I mean the actual vocal sound emerging as air passes through the vocal cords. If I had been more confident about my appearance, posture, and the way my voice sounded, would I still have been drawn to writing?

and choose her/his wording expressing these ideas more carefully. I now see that if students whose first language was not English could untangle the alienating diction and syntax, inspiration seems unlikely. Instead, many might have interpreted this excerpt as an either-or choice: either be a popular, highly functional person who doesn't like to write, or be an antisocial outcast who writes well. In hindsight, this hardly seems the ideal message to deliver the first day of a writing class. Perhaps the construction of the writer as a socially-isolated tortured artist might provide some comfort to students who already see themselves as writers and/or feel socially isolated, but I've come to understand that this romanticized notion of the artist can come off as problematically elitist, and therefore, is unsuitable in a democratic classroom.

Second, I think I might have let my own writing habits and my previous experience as a student prevent me from making the best use of class time. Throughout high school and my undergraduate years, the limited amount of class time was nearly always spent on the instructors' lectures or class discussions, making writing a solitary and usually nocturnal activity to be done at home. Even in my journalism and fiction-workshop courses, class time was always spent discussing strategies for writing and work-shopping drafts but never on actually writing.<sup>11</sup> The habit of writing alone at night had become so engrained that even after finishing my undergraduate degree, when I wrote fiction or even long personal letters or emails, I restricted myself to writing only late at night when no one else was around. I replicated practice of assigning students to write their essays at home because I had no previous experience and no formal training in teaching writing, and also because my experiences writing made me feel that

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<sup>11</sup> The exception was a poetry workshop course I took at UM instructed by Greg Pape. He periodically gave prompts for in-class writing. Also, as a graduate student recently, I have taken a number of courses that utilized class time for writing; the most prominent example of course is the Montana Writing Project.

since I wouldn't be comfortable engaging in on-the-spot writing, it would be cruel and unproductive to ask students to do so.

I followed my predecessor Brian's syllabus in assigning three essays a month (personal, compare/contrast, and persuasive) in the College Writing 1 course and two research papers (analytical and argumentative) in the other course. Since these were written outside of class, we spent time in class mostly reading and discussing other writers' essays. Initially, I attempted to use authentic writing published in sources I liked such as *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Mother Jones*, *Discover*, *Harper's*, and excerpts from *The Best American Essays* 2009 and 2010 anthologies. While these published essays and articles made for some interesting discussions of the content (students particularly liked "The Bad Lion" by Toni Bentley about a research team's decision whether or not to intervene to prevent a sociopathic lion from killing off all of the lionesses in its pride), it was difficult for me to articulate how these essays and articles might be used as models for an essay simulating what a college professor might ask them to do. For the first few months, somewhere in the second week, it seemed that students started to perceive (or perhaps, realize?) that I didn't entirely know what I was doing as an instructor. We read essays and articles, and then I simply told them to write about whatever ideas came to them. That first week, they protested, "I haven't observed lions in the wild, taken the Trans-Siberian railroad, mapped my own genome, or investigated the culture of bribery in Chinese bureaucracy, so, without such experience, how am I supposed to write an essay like these?" Most turned in half-hearted narrative essays that often were about getting accepted into a university in the U.S., Canada, Australia, the U.K., or New Zealand – an issue certainly at the forefront of their minds. Then, in the second week, when we repeated the reading-discussing-assigning-a-paper routine, they must have asked why they were paying \$220 a month for the class. Attendance dropped off

as did students' monthly evaluations of my performance, and the managers at Pagoda wondered if it might be better to just cancel the College Writing program. I knew I needed to do something to turn things around. The pieces of fiction and journalism I'd written were to entertain, inform, and persuade a real audience, not just the teacher; in fact, when I wrote for the *Kaimin*, the *Missoula Independent*, and my writing group in Seoul, a teacher wasn't even part of the equation, but I doubted whether this was the kind of writing my students' professors would want to see and whether it was appropriate for a class titled College Writing. In all of my literature or history courses, class time was for discussing reading, while writing was assigned but never explicitly taught, but I realized this wouldn't work in a writing class. I had to become, or at least make myself seem like, an expert.

Ironically, in an attempt to make myself appear to be an expert in academic writing, I cast aside all of the authentic writing experiences I'd had, and began to teach writing in a very synthetic, very formulaic way. I began using a textbook for ESL students called *Great Essays* (Folse, et al.), which seemed a disingenuous title for a book with such bland and formulaic example texts written at about a sixth or seventh grade reading level. The lifeless simplicity of the syntax and diction were uninspiring to be sure, but the topics (e.g. an argument in favor of school uniforms, the fairly obvious differences between the United States and Japan, and someone's experience getting lost in an airport) really felt like an insult to the students' intelligence. So why did I teach using such insipid content for my next six months at Pagoda? I did so only because it was simple to teach in a way that made it seem like I knew what I was doing. I'd always hated the five-paragraph essay formula, but I knew it and could break it down into simple terms using Folse's examples pointing to things like the thesis statement, the hook, topic sentences, and transition phrases in the usual predictable locations. Since we still didn't

write in class, there was plenty of class time for worksheets I found online that asked students to fill in the missing transition phrases in a paragraph, create a topic sentence for a pre-written paragraph, choose the “best” thesis statements out of a list of five, or practice re-phrasing a pre-written thesis in the conclusion.

As the months progressed, I began restricting the essays students composed at home as well. Before beginning to use *Great Essays*, I simply asked students to write about any comparisons or arguments that interested them, but I didn’t offer much help in the invention process. While a few students were able to select fascinating topics on their own, a disturbing number simply stopped attending class, frustrated by not knowing what to write about. That model clearly didn’t work. Then, the first month I started using the textbook, the majority of students wrote papers that mimicked not only the five-paragraph-essay form provided by the example texts, but were on strikingly similar topics. For example, one textbook essay compares Japan to the United States, so naturally, many students wrote essays comparing Korea to the United States or Korea to Japan, borrowing (or perhaps plagiarizing?) many of the same phrases and only altering a few details. This was frustrating, but rather than risking going back to the state of students not writing anything and dropping the class in droves, I created a list of five potential topics for an argumentative essay and five for a comparative essay. I tried to make the topics interesting and culturally relevant. On the lists were Korea’s policy of mandatory military service for all men, single-sex versus co-ed schools, online anonymity’s connection to cyber bullying, and admission to universities based on a one-shot annual exam. Overtly political topics like potential reunification with North Korea, the presence of US armed forces on the peninsula, and the canal project proposed by the country’s then-president<sup>12</sup> were less popular, but I left

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<sup>12</sup> The proposal, called “The Four Rivers Project,” was essentially an idea to deepen waterways by dredging existing rivers as well as digging new canals to connect four major rivers in South Korea to create navigable shipping routes.

them on the list hoping to send the message that I welcomed serious social and academic issues. I also gave students the option to write about topics they cared about that weren't on the lists, but these instances were rare. Though the lists of topics helped to yield a better product (more interesting essays), the process of teaching writing by blueprint (i.e. put your thesis statement here, topic sentences there, supporting ideas there and there, etc.) remained the same. Although most students may not have exactly liked writing flavorless essays or filling in tedious worksheets, they perhaps grudgingly appreciated them as necessary for progress.<sup>13</sup> My monthly student evaluation ratings went up, and attendance in the classes not only rebounded to where it had been but increased beyond the capacity of two classes, leading Pagoda to open more sections of College Writing.

As students grew more efficient at writing essays on topics I'd chosen using the formulae I taught, the most glaring surface problem I then saw on their drafts was grammar. While I recognized that grammatical correctness was secondary to communication through my own experiences speaking Spanish and Korean and I was therefore sympathetic to slipups as long as the point came across, I worried that my students' professors might not have the same level of understanding. I began to integrate more direct instruction of grammar into my College Writing lesson plans. I knew that most of my students had been drilled all through middle school and high school on English grammar, but I didn't know what else to do but drill more. I printed off worksheets on subject-verb agreement, article-usage, prepositions, dangling modifiers, sentence fragments, and combining simple sentences into compound or complex sentences. When we held

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Based on what I read, the project seemed nearly technically impossible and the risk to the environment was critical. Thankfully, the idea was eventually scrapped when Myung-Bak Lee finished his term in office in 2011.

<sup>13</sup> I have since come to doubt that these worksheets really helped substantially in any student's actual writing development. I now believe the best way to improve one's writing at any stage is to actually write frequently and consciously. I understand, however, that there can be some satisfaction gained from the finiteness of such activities. It is possible (even common) to fill in a worksheet 100% correctly, but this doesn't hold true in writing.



peer-editing workshops, I urged students to comment on the content of one another's essays, but grammar became the primary concern as students took cues from the emphasis I had placed on it. While I was satisfied to fill the role as resident grammar expert in the conversation classes, this role in a writing class felt markedly futile – students made the same errors in their drafts that I thought they had mastered on a worksheet a few days before, and whereas in the conversation classes I could help them save face mentioning the difficulty of speaking and thinking about grammar at the same time, I didn't have that luxury in a writing class where I emphasized proofreading before submitting a draft.

As the months passed, I gradually began to resent my students for not applying the grammar I taught them to their drafts; I began to resent them for what I perceived as a lack of creativity and intellectual engagement in choosing what to write about; I began to resent them for not aspiring to produce any writing besides papers required to pass their university classes. I also started to resent teaching College Writing. The laughs and lively exchanges prevalent in my previous conversation courses were nonexistent in my writing classes. The fill-in-the-blank handouts, the grammar exercises, the hackneyed model essays, and the time spent correcting grammar and writing seemingly useless comments like “Good, clear thesis!” on their drafts all seemed like drudgery. By my fifth month teaching College Writing, I stopped using Ozick's “Ghost Writers” on the first day of class. I viewed my previous hopes to initiate students into the cult of writing as a naïve fantasy. I came to view what we were doing in class not as writing but more as the tedious but necessary preparation for writing, like running laps and doing pushups to prepare athletes for game day.<sup>14</sup> I had three months until the end of my contract, and despite always looking forward each day teaching before, I began counting down the days until I

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<sup>14</sup> In retrospect, I now worry that such “exercises” might have done more harm than good by bulking up the instinct for self-criticism while letting the inquisitive and creative muscles atrophy from disuse.

finished. Though I tried to conceal my growing boredom and resentment, I'm sure these sentiments came across in the zombified way I reeled off the five-paragraph formula and reiterated the same familiar comments in the margins of their essays. In just six months, I had flipped the College Writing class 180 degrees; it swung from being filled with passion but sorely lacking organized instruction to being so regimented and prescriptive that the seeds of passion could no longer take root. In the last few months I was at Pagoda, the boot camp model of writing instruction gradually revealed itself to be just as catastrophic as the lawless neighborhood playground model had been. First, students' engagement in writing evaporated, and then, the students themselves disappeared from class.

It was hard to understand: I had long considered myself a writer, and for the five or six years before, I had viewed myself as fairly competent and likable teacher. Why then did it seem so unfeasible to bring those identities together and be an effective writing teacher? I have always intuited that the best teachers of writing are themselves writers, but is there any truth to this? In my early months teaching College Writing, I identified myself as a writer to students and brought my passion for the written word into the classroom, but clearly privately practicing writing and touting an aesthetic appreciation for the craft are not enough. Missing from the teaching-learning transaction were instruction and dialogue conveying how my experiences with writing and my understandings of the composition process might help inform the decisions student writers make. What strategies and tools, I wonder, do teachers who write have access to that they can offer their students, and how might they use such tools in the classroom to help students uncover their own writing without appropriating too much control over students' writing projects? Might teachers who write also be better positioned by their own experience to create more authentic and dynamic writing contexts than generic decontextualized assignments all too common in

schools? When talking with my colleagues at Pagoda, I blamed the students for the high rates of withdrawal from the writing courses I taught; “They’re just lazy and not willing to do the hard work of writing their papers; that’s why they quit,” I would say, consoling myself. It didn’t occur to me that I might not be giving them enough of a reason to invest themselves in the hard work. I wonder if generating better assignments and a more engaged classroom atmosphere might have helped students perceive their writing as a fulfilling endeavor and less like a series of hollow exercises. Near the end of my contract, the relationship I had with my writing students often felt remarkably adversarial, but is such a dynamic inevitable? The conversation classes never felt that way, but is it possible to maintain a sense of joyfulness and community without sacrificing constructive feedback and inquiry into serious academic topics? Furthermore, how might the practice of writing help teachers do this most effectively?

In this paper I hope to discover whether a teacher’s writing habits make any difference in instruction and ultimately in students’ writing; specifically, I want to examine how teachers’ writing experiences foster empathy, warmth, creativity, and critical thinking in the writing classroom. I also hope to contrast the traditional deficit-perspective approach of assigning and assessing writing with a process-based approach informed partially by the teacher’s own writing experiences. I will also examine the importance of choice, autonomy, and the incorporation of personal experience in student writing. Finally, I intend to make an argument for dialogical writing assignments that combine personal and academic voices as a means for exploring issues while remaining rooted in the contexts of students’ lives.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review: The Virtues of Participation and Dialogue

The question whether teachers of writing should themselves be writers seems as straightforward as asking whether dance teachers should be dancers, whether Chinese language teacher should be speakers of Chinese, or whether woodshop teachers should know how to use the saws, hammers, and drills in their shop rooms. Although the answer seems to be an obvious yes, there is a long history of disconnection between writing instruction and teaching the process of writing. Through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the teaching of writing in elementary and secondary schools focused on little besides penmanship (NWP & Nagin 1), and up through the 1970s, writing pedagogy emphasized a product-centered approach, in which “correctness” of a student’s final written product was the primary objective “with little or no attention given to the process or purpose of producing it” (20). Though process and purpose began gaining traction in composition pedagogy about forty years ago, as evidenced by my own experiences as both a student and teacher of writing, “stamping out the sin of convention errors” (Graves 51), a practice rooted in a nineteenth-century model of language development, has hardly gone by the wayside. In its 2004 publication, “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” the National Council of Teachers of English declares, “Too much emphasis on correctness can actually inhibit development,” and “Whenever possible, teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce texts [...] Evaluating the processes students follow – the decisions they make, the attempts along the way – can be as important as the final product” (NCTE). It is my assumption that teachers who are writers themselves and “know the writing process inside out”

(O'Donnell-Allen) might be equipped by their own experience to help students find authentic writing contexts as well as help guide them through the process of writing.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for writing teachers to also be practitioners of the craft is credibility. When I think back to my adolescence, there was no one I despised more than hypocrites – those unwilling to put their money where their mouth was, those who talked the talk but failed to walk the walk, those armchair quarterbacks and backseat drivers, those without a speck of skin in the game. Such expressions are perhaps dreadful clichés, but they proffer a great deal of truth: if teachers want students to take writing seriously, they must first do so themselves. Writer-teacher Donald Graves notes, “The tone for writing is set by what the teacher does, not what the teacher says” (12). One veteran teacher who began the practice of writing herself after taking part in the National Writing Project summer institute offers this compelling testimonial:

Kids are awfully perceptive; they can see through phonies right away. Other years when I told them that writing was important, they knew I didn't really mean it. I never told them I didn't write, but they knew. This year it's different because I am writing, and my students know it. I say a lot of the same things, but now they believe me. It's hard to explain, but I know that my writing makes me a better teacher of writing (qtd. in Gere 2).

To teach anything requires a certain amount of ethos generated by one's expertise and passion, and while it might be possible to fake expertise by reading a few lines out of a textbook or from a prefabricated set of lesson-plan instructions, passion is much harder to counterfeit. Deborah Augsburger describes “sharing the ecstasy” of her own writing experiences with her students: “Perhaps the most important idea I bring from the trenches is that writing is, beyond and even in the fear, really fun” (549). She recounts scenes of celebration filled with “giddy dancing” after sharing the news of affirming rejection letters or publication acceptances for her own writing,

and these celebrations helped motivate her students to share their own gratifying writing attempts and successes (548). Augsburger writes, “By sharing the joys I find in writing and communicating to an audience, I share reasons to write” (549). This experience of sharing joy from writing is unavailable to teachers who don’t write, and without experiences that cast writing in a positive light, writing for many students often seems like necessary toil to earn a grade at best and meaningless drudgery to be avoided at worst. Another English teacher, who taught at an urban middle school, spent her free time writing a young-adult novel and poetry based on events in class. After an artist in residence shared parts of his novel in progress with her class, she worked up the courage to also share a chapter from her own novel with students. The students responded with “eagerness and enthusiasm as fellow writers and literary critics” (Hynds 235), and in her journal the teacher wrote, “My words that I have kept private for so long – were affecting these kids” (236). Lucy Calkins, director of the Teachers College Writing Project at Columbia University, declares, “When [teachers] share writing, we uncover and share who we are. Writing invites us to put ourselves on the line, to bring ourselves into the classroom, into the teaching-learning transaction” (21). Of course it takes courage for teachers to share who we are, but the potential benefits to students, (e.g. sparking a passion for writing and helping them see writing as a worthwhile endeavor) make it seem like a risk worth taking.

Not every teacher is persuaded by personal anecdotes and lofty proclamations that the ways a teacher decides to spend her/his personal time has an effect on student achievement in writing. In March of 1990, Karen Jost, a high-school English teacher in Wisconsin, had an article published in the NCTE *English Journal* titled “Why High-School Writing Teachers Should *Not* Write” as a general rebuttal to calls by Graves, Murray, and the National Writing Project for teachers to become writing practitioners. In the article, Jost asserts that university researchers

and secondary English teachers are “two aligned but distinct professions” (65), and while writing for university faculty is “a condition for future employment,” which their schedules allow time for, high-school teachers have “much less to gain professionally” from writing and much less time to do it (66). She mentions that high-school teachers are typically burdened with prepping two or three courses for 120 students daily, charged with additional extracurricular duties, and often find themselves “gasping under stacks of composition.” She writes that with so few free hours at teachers’ disposal, “any scraps of free time they can salvage might be more fruitfully spent stomping the bleachers at half time than in pursuit of an elusive metaphor” (66). Jost states that while she applauds a few “naturally gifted writing cheerleaders, often clustered in progressive school districts like San Francisco and New York City, or born-again writing converts freshly emerged from big-name conferences” for their dedication, she declares that if you go to the nation’s heartland and “ask average English teachers from average school districts how much they write, [...] you’re more likely to get a snort than a reply” (65).

Following the publication of Jost’s piece, the *English Journal* was engulfed in a virtual avalanche of letters, receiving more reader responses in two weeks than they normally received in seven months (Gillespie 37). The subject became so controversial that the *English Journal* dedicated a 25-page follow-up forum to the topic of how teachers’ writing habits shape instruction in September of the same year. In that issue, Jost published another essay, “Why Writing Teachers Should Not Write, Revisited,” in which she reaffirms her earlier claims and further asserts that since no “hard research” can confirm positive outcomes for students, “the issue of writing teachers writing remains a case of one teacher’s word against another’s” (qtd. in Gillespie 37).

While Jost's contention that there was a lack of "hard research" measuring the benefits of teacher writing might have been true at the time (I was unable to find any case studies on the topic published before 1990), today, it is not the case. In 2007, Alyson Whyte and team of researchers from Auburn University published their findings from an empirical study done in 2004-2005 that examined to what extent teachers' writing habits and participation in the National Writing Project (NWP) are associated with secondary students' writing development. The researchers selected 17 English language arts teachers who had attended an NWP intensive institute in Alabama, and asked the principals from these teachers' schools to provide names of prospective comparison teachers who were as close a match as possible in terms of the grade level they taught, their classes' achievement level (i.e. standard, honors, A.P.), and the rating given by the principal (8). All 34 teachers were given a list of 10 questions to measure the frequency of writing activities. Items on the survey included questions asking how often teachers posted writing online, made entries in a private journal, met in groups to share writing, wrote formal documents, wrote or edited for pay, etc. (10). The teachers answered the items on a scale of frequency, ranging from 6, every day, to 1, never. The average score for all 34 participating teachers was 2.11, and the researchers designated teachers with scores above this average as having "high writing lives," while teachers with scores below the mean were designated as having "low writing lives" (10).<sup>15</sup> The researchers also gave all 34 participating teachers' students two writing assessments – one early in the 2004-2005 school year, and another later in the year – in order to examine what difference a teacher's writing life and/or affiliation with the NWP had on students' writing development. The assessments were scored holistically for six writing traits on a scale of 1-6 (9), and the results are as follows:

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<sup>15</sup> As a brief aside, NWP affiliation correlated highly with a teacher's writing life; of the 17 teachers with a high rating, 14 had NWP experience.



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**Writing Scores for Students in Classes Taught by Teachers with High and Low Writing Lives**  
**[Adapted from Table 3 (Whyte et al. 11)]**

	<u>Early-course mean</u>	<u>Late-course mean</u>
<i>NWP-affiliated teachers with high writing lives</i>		
Holistic quality of writing	3.88	4.29
Quality of ideas	3.93	4.31
Voice	3.97	4.50
Sentence fluency	3.93	4.27
Word choice	3.83	4.17
<i>Comparison teachers with high writing lives</i>		
Holistic quality of writing	3.67	3.93
Quality of ideas	3.80	4.05
Voice	4.05	4.15
Sentence fluency	3.90	3.94
Word choice	3.91	3.93
<i>NWP-affiliated teachers with low writing lives</i>		
Holistic quality of writing	3.78	3.51
Quality of ideas	3.92	3.60
Voice	3.95	3.89
Sentence fluency	3.81	3.61
Word choice	3.69	3.54
<i>Comparison teachers with low writing lives</i>		
Holistic quality of writing	3.94	3.97
Quality of ideas	3.99	3.99
Voice	4.01	4.07
Sentence fluency	3.95	4.01
Word choice	3.88	3.92

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The results of the assessment are clear: students taught by NWP-affiliated teachers with high writing lives exhibited remarkable development in every writing trait on the table, improving their scores by between 0.3 and 0.5 points. Students taught by comparison teachers with high writing lives also made improvements in every category, though their gains were less dramatic. Students taught by teachers with low writing lives both, NWP-affiliated and comparison, showed

only miniscule improvements or decreases in scores. The researchers also found that among the NWP-affiliated teachers with high writing lives, the number of hours per year that they participated in NWP activities beyond the summer institute was associated with further student achievement in writing (14). The fact that students benefit when teachers continue to regularly write, talk, and work with a community of writer-teachers to find ways to improve writing instruction isn't especially surprising, but it underscores the importance of support networks for sharing research, dialogue, and innovative methods for teaching writing. It's worth noting that Whyte et al. only listed five of the six writing traits on their table; they omitted the sixth writing trait, conventions (i.e. standard punctuation, spelling, etc.), finding "no significant interaction between teacher group and early- versus late-course scores" (12). In other words, if a teacher believes the only important feature of writing that students ought to develop is knowing where to put their commas, it doesn't really matter whether the teacher writes or not, but if there is a hope that students can better understand how to write about interesting and meaningful ideas in an authentic and engaging voice, then the claim made by Graves, Murray, NWP, and many other educators that students benefit when writing teachers are practitioners of writing is now corroborated by "hard research."

Jost might acknowledge there could be some theoretical benefit to students when teachers write, but she would probably still insist that teachers simply don't have the time. During my student-teaching field placement at Big Sky High School last semester, I experienced firsthand how overextended a teacher can feel with so many lesson plans to develop, class texts to scrutinize, meetings to attend, memos to write, pieces of student writing to comment on, and students to give additional support to during lunch or after school. I still found a few evening and weekend hours to write, but I understood how teachers who have childcare or extracurricular

commitments after school could feel there weren't even a few minutes in the day to spend on writing. I like to think that I'll be the kind of teacher willing to forego a few halftime bleacher stomps in pursuit of that elusive metaphor even during the busy school year, but I imagine that most of my more serious writing endeavors might have to wait until winter and summer vacations. Augsburger concedes that during a semester, she rarely has time to do much more than revisit a few pieces she wrote during the holidays (551). Even Jost admits to a summer spent dedicating four or five hours a day to fiction writing (66), and she apparently found the time to compose two polished articles for *English Journal*. No one who urges teachers to be writing practitioners expects dozens of hours every week invested in writing – especially during the school year. Yet, there must be a happy medium somewhere between writing all day every day and never writing. I believe teachers can maintain and demonstrate their own writing practices by composing when they find time on weekends, during holidays, and even in class writing alongside their students. It is worth questioning the traditional paradigm that student writing should mostly be assigned as homework and classroom time should be reserved only for lectures, discussions, and activities. Based on his own teaching experiences, Ziegler concludes, “Given the proper classroom environment, most students write more and better in class than they do if assigned to write at home” (8) The National Academy of Education’s Commission on Reading also advocates for more classroom time devoted to writing, remarking,

Children don't get many opportunities to write. In one recent study in grades one, three, and five, only 15 percent of the school day was spent in any kind of writing activity. Two-thirds of the writing that did occur was word-for-word copying in workbooks. Compositions of a paragraph or more in length are infrequent even at the high school level. (Qtd. in NWP & Nagin 6)

When teachers invest more class time in writing and write along with their students, even teachers with overloaded schedules can re-characterize students' perception of their role from that of an adversarial taskmaster to a more empathetic fellow writer. Graves encourages teachers not only to write at home in their free time but to write together with students for at least fifteen minutes every week (12). He describes the practice of modeling writing with his fifth-grade class: before writing, he tells his students which topic he has chosen to write about and sometimes he divulges a few topics he'd also considered but rejected. He then explains that he does not want to be interrupted while writing so questions or concerns will have to wait; and then he writes sometimes in his own notebook but other times on a large sheet of butcher paper or on an overhead projector "to make explicit what children ordinarily don't see: how words go down on paper and the thoughts that go with the decisions made in writing" (44-45). Graves remarks, "From the beginning it is important for children to realize that writing is important enough for you [the teacher] to do" (19).

I mentioned previously that I never devoted any class time to writing while I taught in Korea, but before I became a teaching assistant charged with teaching WRIT 101 at UM, I was exposed to the idea of writing with students in the Montana Writing Project 2012 summer institute, and I decided to try it with my 101 students. While Graves taught during the 1970s and 1980s, I had the advantage of early twenty-first-century technology at my disposal: a classroom with slow but functional computers and a blog website for collective composing. Still, the practice of composing in-class free writes with students was similar to Graves' approach except rather than putting students through the torment of deciphering my awful handwriting on butcher paper, I typed on a computer that projected what I was writing, and we could all see each other's blog posts as they were published. I encountered two points of difficulty employing this

seemingly straightforward practice. For the first few weeks, or even perhaps for the first month of the course, I allowed students to interrupt me while writing. Some needed further clarification about the prompt; others had been absent earlier or would be absent in the future and wanted to know what we had done or would be doing. I noticed that when these interruptions occurred, many students seemed less engaged in their freewrites – something I determined later when I saw their shorter- and simpler-than-usual posts. It seemed clear that by allowing procedural questions to interrupt our writing time, I was unconsciously sending the message that the invention or reflection writing we were doing was nothing more than meaningless busywork – a way to kill 10 or 15 minutes of class time – and ultimately, of no great importance. Eventually, I managed to resolve this problem by posting clearer step-by-step prompts as well as daily summaries of activities and assignments on the blog as a way to head-off interrupting questions. Graves mentions, “Students interrupt for many reasons, but the chief reason is that they don’t believe you are doing anything significant when you are not working with them” (44), so I also began to explicitly tell them the purpose of the freewrite and my reasons for writing with them. After mostly resolving the interruption issue, my next difficulty with in-class writing was that sometimes when we wrote together, I couldn’t think of anything profound, clever, or even interesting to write and ended up with a post that either made me feel foolish when I re-read it or was only a sentence or two long in spite of the ample writing time allotted. On those occasions, producing simpleminded drivel or getting stuck felt mortifying: “I’m supposed to be the expert here,” I remember thinking; “What sort of example am I setting?” I now realize that there might have been opportunities for teachable moments concealed in my embarrassment.

Graves observes that when children are asked to imagine how adults write, “Their replies blend concepts of witchcraft and alchemy” (43). He continues, “Children suggest when adults

write, the words flow, arrive ‘Shazam!’ on the page. Like the Tablets, words are dictated to us from on high; we only hold the pen and a mysterious force dictates stories, poems, and letters” Graves concludes, “We maintain their fictions by not writing ourselves” (43). Anyone who writes regularly knows all too well that struggle is a frustratingly integral part of the composition process, but students often believe that if they can’t write quickly and easily, that means they can’t write at all (Ziegler 32). When teachers write and talk about as well as demonstrate encountering challenges and setbacks when putting thoughts into words, students might feel less stigmatized when facing their own writing difficulties. Augsburger asks, “Students feel the agonies of writing, but do we teachers remember this?” (549). Beyond giving her “a more authentic perspective” for evaluating and coaching students’ writing, Augsburger claims that sharing her personal struggles and worries about writing is fundamental in building rapport in the classroom and laying a foundation for good instruction. She writes, “No amount of style exercises or starter sentences can substitute for the acceptance and commiseration of a fellow writer in the trenches” (549). And as a teacher who actively writes and submits for publication, Augsburger draws on her own experiences fearing judgment, ridicule, and rejection to help her students get past their fears of writing (550). Ziegler also invites teachers to share their personal writing experiences, especially the difficult ones, as a way to connect with students. He imparts,

Share some of your writing, including a piece as it developed from first to last draft. Don’t just bring in writing you are confident of, but also bring a piece you are unsure about. Expose your own vulnerability and ask for reactions. Chances are your students will be gentle with you. (5-6)

Yet, for the many teachers who have written little besides lesson plans, reports, emails, and shopping lists since they were students themselves, the idea of making themselves vulnerable by sharing their writing is a cause of much anxiety.

One of the most promising ways for teachers to face and overcome writing anxiety and bring their writerly experiences into the classroom is joining a peer writing group. Watts cajoles educators: “The use of a Teachers as Writers group could be a golden opportunity for the improvement and solid development of good writing instruction” (155). The National Writing Project is one such group as is the We’re Writers project – a monthly writing workshop group based in southern England for teachers from eight primary schools (Grainger 77). Grainger describes an easy, assured atmosphere during the initial group discussions, but every time it came time to write, high levels of anxiety and “a distinct fear of comparison” were reported by teacher participants through the first year of the workshop (78). Participants made self-derogatory comments such as “I have always been awful at writing” and “I feel thoroughly thick when I’m told to write” (78), but the role shift from instructors to learners helped them become more sensitive to their students’ journeys as writers as evidenced by participant comments like, “My fear of being shown up makes me feel rebellious – perhaps my boys feel like this too” (78). Cremin theorizes that if teachers undertake creative endeavors themselves and participate in “a pedagogy of discomfort,” these teachers “will be better placed to help children handle uncertainty, reduce stasis and take risks” (429). Though the National Literacy Strategy (a framework of practices similar to the Common Core) requires British educators to teach writing by leading students through an instructional process that includes modeling and demonstrating writing, before taking part in the We’re Writers project most participants admitted they typically pre-wrote their demonstrations at home and “pretended to be thinking out loud as they wrote”

(Grainger 80). Cremin argues that simulated writing demonstrations that omit the struggle the teacher actually encountered while writing the model the night before are problematic in allowing “the modeling of textual and linguistic features, issues of organization and structure and the use of adverbial clauses or metaphors for example, to take precedence over modeling the complex recursive nature of writing or the pleasure in making meaning” (417). In other words, simulated writing demonstration sap the emotional and contextual lifeblood from the composition process, leaving behind only a static text for formal dissection. Grainger notes that participants who expressed low self-esteem as writers in the pre-workshop survey were especially prone to pre-writing their demonstrations, being “understandably concerned about their ability to model specific literary features spontaneously and publicly” (80). It seems that in spite of Ziegler’s encouragement that “Chances are, your students will be gentle,” for teachers who lacked confidence in their writing, real spontaneous composition modeling was initially a chance they were unwilling to take.

Cremin asserts that risk-taking is a central component to creativity, and “teachers who inspire creativity often model the creative process for pupils with all the attendant risk-taking that this can involve” (418). Gradually, as their fear of being judged by their peers dissipated and their assurance as writers grew with experience, participants in the We’re Writers project began to open up and take more risks in their own writing, giving them the confidence to “consider their ideas, or lack of them, more explicitly in front of their classes” (Grainger 81). Participants also started to model the internal dialogue of “possibility thinking” between the composing and editing selves in their classes (82). Graves emphasizes the importance of modelling difficulty and strategies for overcoming it in writing demonstrations. When he writes in front of his students he occasionally stops writing and tells his students, “I’m stuck. I don’t know what to say next. I



think I'll read this aloud to feel where I am" (49). This strategy highlights the recursive nature of writing, which was another important discovery that emerged among the participants of the We're Writers project. Grainger describes that through their own writing, participants became conscious of how re-reading and sub-vocalizing while composing helped them in directing and re-directing focus. After discussing the strategy in their workshop groups, they concluded that addressing inner speech in their writing demonstrations was important (83). Participants attributed "the discursive atmosphere" and "sense of collegiality" in the We're Writers workshops as key factors in allowing them to take risks in their writing, and they sought to replicate this environment in their own classrooms (83) as they saw their role shift from being "mere instructors to informed facilitators and fellow writers" (86). Graves also reports that his status as a teacher who writes and his regular practice of modeling writing together create a positive shift in the dynamic of the classroom: "Modeling changes my relationship with a class. We become writers together when blocks become problems to be solved rather than sinful errors" (51).

Cognitive psychology professor Daniel Willingham explains that unlike in East Asian countries where intelligence is typically seen as malleable and struggle is embraced as a necessary step in overcoming difficulty, in Western societies, intelligence is usually seen more as a fixed attribute, so according to this viewpoint, "if you work hard [at an intellectual task such as writing], that must mean you're not smart" (131). As an educator immersed in this Western value system from birth, I reflexively worry that revealing the struggles I encounter when writing could cause my students to lose confidence in my intellectual ability, but if I hope to create an empathetic and supportive classroom environment where creativity and bold risks are

encouraged rather than feared, perhaps the best thing I can do is muster the courage to lead by example. Ziegler writes,

A student once commented that when writing is at its very best, “you get into it so much, your hand is like a skater on the ice.” But every skater stumbles occasionally and winds up sitting on the ice. Students should perceive the writing workshop as being big enough for room to ‘fall.’ [...] The biggest mistake students can make is to be so afraid of mistakes that they stunt their growth. (19)

Thinking back to those little slips and lurches I experienced writing on the WRIT 101 class blog when I stumbled into uncertainty, blank spots, and a few bad clichés, I wonder what my students would have thought if instead of getting up and continuing as if nothing had happened, I had sat on the ice and gathered everyone around for a discussion. Would they have agreed with me that the joy of the glides and spins are worth enough to risk an occasional fall? Would they have trusted me more not to laugh or snicker when they took a spill? Would they have become more willing to venture out onto the ice not only when other teachers and I required them to but also later on their own? It seems that the research points to yes for all of the questions above. I guess I’ll find out the next time I’m out with a group of students on the rink.

Whyte, et al. cite a meta-analysis of 119 studies spanning from 1948 to 2004 by Cornelius-White that found positive outcomes for students ranging anywhere from pre-kindergarten to graduate school were highly correlated with four instructional attributes: empathy, warmth, non-directivity, and encouragement of higher-order thinking (12). I believe that the best way for teachers to integrate all four of these attributes into the writing classroom is to teach from a dialogical stance in which the teacher positions him or herself as a fellow writer and participant within a writing community of critical inquirers and knowledge builders.

When I first taught English conversation in Korea, I think I intuitively approached teaching from what Gorlewski calls a “sociocultural framework,” which she describes as an environment where “mental activity is distributed and shared between the teacher and student participants and knowledge is developed as a joint activity” (79). Classes were fun as they were filled with dialogue and good-natured laughter. Bakhtin shares my view of the power of laughter in learning: “While seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, laughter allows us to rise above and liberate ourselves from such doubts. Laughter, when shared in joyful, open ways only unites; it cannot divide” (qtd. in Fecho 47). In addition to being the willing butt of most of the jokes, I acted as the “instigator of dialogue” (Ritter 19) and an active participant sharing my views and experiences while listening to the views and experiences of my students. We engaged in inclusive dialogue as “a way to cross cultural boundaries” (hooks 130), building knowledge not only about American or Korean cultural experiences, but since students ranged in age from their late teens to well into middle age, grew up in privileged or poor households, came from highly urban or rural homes, were Buddhist, Christian, or secular, and were female or male, our dialogues helped us to cross the cultural boundaries between generations, social classes, regions, religions, and genders. Students often confided that though there were some obvious difficulties attempting to converse in a second language, in some ways, the use of English enabled a climate of openness for dialogue since social hierarchy is built into the grammar of the Korean language, requiring different verb endings denoting respect based on age, position of power, and gender. Paulo Freire asserts that “no dialogue can begin with the premise that some chosen among us can enter that dialogue, or that some voices carry more weight than others” (66), and while I acknowledge that participation was in some ways limited to students who could afford the monthly tuition, I maintain that the same degree of openness to particularly the voices of young

people and women would be rare if not absent in other settings. In most conversation classes, there was a virtuous cycle of honest dialogue producing warmth and a sense of community, which further enriched the dialogue. Freire establishes “a profound love for the world and for people” (70) as a prerequisite condition for dialogue, and while my students and I never used the word “love” specifically, there was normally an unmistakable feeling of mutual support and camaraderie.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the atmosphere in the College Writing classroom was much less dialogical and therefore much less joyful. Though I agree with the principle expressed by Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley that “Authoritarianism creates alienation; authority creates community” (qtd. in Fecho 48), as an inexperienced teacher of writing, I was unsure how to seek out the latter. Instead, I latched onto the former by resorting to a “banking approach” (Freire 53) in my writing instruction. Perhaps I had internalized “paternal authority through the rigid relationship structure emphasized by school” only to then “repeat the rigid patterns” in which I was miseducated (Freire 136). In a similar vein, Kohl writes, “many teachers become socialized into taking power away from students, to judging, stigmatizing, and failing young people” (77). I might hypothesize that the perceived gravity associated with the term “academic writing” coupled with the fear that comes with inexperience squashed any inclinations towards opening the floor up to dialogue that was not serious or academic. Though I didn’t make absolute restrictions on what students wrote about or bank information so much by lecturing, the fill-in-the-blanks writing, which closes off the possibility of critical thinking (Gorlewski 99) and the “drill-and-practice” activities, which “individualize” and “decontextualize” writing by stripping it of its social nature and authentic purpose (Ritter 152-153), we did in class were inarguably disempowering. Perhaps my gravest error was that although I viewed myself as a writer, I didn’t

participate alongside my students to form a community of writers. Teacher expectations have significant effect on learning (Gorlewski 75), but I didn't view my students as or expect the majority of them to become real writers because I made the mistake of viewing writing as an artistic gift that is more-or-less fixed.

This fixed perspective on writing is something that many university teacher-preparation programs are trying to change. In a study based out of a large university in southern California, Norman and Spencer found that more than half (63%) of 59 pre-service teachers viewed writing as "an inherent talent or gift" (34) based on autobiographical writing histories composed in a semester-long course on teaching writing (27). None of these pre-service teachers described writing instruction or corrective feedback they had received in positive terms and primarily viewed grades and feedback from teachers as a confirmation of whether or not they possessed a gift for writing. Pre-service teachers who viewed writing as a fixed trait often remembered feedback and suggestions as responsible for bruising their perceptions of themselves as writers. One participant wrote, "My enjoyment and confidence in writing was changed to viewing writing as a chore" (33) when a teacher suggested her papers needed revising; another wrote that she interpreted the red marks and teacher comment, "writing is hard work," she received in second grade as "an insinuation that I did not possess the gift of writing," which she claims "extinguished" her dreams of becoming a writer (34). When asked to describe the qualities of good writing, particularly participants with a fixed view of writing expressed uncertainty about what characteristics can make writing strong (36), and they tended to express the belief that "the primary role of the teacher is to establish a supportive environment that provides many opportunities to write" (34). The fact that so many pre-service teachers in this study viewed writing as a gift is troubling and a direct contradiction of the first belief about the teaching of

writing listed by the NCTE: “Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.” The NCTE also mentions that while a supportive atmosphere and time to write are both important, “instruction matters;” therefore, teachers should be “well-versed in composition theory and research” and “practice good composition.” NWP and Nagin contend that the “mystique” characterizing writing as “an elite talent, something only creative or literary people know how to do,” undermines good instruction (17). A fixed disposition toward writing in pre-service teachers is particularly problematic because when pre-service teachers view grades and feedback on their own writing as a confirmation of whether or not they are gifted writers, they are more likely to perpetuate this cycle of using feedback to categorize which students possess writing talent and which don’t. Freire professes that besides love, “an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create” (71) is a condition for authentic dialogue. It seems that no matter how warm and supportive a writing environment these pre-service teachers create in their classrooms, if they lack faith that students who they don’t see as gifted writers can improve, it’s unlikely they will provide the kind of feedback and instruction necessary to for development. The study’s authors, Norman and Spencer, hope that by asking pre-service teachers to reflect upon and analyze how personal experiences and beliefs have impacted their own learning and teaching practices, these teacher candidates will be encouraged to “look beyond their own perspective and to be more open to alternative approaches that they might have rejected or not had the confidence to try” (38). When teacher candidates engage in reflective writing and discussions that enable prior experiences and beliefs to enter into a dialogue with research-supported beliefs and practices advocated in their methods courses, these future teachers might

be stimulated to utilize dialogic instruction and feedback to explore with students what good writing entails and how they can develop their craft in getting there.

While Norman and Spencer aimed to champion the idea that everyone has the capacity to write by asking pre-service teachers to reflect on their literacy experiences, Denise Morgan describes promoting the same idea by helping pre-service teachers at Kent State University develop a sense of themselves as authors. Morgan reports that in initial essays, which asked pre-service teachers to characterize their perceptions about themselves as writers, nearly 60% of participants expressed a distinct lack of confidence in their writing, (356) and only 6 of the 42 participants stated that they enjoyed writing and did so regularly (357). Like the pre-service teachers in Norman and Spencer's study, the Kent State participants largely recognized comments, grades, and corrections from teachers as shaping their perceptions of their writing ability (356-357). They particularly remembered "all those red marks," "blood," "red circles," and "words underlined" (357) – all signifiers of a deficiency-perspective approach to writing instruction – as undermining their confidence as writers. Although most teachers who edit unconventional spelling, punctuation, and syntax in student writing probably do so with the intention of helping students to better understand usage conventions,<sup>16</sup> T.R. Johnson characterizes this traditional approach as one filled with antagonism and violence that serves to relegate the status of student writing and thinking:

Although we rarely detect the errors that dot the texts of professionals, we actively seek them out in student texts, and when we find them, we figuratively slash them, often with "bloody" red ink: that is, we expose the texts as unclean, impure, and thus unfit for full membership in the academic community. By embarrassing them in this way, we slowly

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<sup>16</sup> Certainly, this was my intent when I circled, underlined, crossed out, and added words or punctuation on countless student essays when in Korea as well as when teaching WRIT 101.

but surely initiate them into a certain set of affiliations ... [one of which is that] pain is an essential ingredient in writing pedagogy. (Qtd. in Ritter 162)

Uncovering previous writing experiences and beliefs – especially the negative and painful ones that “might potentially interfere with teaching writing in [pre-service teachers’] classrooms” (Morgan 354) – is essential because, as Gorlewski puts it, “awareness, reflection, and critique of deficiency are necessary elements for change” (165). Morgan believes that creating new “more positive attitudes, perceptions, and understandings about the writing process” (354) by having participants live the experience of writing is also crucial in cultivating better writing instruction.

Pre-service teachers in Morgan’s semester-long writing literacy courses used Katie Wood Ray’s strategy of reading like a writer in studying different genres of writing (how-to, all about, poetry, and memoir) and then composing “try-it” pieces in each genre (354). In addition to the try-it pieces, participants also wrote weekly “exit slip” reflections in response to open-ended questions about the course material and their experiences writing. Pre-service teachers viewed the freedom to choose – or perhaps the burden of having to choose – their own topics within each genre as “critical” to their writing and teaching development (359). Like the teacher participants in the *We’re Writers* workshop (Grainger), pre-service teachers in Morgan’s courses reported that the “initial difficulty and angst” (359) they experienced in selecting their topics allows them to understand students facing similar challenges, illustrated in reflective comments such as: “I was able to take on the role of a student as I learned through the eyes of a teacher,” and “They [future students] might have difficulty getting started like I did” (358). Morgan suggests that experiencing uncertainty in topic selection helps foster empathy in future teaching practices (362). A group of five teacher-researchers who started a writing workshop arrived through their own writing experiences at a similar conclusion regarding topic selection:



Finding a worthwhile topic took some time and thought. We were helped sometimes by reading, sometimes by talking, sometimes by doodling, sometimes by freewriting, and sometimes by what an onlooker might call daydreaming. We intend to suggest these techniques to our students and provide them with the time that every writer needs. (Keefer, et al. 120)

When teachers engage themselves as writers, they not only become more empathetic to students' writing dilemmas, but they also can draw on their own experiences for strategies in overcoming difficulties.

In addition to learning via interfaces with difficulty, pre-service teachers in Morgan's study described feeling "empowered" by topic choice, which led to a willingness to take "creative" and "playful" risks in their writing (361), an increase in time and effort invested in their try-its (360), and a greater feeling of "ownership of their right as an author to make intentional decisions about their texts" (362). Graves writes that although both an increase in time and teacher workload is required when students are given choice, the tradeoff is often worth it as topic choice promotes ownership, pride in the piece, and more "significant growth in both information and skills" as compared to when topics are assigned (21). Graves also warns, "Writers who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject" (21). Morgan notes that through their experience writing try-its and reflections, "Many pre-service teachers felt they rediscovered their voices, and for many this meant humor" (361). Attempts at humor entail risk as do attempts at beauty and profundity. When "schools reward boring and obvious writing" (Elbow 72), risks in voice hardly seem worth taking. Gorlewski alleges that in many schools, "writing serves primarily to answer questions, to repeat facts, to describe procedures, and to demonstrate knowledge" (145). While this sort of writing is

necessary in some instances for assessment and identifying gaps in learning (NWP & Nagin 145), students also need opportunities to write for more authentic purposes including personal growth, expression, reflection, entertainment, pleasure, and exploration (NCTE). Elbow remarks that school writing often feels inauthentic for students when its primary purpose is to demonstrate knowledge for assessment on topics about which the teacher knows more than they do (127). In these contexts, teachers are not in a position to be “genuinely affected” by students’ words and instead are looking for something the matter with the diction, paragraphing, organization, or argument in the writing (120). Gorlewski claims that such deficiency-perspective-driven writing contexts actually discourage true engagement and critical thinking; she writes, “It is evident, then, that merely repeating and reorganizing information does not involve true meaning making. In fact, superficial writing tasks undermine students’ ability to learn from and/or about the ideas they repeat and minimally manipulate” (96).

In contrast, while the pre-service teachers in Morgan’s study were expected to adhere to genre norms, the purpose of the writing extended beyond parroting information from a textbook or lecture. Instead, the genres the participants were writing in (how-to, poetry, memoir, and reflection) allow for (perhaps even demand) exploration and making meaning out of the writer’s subjective experiences. Mike Rose asserts: “Writing is not just a skill with which one can present or analyze knowledge. It is essential to the very existence of certain kinds of knowledge” (qtd. in NWP & Nagin 25). I am willing to speculate that as participants brainstormed, composed, revised, and reflected, they came to a better understanding of the particular genre they were writing in than they could have by only reading and listening. Also, because they engaged in writing that asked them to ponder experiences from their lives rather than simply regurgitate information, it’s likely that participants made connections, arrived at discoveries, and created

new knowledge about their memories, themselves, and the people and events they wrote about. Freire writes, “banking theory and practice, as immobilizing fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take people’s history as a starting point [...] in the process of *becoming*” (65 original emphasis). This idea of “becoming” echoes Carl Rogers’ non-directive or person-centered approach to psychotherapy, which is grounded in “the assumption that every being seeks to maintain and enhance self” (McCombs 87). Therapists using this approach seek to maintain non-judgmental, empathetic, and genuine relationships with clients in order to encourage open communication that aids clients in forming “their own self-understanding and determining their own futures” (86). Educators have adapted Rogers’ non-directive approach to develop a style of teaching (most frequently called the learner-centered model) in which the teacher takes on the role of a “learning facilitator” who “empathizes from his or her own experiences in understanding each learner as a whole person” (89). Also, investigations of learners’ personal experiences and each “individual’s subjective reality” are crucial in fostering self-awareness and subsequently empowering transformation in thinking and actions (90). The NCTE seemingly endorses a learner-centered approach in its recommendation: “As much as possible, instruction should be geared toward making sense in a life outside of school, so that writing has ample room to grow in individuals’ lives.” Yet, too often teachers at all levels still use writing only to assess students’ understanding of a selection of literature, events in history, scientific principles, etc. but neglect opportunities for students to use writing to understand themselves. According to hooks, alienation and “dis-ease” arise when educators fail to view students “as human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge” (15). It’s no wonder then that the pre-service teachers in Morgan’s classes described feeling “a freedom they hadn’t experienced in

a while” and “a renewed excitement about writing” (359) when given the opportunity to explore and share their subjective personal experiences in a non-directive setting.

Even though participants’ topics stemmed from real-life experiences, through memoirs and personal poetry, they reconstructed these events through the lens of their own perception, differentiating them from the constructions of other individuals who might have experienced the same event. Shor suggests that composition is “the activity of making some sense out of an extremely complex set of personal perceptions and experiences of an infinitely complex world,” and thus, “A writer (or any other language user), in a sense, composes the world in which he or she lives” (qtd. in Gorlewski 183). In a similar vein, Ziegler contends, “writing is not only self-expression; it is also self-formation and re-formation. Writing can be an investigatory process that helps us develop a sense of who we are and how we fit into the world of people, places, and ideas” (3). Pre-service teacher participants in Morgan’s study not only gained new knowledge about themselves through writing about past experiences, but throughout the semester and in their final reflections, they expressed “surprise at being able to write in genres they initially thought beyond their capabilities or did not think they would enjoy” (359-360). Also, many who never had considered themselves to be purposeful, passionate, or self-driven writers before began to identify themselves as such (361). Through writing, these pre-service teachers were able to recast the way they saw themselves fitting into the world as not only students empowered to write but also teachers better equipped with a firsthand understanding of the potentials of a non-directive approach, and thus, better prepared to empower their students to write.

It’s easy to imagine a language arts teacher saying something along the lines of “Yes, there’s value in encouraging students to write about their personal experiences from time to time, but shouldn’t English class also include writing that asks students to think critically about social

issues and analyze literature?” When I taught College Writing in South Korea, I framed personal writing and academic writing as more or less mutually exclusive; I asked students to draw from their life experiences during the week we spent on narrative essays and then narrowed the elements of choice, structure, and application of firsthand knowledge by offering a list of suggested topics for the next two assignments. I believed this approach would be a shortcut avoiding broad well-worn arguments on topics like abortion, the death penalty, and pirating music, leading more directly to critical thinking. Instead, many of the subsequent essays felt stilted in tone and haphazardly written when compared to the detailed and engaged writing in narrative essays by the same students. I had hoped that beginning the month with personal writing would help students ease into the act of composition and that there might be some implicit skill transfer across genres as O’Donnell-Allen suggests: “The same skills that help you describe a beautiful sunset can help you deconstruct a politician’s argument. Allowing students to write about the stuff they love and care about is to help them be ready when they need to pay attention next time.” I never made this idea of commonalities across genres explicit, and once the narrative essays were turned in and we moved on, students likely assumed that the effort spent writing about their personal experience was little more than a meaningless warm-up before the slog of academic writing. According to Myers, providing a good link between narrative and expository writing is particularly tricky for many teachers; he writes, “One week the students are writing stories, personal and interesting; the next week they are writing reports, dull and uninspired. What happened in the transition?” (39). Myers suggests a need for more imaginative assignments to bridge this gap (40). Although I was (in my own humblest opinion) a fairly imaginative writer, I lacked imagination as a teacher and relied on bad, generic assignments and easy-to-teach formulae. I was able to think critically about topics I might want to write about yet

unpracticed at creating assignments and providing instruction that could help students think critically for themselves. Freire reminds us, “A teacher cannot think for her students nor can she impose her thoughts on them” (58), and by approaching the class as a writer rather than a writing teacher – meaning, I selected topics I personally would be interested in writing about, doing all of the invention pre-writing work myself – I reinforced “a feeling of helplessness” (Elbow 114) by removing ownership from the students composing.

Fecho proposes that dialogical writing, which represents “an intersection of academic and personal writing” (7), could help nurture scholarly critical thinking while preserving student ownership created by a non-directive approach. Rather than viewing personal and academic writing as opposing binaries, Fecho suggests that teachers should help students understand “how their personal writing benefits from academic structures and how writing that is more academic in intent can benefit from the life and spirit of the personal” (8). Freire also recognizes the fecundity of combining the personal with the empirical in his assertion: “Subjectivity and objectivity thus join in a dialectical unity producing knowledge” (20). Fecho characterizes dialogical writing as polyvocal, allowing for multiple voices within the writer as well as in response to external texts “in our immediate and distant physical worlds” (8) as a strategy for creating opportunities for “substantive and ongoing meaning making” (9). Formulaic writing is often monological: research papers too often emerge as little more than reports summarizing enough information to meet the prescribed page requirement; in writing arguments, students are frequently taught to take a position and outline their major points before beginning writing; even narrative writing can often remain stifled in superficial anecdote.

The hope for dialogical writing is that interesting things can happen when the subjective and the objective, internal conceptions and external texts, experiences and observations are all brought together in conversation. Elbow writes,

Just as two people, if they let their ideas interact, can produce ideas or points of view that neither could singly have produced, a lone person, if he learns to maximize interaction among his own ideas or points of view, can produce new ones that didn't seem available to him. (50)

Elbow calls this process of combining contrasting or conflicting material into interaction “cooking” (49). The central tenet of cooking, or dialogical writing, is that the act of writing must be generative rather than simply demonstrative; in other words, it is not a matter of transcribing a set of fixed ideas but rather a strategy for identifying and exploring new ideas (NCTE). NWP and Nagin contend that merely asking students to write about something they have read or experienced alone does little to promote critical thinking, and for an assignment to be effective, it should engage students “in a series of cognitive processes, such as reflection, analysis, and synthesis, so that they are required to transform the information from the reading material in order to complete the writing assignment” (47). Elbow employs a bit of poetic imagery in describing the transformation of material through cooking as “one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented and reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other” (49). Cooking, or dialogical writing, is not possible when teachers expect students to know exactly what they want to say ahead of time and then produce it quickly in a straightforward process. Students need the time and freedom to muck with their thoughts and texts to find things out they didn't know before (Graves 45) and experience changes in beliefs or ideas while thinking through writing (Elbow

22). And in order for teachers to have the expertise to support (as well as the patience and understanding to allow for) such complex writing tasks, teachers themselves must be writers with firsthand experience composing their own dialogical writing. Zarnowski maintains that teacher-writers such as Herbert Kohl, Phillip Lopate, Jonathan Kozol, and James Herndon all draw on their own writing experiences to help provide students with authentic writing instruction by acknowledging that “writers discover material by writing” rather than expecting first drafts to be finished products, modeling active thinking and uncertainty, and encouraging “vigorous questioning, probing, and hypothesizing as a general strategy for learning” (504-505). But perhaps before expecting students to engage in dialogical writing, teachers must first engage students in dialogue as a joint exploration of the mode.

According to the NCTE, “From its beginnings in early childhood through the most complex setting imaginable, writing exists in a nest of talk.” Merely viewing oneself as a writer doesn’t automatically make for an effective writing teacher if there’s an unwillingness or incapability to share what one knows about writing. Graves recognizes a synergetic relationship between the practice of writing and the practice of teaching:

The teaching of writing demands the control of two crafts, teaching and writing. They can neither be avoided, nor separated. The writer who knows the craft of writing can’t walk into a room and work with students unless there is some understanding of the craft of teaching. Neither can teachers who have not wrestled with writing effectively teach the writer’s craft. (5-6)

In a study analyzing what effects the writing practices of 12 teachers’ have on their instruction, Robbins arrives at a conclusion that caught me a little off guard: “The mere fact that teachers write does not tell much about the relationship between their writing and their teaching” (125). I



wasn't surprised that the most effective teachers in the study were practitioners of writing who wrote on their own and together with students, used their writing experiences to promote "discussions of processes and strategies within the writing classroom," and identified themselves as empathizing with student writers (114-116). Nor did it shock me that the least effective were teachers who never wrote anything other than functional curriculum plans and accreditation documents, viewed student composition only as "the means for evaluating students' reading of literature" (111), and understood the "main responsibility of a composition teacher to be a reader, not a writer" (112). These teachers valued only the final product and rarely or never employed process-based composition instruction, which one teacher disdainfully defined as "marching a class through a series of steps in which everyone makes a list, web, or cluster; writes a rough draft; exchanges papers; fills out a critique sheet; revises; and so forth" (112). Moffet alleges "a major reason that many teachers ignore, slight, or mangle the teaching of writing is that they lack direct experience with the learning issues entailed in writing" (qtd. in Gorlewski 173), so it was hardly surprising that a teacher who viewed the composition process as a series of discrete steps rather than something recursive, variable, dialogical, and generative in nature neither engaged in writing on her own nor invested much effort in writing instruction. The profiles of both the most and least effective writing teachers in Robbins' study seemed consistent with the study by Whyte, et al. examining teachers with high versus low writing lives.

The finding that did surprise me however examined a teacher Robbins calls Robert. According to Robbins, Robert has earned numerous awards and a national reputation publishing poetry over the past 30 years and considers himself "primarily as a writer who teaches rather than a teacher who writes" (118). Although Robert regularly writes for sustained periods on the weekends, he never writes along with his students, and instead grades papers or does prep work

at his desk at the front of the room while students compose (120). While Robert does occasionally share his own poetry as a model, it is only work that has been completed or “sanctioned by publication” (120). The class is “more product-oriented than process-based” with the majority of instruction focused on defining poetic forms and commenting on students’ finished works rather than on “exploring strategies or processes useful for producing” (124). Robbins posits that because Robert has been writing for so long his writing process has become mostly “unconscious and automatic;” when asked about his process in interviews, he tends to “focus on *what* he is writing, not *how* he is writing it” (118 original emphasis). Robert’s accomplishments as a writer give him credibility, and students respect him, but Robbins charges that Robert’s failure to “provide modeling of his writing behavior” (124), hold dialogues with his students about the way cooking happens when ideas come together, or even frankly discuss all of the moments of ecstasy and agony that accompany the writing process sends the wrong message about the craft: “Although for Robert the important work is to enter into an imaginative process of discovery, for his students the important work mostly seems to be to complete assignments by due dates” (124). Ziegler, another poet-teacher, remarks that when he emphasizes the writing process in his classes, “the products come naturally,” and although not every writing experience results in an amazing final piece, each is “part of an ongoing growth that pays dividends in future writing” (104). In a dialogical approach, “writing is not a discrete act aimed at producing a singular product,” Fecho writes, paraphrasing Bakhtin; “Instead all that we write is part of a mesh of responses that simultaneously connects us to what we have come to understand while raising future questions and pointing toward other possibilities” (18-19). And the conversations we have with students about writing must include what understandings and questions writers communicate to audiences as well as why and how they are communicated.

As much as it pains me to admit it, I see a lot of myself in Robbins' description and analysis of the poet-teacher Robert. Of course he's at least a generation older and much more accomplished as a writer than I am, but the lack of dialogue with students relating his own understandings of the process of writing strikes a familiar chord. When teaching in Korea, before resorting to the rote formulae offered in Folse's *Great Essays*, I, like Robert, assumed that students would learn to write the same way I did: from reading and imitation. In an interview, Robert compares the acquisition of painting skills through imitation to the process of learning to write: "It's like painters who go to the Louvre to copy the masters. You begin with imitation until you can work away from it and find your own voice" (qtd. in Robbins 119). While there certainly are merits to learning by imitation, one problem I encountered early on when discussing the professional essays published in anthologies and magazines was that as a class, we spent more time discussing what the essays were about than what we might learn from them about the craft of writing. This might be a lot like going into the Louvre and trying to learn how to paint by only noticing that one painting features a serious-looking woman; another shows a city at night; a lot feature flowers; and some have just lots of lines and rectangles. Though such an approach might be pleasurable enough – and, it is probably close to the way most of us perceive paintings – it's doubtful that the viewer would learn much about technique by focusing mostly on subject matter. Likewise, when in the early months we discussed those model essays, students came to new understandings through their reading about lions and corruption, but the craft of writing itself remained sublimated because we rushed through so many readings, and I didn't provide the time or an adequate framework to allow for a deeper investigation. Bomer asserts that a teaching writing requires a different approach than teaching reading:

Most of the time when we are focused on teaching reading, we want students to let language be a window they look through to the world on the other side [ . . . ] But when we look at writing like writers, we ask them to attend to the glass of the windowpane itself: the text structures, sentences, phrasing, words, choices in arrangement and style. (223)

To be fair to Robert, I'm sure that when he examined model poems with his students, he drew their attention to the brushstrokes and coloration of the writing. Rhythm, imagery, and literary devices like figurative language and alliteration most likely came up frequently in his class's reading discussions; likewise, when I started teaching formulized essays, I also pointed to structural arrangements, connotative choices in language, and instances of sensory description. Yet, I think Robert and I missed great educational opportunities by relying too much on asking students to try to reverse-engineer finished products and rarely, if ever, discussing or demonstrating how we, ourselves, make these products. If we might return to our painting analogy, for novices, it seems much easier to learn technique by watching someone paint than by seeing a finished painting and trying to understand what the artist did.

While the type of modeling demonstrations that Graves and others describe seem valuable for elementary students just learning how to put ideas down onto paper, when imagining the more sophisticated secondary- and college-level assignments that take multiple hours or even days or weeks to write, demonstrating the writing of a complete essay, research paper, or short story seems unrealistic. This doesn't mean that students can't benefit when teachers either model shorter fragments of writing or discuss ideas or decisions made in creating a draft they see in progress. As discussed earlier, these practices might reinforce the notion that writing is a difficult but worthwhile practice requiring more conscious decision making than divine inspiration. While modeling line-by-line decisions about diction and syntax might be

helpful to younger students, I imagine that with older students, discussions about deciding which forms or strategies to employ to meet the rhetorical situation, explicitly talking through instances of when writing feels stuck or off-track, and reflective thoughts about future revision could be most valuable. When teaching College Writing, I required students to revise their essays based on my corrections and comments, but I wonder if this practice might at times engender too much dependence on the teacher for revision ideas. I'm unwilling to take the extreme position that teachers should never intervene in the revision process, but students might benefit from occasional discussions that include the teacher's ideas and strategies for self-revision based on concrete examples. Also, I've noticed that students often set themselves up for producing stagnant writing when they either choose topics they have little or no connection to, which often leads to dry encyclopedic reports of information they read, or when they choose to re-hash stale arguments because they seem easy to write about. Robbins mentions that when Robert writes poetry, "ideas often determine the form in his own writing," but in his classroom, "forms usually come first" (124). When writing instruction primarily focuses on form (as was also the case in my latter months of teaching College Writing) and the ideas and content are sidelined as secondary in an artificial rhetorical setting, it's understandable that some students invest little effort in investigating ideas. Perhaps, if instead of merely producing a list of topics I was interested in (but never actually wrote about), it might have been more helpful if I had engaged students in a dialogue explaining what interested me in a few of the topics, what I already knew about each one, why I was curious to learn more through writing about it, and how I might write choose a genre and style of writing appropriate for the context.<sup>17</sup> I think this sort of verbal dialogue could be helpful, but what seems appealing about dialogical writing is that since

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<sup>17</sup> And then of course it would be essential to follow through in actually writing and discussing how ideas shifted and evolved through the composition process. Modeling planning without actually writing dangerously reinforces the idea that writing should be a straightforward and linear process.

personal connection is an intricate part of the assignment, it allows for, and perhaps even demands, students to choose topics that are situated in the context of their lives.

Dialogical writing projects can take many forms. In the third chapter I'll discuss one I tried out during my student-teaching field experience at Big Sky last semester; but to offer a few immediate examples, some mentioned by Fecho include I-search papers (81); family histories that consider the impacts of political, social and economic trends (65); personal narratives informed by commonplace experiences described in literature (54); inquiries into language use and stereotypes (59); and multi-genre manifestos (85). Despite the variance in genre, a common characteristic of all of these is a spirit of reflective inquiry in investigating how multiple voices brought to a text can result in meaning making. Dialogical projects often take the form of what Freire calls a "thematic investigation," in which the dialogical teacher "re-presents" the universe "not as a lecture, but as a problem" (90) for recursive joint investigation. Fecho writes about one such thematic investigation unit taught by a teacher named Angela in a diverse suburb of Atlanta where the reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is mandated by the district. Rather than simply teaching the book in the traditional way that I (and probably all of you) experienced it, Angela uses the novel as "just one piece in a larger investigation of social justice issues" including race and social class (78) in accord with Freire's call for pedagogy to make oppression the subject for reflection (Freire 30). In addition to reading and responding to Lee's novel, students in Angela's class also write about their personal experiences; they define and redefine the meaning of social justice throughout the unit, they examine documentary films, poetry, and song lyrics; they use online research; they illustrate scenes from the text; and they compose using description, analysis, exposition, and investigation (78-80). These activities not only enrich students' understanding of the novel but also place the text in a context in which it can inform

students' understanding of the world and themselves. Fecho writes that in the context of a thematic investigation into social justice, "knowing what happens to Scout and Atticus was less important than having their story provide insight into the lives we currently lead" (80). Though Angela still gives "the book the respect it deserves" (78), she breaks from traditional practice by not treating the text as "an aesthetic object that cannot and should not exist in a comparative, dialogic setting with student texts" (Ritter 59). With his elementary students, Graves also attempts to "remove the mystique of authorship" by making no distinctions between children's writing and the writing of published authors; he writes, "Both are treated as important writing with the same scrutiny given to the information in each" so that students may experience "the beauty and depth of information contained in literature" and also understand that they have equal access to the pleasure of authorship (76). In other words, students should come to understand that texts are not finished products of knowledge to be consumed, but rather living utterances that can be engaged through discourse to produce new texts and knowledge.

In a dialogical classroom, both teachers and students must participate in the classroom not as passive consumers, but as a community of knowledge constructors. hooks reminds teachers of the importance of being participants in the classroom community:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (21)

Yet, in addition to taking "a humble stance" which enables educators to better "recognize the intelligence and potentiality of all with whom we engage" (Fecho 39), writing teachers must also

be active agents who share (but don't impose) their expertise by creating "spaces to make available to students the full range of semiotic tools and discourse in constructing written texts" (Gorlewski 167). In essence then, the writing teacher in a dialogical classroom is something of a liminal figure, shifting between, and at times simultaneously encompassing, the role of allied participant engaged in "a common struggle to know more about the world and oneself" (Kohl 78) and the role of mentor offering access to strategies and tools for composing as well as "insinuating complexity into the lives of students" (Kohl 58) by presenting them with new voices, ideas, and experiences to investigate and build knowledge. Writing as regularly as possible, both with students and outside of school individually or with a community of writers, can help to empower teachers in fulfilling the roles of both co-participant and mentor.

Additionally, just as teachers in a dialogical classroom expect students to reflect upon their learning, when teachers use writing to reflect upon lessons, met or unmet expectations, student responses, and the impact of assignments, they can continually revise and hone their instruction. Gillespie suggests, "When we write, our classroom writing program and our interactions with our young writers can be based on knowledge we have earned ourselves rather than received by others" (2). Also, Vivian Paley, a teacher who journals to explore her thoughts as well as to better understand the dynamics in her kindergarten classroom and the developing characters of each of her students, writes,

There are few novelists among us, and only a small number will have their works published in any form. But we all have the desire to learn more about ourselves and the children who call us Teacher. Let us resurrect the daily journal to help us study the most complex society assembled in a single place: the school classroom. (122)



When teachers who write articulate their classroom experiences and teaching philosophies, they not only build knowledge for themselves, but they create the potential to share it with fellow teachers and the world. Almost every source I've cited has come from a teacher-writer, and while many are professors with advanced degrees, often their most meaningful and immediately applicable insights emerge directly from their classroom experiences. Finally, as ideologically conservative education reformers seek to implement more and more testing in the name of accountability and continually spew rhetoric that de-professionalizes, infantilizes, and demonizes teachers (Giroux 160), writing – whether published in books, professional journals, newspapers, popular magazines, or online, or even if it takes the form of a letter or email sent to an administrator or legislator – becomes an instrument for teachers to re-assert agency and redefine themselves as “engaged public intellectuals” (165) invested in the critical education and the common good of their students.

## Chapter 3

### Applications and Conclusion: Big Sky and Horizons Beyond

By the time I began my student-teaching field experience at Big Sky High School in the fall of 2013, I had finished the coursework (including courses on composition theory and pedagogy) required for secondary school licensure and a Masters in English Teaching; I'd taught an introductory composition course, Writ 101, for two semesters; I had taken part in the Montana Writing Project for two summers – first as a participant and later as part of the leadership team; I had read through most of the research for this paper (though I hadn't gotten very far in writing it). All of these experiences gave me a much better theoretical and practical grounding in pedagogy on which to build my teaching practices. Though I acknowledge that both writing and teaching are lifelong crafts that can never be mastered to the point of complete perfection but can only evolve and improve through study, practice, and reflection, when I walked into Big Sky the first day, I felt a good deal less clueless about how to teach writing than I'd felt teaching in Korea.

My goals for the semester included creating more interesting and contextualized writing assignments as well as opening up participatory dialogues with students to share difficulties, strategies, joys, and insights around our writing. I was determined not to repeat the mistakes I'd made before: either taking the easy route of teaching writing as simple formula or opting for the even easier path of assigning papers without scaffolding writing or instructional discourse. Instead, I knew that creating a dialogical writing environment would require the hard work of planning lessons and writing prompts that not only might help students immediately explore and express ideas but could also catalyze and inform larger writing projects. I realized that planning would only be the beginning of the hard work required for dialogism; if I wanted to meaningfully

embody both the roles of writing co-participant and mentor, I would also have to write with students and be prepared to discuss strategies resulting in positive outcomes as well as humbling stumbles and blank spots. And although I hoped students would be inspired by all that hard work on my part to invest more of themselves in their writing and our discussions surrounding it, my larger ambition was to help them begin to shed stigmas surrounding writing and recognize composition as a rewarding avenue to discovery and expression. I realize that such aspirations might be perceived as dripping with starry-eyed naïveté, and I will confide up front that my success in reaching these objectives was partial at best, but I had and still maintain great hopes for dialogical writing.<sup>18</sup>

The cooperating teacher I worked with, Meleina Helmer, taught three sections of senior English and three sections of sophomore English – two of which were honors courses. Though it wasn't until October that I effectively took the reins of all six courses and began teaching my own units, from the very first day, she included me in co-teaching pieces of lessons, working independently with students, and collaboratively devising lesson plans and assignments. In the past several years, the writing assignment Meleina has opened the year with in all of her classes has been a simple letter in which students can write about whatever they like: hobbies, family-life, personal philosophies, favorite movies or books, etc. The purpose of these letters, she explained, is to help her learn a little something about her students as well as begin to assess their strengths and weaknesses as writers. I proposed altering the first-week assignment for seniors: instead of asking for general letters, I believed that if we asked them to describe their best and worst experiences writing, we could still get to know the students and assess where their writing was at; additionally, we could use such an assignment to inform our future teaching practices and

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<sup>18</sup> When the only other alternatives to great hopes are low expectations and a pedagogy of hopelessness – a feeling I had already experienced and was keen to avoid – a little impassioned idealism ought to be permitted and welcomed (I hope...).

open up a dialogue about writing early in the year. When we explained the assignment to students, Meleina and I both spoke about our own best and worst experiences with writing as a way to not only model the level of detail we hoped to see in students' responses, but also position ourselves as empathetic fellow writers who have faced struggles as well as experienced a good deal of satisfaction and joy through writing. I also wrote a narrative of my best and worst writing experiences, which I posted on Edmodo (the class website) for any students who sought further modeling or were just curious to read what I had to say.

Bomer writes about the importance of appreciating students' existing literacies, and he suggests that the best beginning to a school year should involve "finding out about students as literate people, while also building a relationship with a listening attitude" (21). Meleina and I listened as we carefully read through students' narratives. Their experiences closely aligned with much of the research I presented in the previous chapter. Writing that allowed for topic choice, personal connections, and freedom in form tended to result in positive experiences. Also, audience was important in making writing feel meaningful, whether it was teachers and peers appreciating something the student had written or writing that effectively addressed an audience outside of school. A few students mentioned positive mentoring experiences with past teachers, but the majority students' positive experiences emerged independent from the institution of school. On the other hand, every single negative writing experience students shared involved a school assignment. Like the pre-service teachers in Morgan's study, a number of students described feeling shame when teachers corrected errors in language conventions; others had internalized this focus on conventions and described feeling overwhelmed by the expectation that every sentence had to be perfect. In some ways though, it seemed harder to avoid the type of instruction that led to negative experiences than to create the circumstances for positive

experiences as many students' bad experiences writing contradicted others': some felt stifled when assignments didn't allow for creativity while others resented assignments that required it; some described feeling frustrated when timed writes pressured them to rush and didn't allow time for revision while others disliked being forced to revise after they had already lost interest in the topic; some described writing to meet items on a rubric as confining while others' bad experiences stemmed from a feeling of ambiguity about what the teacher expected. When I read through these responses and considered how I might shape future instruction, I felt overwhelmed by the array of contradictions. While there's no sure way to please everyone all the time, further reflection helped me postulate that some of these contradictions might be at least partially resolved through conscious and dialogical instruction. It might be possible to create flexible daily writings that allow for creativity but also scaffold it in a way that students don't feel pressured to make a singular piece especially creative to earn a grade; helping students invent intriguing topics from the get-go and allowing students to choose to polish some pieces and discard others might be ways to avoid revision weariness; also, more open dialogues with students about possibilities and expectations might help to clarify assignments without resorting to overtly-restrictive rubrics. While the hope that every writing assignment can turn out to be an engaging and transformative experience for every student might be unrealistic, I believe thoughtful planning and transparency go a long way in improving most assignments for most students. And when, as a class, we shared and discussed the list of circumstances leading to positive and negative writing circumstances that I'd compiled based on their written responses (Appendix A), Meleina and I promised to try to be as thoughtful and transparent as possible in creating future writing experiences and empowering students to positively shape their own writing experiences.

Though I only put the list of circumstances up on the projector for discussion in the first week, throughout the semester, I referred to points on it nearly every time I ask students to write as a way to reinforce previous learning and rationalize the relevance of each new task. In the first week, the seniors in our classes began working on their papers for their senior projects. At Big Sky, in order to graduate, seniors must commit to a project that entails a “learning stretch.” Some choose terrific project ideas that dialogically bring together academic learning, valuable extracurricular learning, and mentoring experiences; a few projects of seniors I worked with included: learning to conduct music through studying theory and practice conducting the high school choir, building and programming a simple robot, and volunteering with a non-profit in Cambodia to explore the viability of eco-tourism. Others’ were less vigorous in stretching their learning, choosing topics such as assisting a middle school cheerleading coach, rebuilding the engine of an old car, or repainting her own bedroom. In addition to carrying out their projects and giving a presentation about their experiences at the end of spring semester, Big Sky students must also write a four-to-five page research paper on a topic in the same universe as their projects, and in the first month, Meliena and I focused on helping students get an early start on these papers. Because the guidelines determined by the Big Sky English department emphasizing compliance with MLA style over content and discouraging the inclusion of firsthand experience constrained the form of these papers, my ability to enact my ideas about writing was limited. While students were still in the early stages of figuring out their topics, I reminded them of their own earlier finding that topics they wished to learn more about provided for the most positive writing experiences. For most of September though, Meleina gave information about MLA style, deadlines, or documents necessary for their project portfolios in the first few minutes of class; then, students worked independently finding or reading research, contacting their project mentors,

and writing source pages or early drafts for the remainder of the period. I often worked with students individually during this time, acting as a sounding board for ideas and sharing my knowledge about research strategies or technical issues. While I believe that conferences and help sessions like these are a vital part of good writing instruction, there weren't many chances to write with students or open dialogues about writing until I took control of the class in mid-October.

While Meleina usually does a unit on *The Great Gatsby* with seniors during the first semester, I chose to base my unit around Barbara Kingsolver's first novel, *The Bean Trees*. I looked forward to discussing its social-justice-related themes on the treatment of Latino immigrants, U.S. support of right-wing paramilitary groups that targeted Indigenous people and trade unions in Guatemala, female empowerment, and the gray area between what's legal and what's morally right. But more importantly, I chose the book for the contemporary, funny, accessible, and frequently poetic voice it's written in since I planned to accompany the reading with writing our own narratives. I had toyed with the idea of doing inquiry projects on some of the more serious political and social issues in the novel (immigration, the glass ceiling, the Cold War, adoption of Native American children, single-parent households, social class, voluntary vs. forced migration, the stigma of rural origins, etc.), but as Meleina and I discussed the unit, we decided that after the intense research students did for their senior papers, it might be nice to change things up by focusing on lyrical and creative personal writing. In addition to deepening understanding of the text through discussion, my goal for every lesson was to leverage our reading of *The Bean Trees* and other texts in the development of our own writing. At times, this meant making personal connections to themes and events in the book. Discussing how Taylor, the novel's protagonist, continues to be shaped by her rural Kentucky origin even after she leaves

helped us investigate the links between place and identity, which we explored by writing our own place-based poems modeled after George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" (Christensen 18). As Taylor drives across the country, we compared Kingsolver's depictions of travel with Richard Hugo's poem "Driving Montana;" we ruminated on the fragmentary qualities and vivid details of each as we wrote our own travel poems. My hope was that these poetry exercises might help students practice a greater sense of lyricism in their writing and perhaps discover topics for a larger writing assignment. At the end of the semester, I gave students surveys asking them to reflect on my instruction, and quite a few (20 of 59) described being especially aided by these activities; one wrote, "I think writing poetry before writing short [non-]fiction was most helpful. It helped me to engage more creativity rather than just memory." While only a handful of students (7 of 59) eventually wrote their essays by adding flesh to the bones of one of these poems, a few sparkling lines or images as well as a purposeful lyricism later appeared in most students' essays after I suggested that dialogically re-reading earlier writing can be one way to sift out gems and find inspiration.

Besides themes and events, we investigated Kingsolver's character descriptions, dialogue, and use of language to inform our own writing. I've been a fan of Kingsolver's writing style since my undergrad days a dozen years ago, and in one mini-lesson, I pointed to the way she deploys dynamic verbs and personification to invigorate her descriptions. I typed up the following passages to emphasize my point; the first is Kingsolver's original, and I weakened the verbs in the second:

1. We'd come to a place you would never expect to find in the desert: a little hideaway by a stream that had run all the way down from the mountains into a canyon, where it jumped off a boulder and broke into deep, clear pools. White rocks sloped up out of the



water like giant, friendly hippo butts. A ring of cottonwood trees cooled their heels in the wet ground, and overhead leaned together, then apart, making whispery swishing noises. (123)

2. We'd come to a place you would never expect to find in the desert: there was a little hideaway by a stream. The stream came from the mountains, through a canyon, over a boulder, and into deep, clear pools. There were white rocks like giant, friendly hippo butts in the water. There was a ring of cottonwood trees. The bases of the trees were in the wet ground, and the tops of the trees made whispery swishing noises together.

After distributing printouts with both selections, I asked students to decide which passage sounded better, and in all three classes, students selected the first. Then, I asked why. I didn't want to simply tell them; I wanted them to make the discovery on their own "through a close dialogue with the form" (Fecho 96). In two of the classes, students noticed the difference in verbs after just two or three guesses, but in one class, it took about a dozen guesses, and I had to coach them a little to focus on which specific words were different. I explained that it wasn't until I was a college freshman that I realized the power vibrant verbs can wield in writing, and then I asked them to take out the short place descriptions they had written as homework and revise them with special attention to verb use. While students revised, I revised my own description of Missoula's famous Big Dipper Ice Cream. I asked a few volunteers to read aloud, and then we briefly reflected, discussing how employing dynamic verbs could strengthen the upcoming narrative essay and future writing. I worry in some ways about the value of activities like this "addressing subskill after subskill" (Fecho 19), but I think it was helpful to have students apply the skill right away to their own writing and then later reemploy it when they wrote their longer essays. The activity focusing on dynamic verbs was cited by the highest

number of students surveyed (23 of 59) as the most useful pre-writing lesson in developing their writing. I aimed to help students see *The Bean Trees* and other literature as more than a story for passive consumption; I wanted them not only to appreciate the ideas and writing techniques but to integrate and expand upon them into their own writing.

*The Bean Trees* wasn't the only model text we looked at in the unit on narrative writing. Students also read a student-written essay titled "Grandma's Kitchen" about the memory of facing discrimination due to the author's use of Black Vernacular English as a young girl and reflections on the connections between language and identity (Christensen 110-111). We read a selection from Jose Antonio Vargas' 2011 essay, "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant," to gain an inside view of the struggles Kingsolver touches on but perhaps can't speak to as authentically since she hasn't lived the experience. Though these are both emotionally compelling essays, discussing the content ramifications of each was not enough; we also attempted to "attend to the glass of the windowpane itself" (Bomer 223). We examined the way the author of "Grandma's Kitchen" effectively uses specific diction and syntax in dialogue to imply traits about the characters in the essay; Vargas' essay gave us a framework for contrasting linear and non-linear structures in narrative writing. Again, after each discussion, we tried applying these techniques to our own writing. While I thought these essays' social justice issues were important to consider, I worried that I could be making one of the same mistakes I'd made in Korea: using model essays about experiences students might have trouble relating directly. I was especially having a challenging time getting one class with 15 male students and only three females to engage.<sup>19</sup> Many of these young men were doing automobile-related senior projects but weren't keeping up with the reading, and a few had commented that they thought *The Bean*

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<sup>19</sup> Also, this was the first class of the day, and therefore the guinea pigs. They had to endure the trial runs of every discussion and activity while students later in the day benefitted from lunchtime revisions to my lesson plans.

*Trees* was boring and “girly.”<sup>20</sup> While racking my brains for writing that might connect with these students, at a Second Wind reading,<sup>21</sup> I saw my friend and former classmate Brenden Oliva read “300 Deluxe,” an essay recalling the aesthetics and strengthened bonds when he and his best friend restored an old car. I asked him if I could use his essay in the classroom, and he was so excited about the idea that he actually volunteered to come to Big Sky to read his essay and chat with students about his writing process.<sup>22</sup> While a few students wrote on the final surveys that they had found Brenden’s essay “kinda dry” or “way too long,” it was rated by the highest number of students (39 of 59) as the most useful model essay we examined. Many described enjoying hearing the author’s words in his own voice. A number of students, especially males, mentioned being able to relate to the content, and others appreciated his use of humor and attention to detail. Ritter cautions that when teachers ask guest writers to visit, it can call into question the teacher’s knowledge about writing and serve to remove the teacher from the conversation (178). I considered this, and partially for this reason I decided against having other creative writing grad students who had volunteered visit my Big Sky classroom,<sup>23</sup> but I hope that by introducing Brenden as classmate and fellow WRIT 101 teacher in addition to a writer, by engaging actively alongside students when he visited rather than spacing out at the back of the

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<sup>20</sup> In case you haven’t read Kingsolver’s novel, it’s a book with lot of interesting conversations and emotional expression but not much action.

<sup>21</sup> Second Wind is a weekly reading series pairing UM creative writing graduate students with professors and community writers for the reading of original poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

<sup>22</sup> The way he talked with students about coming up with conflicting and even bizarrely paired events and ideas in his writing was very reminiscent of Elbow’s description of “cooking.”

<sup>23</sup> The limited amount of time for the unit was actually the biggest reason I didn’t invite other writers. Although I acknowledge that a new presence in the classroom can be disorienting initially for some students, I believe that the more writers’ voices (both in text and in person) students are exposed to, the more likely they will be inspired by one of them to write.

classroom, and finally by writing a narrative essay myself to share with students I was able to minimize any dialogical disengagement and suspicions about my expertise.

Although I wrote alongside students during every freewrite in our study of the craft of narrative writing, the narrative essay I offered up for students to experiment on as a dry run for peer workshopping was written at home. In the spirit of participatory pedagogy, Meleina also wrote a fun personal narrative essay about how she, a self-described former band and drama nerd, was coerced into joining her high school softball team and hated every minute of it. Her essay got a lot of laughs as she read it, and while I also often shoot for humor in writing, I decided to write my personal narrative on something a little darker. A few weeks before the workshop, when we examined “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant,” I gave students the optional prompt to write about any identities they kept hidden. Many of the students who responded to this prompt wrote about aspects of themselves that were interesting but didn’t leave them especially vulnerable,<sup>24</sup> but a few exposed more personal aspects about themselves, such as sexual identities and mental illness. One student, Felix,<sup>25</sup> who had never written more than a few cursory sentences, usually only to call something or someone stupid when Meleina or I gave a prompt, released a page-and-a-half-long outpouring about his struggles with bipolar disorder, sleeplessness, graphic descriptions of how surges in libido manifested during his manic moods, and his habit of self-medicating with alcohol. Meleina suggested that he was testing me to see how I would react, and I suspected that might partially be the case, but I also sensed a need for an emotional outlet. Ziegler describes discussing past creative writing experiences with a group of high school students who confess they played it safe by writing trite, bland stories so that “the

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<sup>24</sup> Some that I can recall offhand include having a German mother and speaking German sometimes at home or being a Montana ranch kid at heart while dressing like a jock.

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of privacy, all student names are pseudonyms, and for the sake of levity, all pseudonyms are names of past Atlantic Hurricanes.

teacher doesn't have to deal with what's really going on inside and doesn't have to worry about how to respond to the heavy stuff" (98-99). But when Felix dumped a lot of heavy stuff on me, I was thrilled that he'd discovered something he could write passionately about. I applauded him for his bravery and encouraged him to consider further exploring some of the ideas from his freewrite with the only caveat that he would be expected to share his writing with a classmate (whom he could choose) when we workshopped the essays. Since I'd asked Felix and other students to take emotional risks, I felt compelled to put myself on the line through my writing as well; a light piece just about cats or ponies might feel like a copout. Well, I actually did write about my childhood cat... and bugs and spiders, but I also wrote about the shame and frustration stemming from my parents' marital strife, my mother's struggles with mental illness, the memories of not feeling wanted, and the poverty I experienced growing up (Appendix B). Though such themes and events had found their way into my fiction writing before, I'd never written a piece that was so emotionally honest and raw. And sharing it was scary.

Before reading my example essay for the rehearsal workshop, I tried to guide students through my writing process. I told them the idea for my essay had emerged from the freewrite we had done about hidden identities. I'd written just a single viscerally descriptive paragraph about insect mutilation at the time and had spent about a week mulling over how I might use that description to get at something more meaningful. A few days earlier, I'd written the introduction, then added and revised the earlier description before getting stuck (or perhaps, giving into procrastination). Then, as is too often the case, I stayed up late the night before finishing. (One thing that I didn't share with students, and even feel a little ashamed admitting now, was that since I was facing a time crunch, I borrowed a few paragraphs from a different essay I'd written

a year earlier. Though working with older material is a fairly common practice among writers,<sup>26</sup> I worried that such an admission might be interpreted as permission to recycle the same essay over and over throughout their school lives rather than first building up a store of writing to work with.) Of course this wasn't the only time I talked about my writing process. We'd been discussing how we write from the first day, and sometimes, I felt that I was overcompensating and talking about my process to a point beyond saturation. For example, I wondered if my rambling was helping anyone when I described how before I arrived at the idea of employing the subjunctive tense to find depth in the hypothetical, specific scenes with parents or classmates I'd drafted were failing to acceptably get at the deeper issues behind the bug killing. Also, though I made my struggle in writing the essay explicit, I couldn't help feeling like I was bragging about my writing. In fiction workshops, I never talked much about how I came up with ideas or my reasons for making writing decisions; rather, I wanted my work to stand on its own without a lot of verbal justification. Yet, I knew that my goal of opening a classroom dialogue about writing wouldn't work if I stayed mum. I had to trust the process.

On the surveys I gave students at the end of the semester, one of the questions I posed was the following: "Mrs. Helmer and I both wrote personal narrative essays and had you workshop them giving us comments. Do you think it is important for teachers to write when they ask students to write? Was this a useful activity for you? Explain." Perhaps this was somewhat of a leading question,<sup>27</sup> but only one student, Roxanne, responded that she doesn't think it is necessary "because we already know you are good writers," though she added, "I liked it for an

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<sup>26</sup> There are many examples, but one that specifically comes to mind is when I was putting together an author-study unit on Louise Erdrich a few years ago, I noticed that entire chapters of her novels had been taken nearly verbatim from short stories she had previously published.

<sup>27</sup> I suspect the half-dozen students who simply wrote something like "Yes," or "Yeah, it's good when teachers write too," might not necessarily have strong convictions about the topic but just responded the way they thought they were expected to.

example though.” Quite a few (14 of 59 students) responded that it was helpful in illustrating how the assignment *should* or *must* be written. Floyd wrote, “This was useful b/c it depicted what EXACTLY we needed to do” (caps original). These students’ responses disturbed me because throughout the unit, I tried to emphasize that there was no strict formula for the assignment. The only hard and fast requirements were a minimum length of three typed pages and the essays had to be about something they had experienced. I had aimed to present certain tools like sensory details, characterization, personal reflection, dialogue, and figurative language as elements some authors use, but they could take whichever ones they found useful and leave the rest. I also explicitly mentioned that they, as writers, were free to choose not only their topics but also structural strategies, and I shared examples of a variety of forms – linear and nonlinear essays as well as texts focused on a single event compared to ones that bounced between different events and reflections but orbited around a central idea or theme. Perhaps I hadn’t been as clear in communicating these options as I had thought, or perhaps these students meant that the essays Meleina and I shared depicted roughly what students *could* do rather than exactly what they *needed* to do. Semantics aside, the larger issue seems to be that in spite of my conscious attempts to talk about and demonstrate my writing process, a large number of students thought of the writing Meleina and I shared as *products*. Only a small number of students (4 of 59) described sharing knowledge about the writing *process* as the primary benefit of teachers practicing writing. Iris said that the sharing of a teacher’s writing is beneficial to students “because it shows a different perspective [from] someone who is experienced in writing (teacher) to some who is not experienced (student).” Another student, Jeanne, wrote that the practice of teachers writing is “good because we can see the process of a more experienced writer.” She further added, “It also gave a teacher student connection.”

This idea of a connection, whether shared commiseration or shared joy, was cited more frequently in student responses about the value of teacher writing (24 of 59) than either product or process. Felix, who as I mentioned before had a resistant attitude to school work, responded, “When teachers tell me to write, it’s a drag. They need to write before I will even consider putting words on paper.” Katrina also cited the appearance of fairness as the main reason why teachers should write, explaining that “it shows their students that the teachers actually do work and don’t just sit there handing out assignments.”<sup>28</sup> Charlie asserted that when teachers write, it helps them to “understand students’ struggles.” All three of these students expressed a negative view of writing in general when I asked them to assess their experience writing senior papers. Katrina mentioned that due to her “lack of writing skills” and never being “a fan of writing” she had difficulty with her senior paper. Charlie described the experience writing his senior paper as “alright,” but mentioned that he believes he wouldn’t have passed if not for the extra help Meleina and I gave him. Though Felix cavalierly declared that school assignments, including the senior paper, aren’t “hard at all,” and “a half brain-dead monkey can pass high school,” he proclaimed writing is usually “a waste of time” on the survey. Given their view of writing as an arduous or mundane task, it isn’t surprising that these three students saw a sense of commiseration as the primary reason for teachers to write.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a number of students who described enjoying writing generally and/or having a good experience composing their senior papers (9 of 59) also saw the potential for connection with students as the primary reason teachers should write. Isabel, who enjoyed composing her senior paper as she claims it was “one of the only times [she] was researching something truly relevant to [her] life” and described the opportunity to do some “creative writing” in English class as “really nice,” wrote that she thinks it’s important “for

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<sup>28</sup> I appreciate her point though the extent to which she underestimates teachers’ workload made me chuckle.



students to see our teachers engaging in and hopefully enjoying the same activities students are doing – especially in literature and fine arts.” Other students commented that by sharing our essay drafts, Meleina and I illustrated that we actually liked narrative writing, which helped them better appreciate the narrative essay form. Though only about half described writing their senior paper as a uniformly good experience and others had ups and downs but were happy with the end result, all nine students who saw sharing passion or joy as the primary benefit of teachers practicing writing characterized their own experience writing the narrative essay using highly positive terms like “great,” “interesting,” “fun,” and “something I will cherish.” Even Katrina, Felix, and Charlie, who all had negative views of writing in general, considered composing their narrative essays a good writing experience, explaining that they had appreciated the opportunity to write about their lives and “sit down and think in detail about what I was writing.”

In fact, a large majority of students (53 of 59) characterized their experience writing the narrative essay as positive<sup>29</sup> compared to fewer than half (27 of 59) who reported feeling positively about writing their senior paper. I wondered what made the narrative writing assignment feel negative for the remaining six students. Looking at their surveys, I noticed two never did the assignment but didn’t give a reason, one mentioned not seeing the importance in either creative or personal writing, two said they liked creative writing but would have preferred fiction because, as one described, “My life has always been pretty boring,” and only one cited feeling unsatisfied with the topic he’d chosen to write about. By contrast, nine students cited regretting their choice of topic as a factor making their senior paper a negative writing experience. Freedom in topic choice and the opportunity to write about personal experience tend to positively shape any writing experience, but I believe that the time spent engaged in dialogue with *The Bean Trees* and other texts in an effort to not only appreciate the craft of narrative

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<sup>29</sup> It’s possible that a number of students were trying to spare my feelings here.

writing but become practitioners of it also played a part in students' satisfaction. And since many of our textual discussions were framed around studying the craft of writing, my own participation in writing felt central in authenticating our dialogues with the texts and with each other. By this I mean, if I had extolled the importance and joy of narrative writing but held myself aloof from actually engaging in it, not only would my accolades ring false, but I would lose the ability to draw from my own experiences writing when engaging in dialogue and only be able to add contributions as a reader.

I was pleased that many students described writing their narrative essays as enjoyable or fun, and the students who declared they had learned something about writing or themselves via the experience made me feel even more satisfied. Writing, ideally, should be fun and a learning experience rather than only a means for assessment, but the student response that most inspired and gratified me came from Rita. About her narrative essay writing experience, she wrote, "I loved it! It gave me that urge to want to just keep writing and writing because after that story I wrote about, more and more like it came to mind." While a fair number of students I taught in the College Writing class in Korea might reflect they had learned something about their topics or the craft of writing, and a few even might say that they had enjoyed the class at times,<sup>30</sup> I can't imagine that any ever felt inspired enough by what we did in class to want to continue writing of their own volition.

It's been nearly three years since I finished teaching in Seoul, and though I still have a lot to learn about teaching, I feel much more confident going forward. While at Big Sky, I realized that managing the classroom to maintain an atmosphere of focus and innovating a greater variety of activities to keep students engaged while still meeting my pedagogical goals are areas in

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<sup>30</sup> I might have slightly exaggerated the level of discord in previous chapters. While, overall, it was frustrating experience for me as well as for my former students, there were times that we bonded in the way people who spend time with each other every day tend to.

which I especially struggled. Though I made improvements throughout the semester, I will have to continue developing strategies as I teach. Yet, I feel like I've made great strides in understanding the theories of meaningful composition and finding ways to put those theories into practice in the classroom. Though of course there were certain lessons at Big Sky that didn't completely meet my hopes, I never felt the need to fall back on rigid, formulaic writing instruction; rather than relying on a textbook to describe the structure and style of the genre, we read, wrote, and discussed to draw our own conclusions. Nor did I ever feel at a loss for ideas about how we could together investigate and practice writing. In fact, there were often too many ideas to fit into a six-week unit, and perhaps my biggest regret was not spending more time on revision. Because we were running short on time and because most students had been required to revise their senior papers multiple times, Meleina suggested that after students received my feedback and a preliminary grade, revisions of the narrative essays should be optional. I had little choice but to go along, and only about a third of students chose to revise. Also, although I maintain that this narrative essay unit was dialogic in the way we used texts and conversations to build our own understandings of the narrative genre, in the future I hope to continue innovating writing projects that more effectively blend academic and personal writing. The personal academic essay in the WRIT curriculum as well as the three-stanza memoir and I-search paper from the Montana Writing Project all offer excellent models for bringing personal writing into conversation with academic writing, and I can envision adopting and modifying these forms as well as cultivating new ideas for projects as I continue to teach.

Last summer, when I first began thinking about the effects a teacher's writing has on her/his students' writing as a topic for this paper, my premise was simple: I assumed that if a teacher writes and feels passionately about writing, then that passion will effortlessly spread

throughout the classroom like chickenpox, inevitably infecting every student with a chronic case of the writing bug. Both my research for this paper and my experience trying to implement my ideas at Big Sky have forced me to revise this hypothesis: I now see teacher writing less as an panacea guaranteeing good student writing and more as a starting point opening the doors to good writing instruction. Teacher writing is a foundational point for thinking about interesting and authentic assignments; when teachers ask themselves “Would I benefit from or enjoy writing this?” they begin to experiment in crafting assignments students benefit from and enjoy. When they actually write these assignments themselves, they take another step forward by testing the assignment. Teacher writing also is a starting point for creating a participatory classroom dynamic. Improving writing requires a certain amount of risk taking both in content and style. Without risk, writing is static. The first step in helping convince students that there is room to fall sometimes is perhaps exposing oneself to a certain amount of risk through writing. Teacher writing can also be a step in decentering authority in the classroom. When students like Felix ask “Why should I suffer through writing when you don’t,” a teacher who writes has an answer available beyond “Because you have to.” Though a passion for writing doesn’t spread as effortlessly as chickenpox, developing a classroom full of passionate writers begins with the teacher demonstrating that pain and suffering are not the only byproducts of writing; there are also pleasures and rewards, which are as important to demonstrate as struggle. Finally, teacher writing is the first step in allowing a reflective dialogue to open up about the process of writing and strategies for improvement. Contexts that provide a sense of discovery engender more effective learning than rote recitation. When teachers write rather than rely on textbook formulae, they can begin to better empower students and themselves to define the traits of good writing together and work towards getting there.

I now realize that teacher writing is only one small but essential factor in bringing about the larger goal of creating a dialogical writing classroom. A passionate and accomplished writer probably won't be an especially effective writing teacher if she lacks compassion, empathy, and faith that everyone has the ability to write. Viewing writing as a gift that only a lucky few are born with serves to delegitimize the voices of the majority of students, and therefore, thwarts dialogue. Also, a writer who hesitates to explicitly explore or deliberately withholds understandings of the composition process stemming from her own writing experiences does a disservice to students in need of writing-behavior modeling and mentoring. While I believe actually giving students frequent opportunities to write in a variety of forms is absolutely the best way to help students advance their writing, teachers must also remember that nests of talk that examine purposes, contexts, strategies, and tools also play an important role in dialogical writing instruction. Dialogical writing must go beyond assignments that simply seek to assess students' knowledge of conventions or concepts banked by the teacher or textbook; rather, it must strive to bring multiple voices together both within and outside of the writer to construct new meaning. The discovery of new ideas and understandings is what makes what powerful and is its essential purpose, but without an element of discovery, writing is little more than a hollow exercise. Though I acknowledge that the final product of the unit I taught seniors (a fairly straightforward narrative essay) wasn't particularly revolutionary in itself, the process of drawing upon poetry, fiction, and nonfiction texts as well as whole-class and small group conversations to inform not only what students might write about but why and how they might write it felt groundbreaking for me. I'm determined to build on this experience teaching writing dialogically in my future teaching practice, but it's difficult to give specifics since so much will depend on the age of students I'm teaching, which texts are required or available in the school, and which local issues

are impacting the community at the time. Nevertheless, my primary ambition is to create projects that not only continue to allow students to make connections between texts and their own personal experience but also incorporate an element of academic or hands-on research to make connections with the world.

Rita's narrative essay about how a fairly serious knee injury she incurred while playing soccer had forced her to re-think her sense of identity, which had always been built around sports, was reflective and thoughtful. She included some great introspective ideas, but her language was a bit clunky in places and she struggled transitioning between external events and internal thoughts. Yet, I'm certain that her writing will continue to improve as she writes more just as mine did after writing that first simple story about the pickle and mayonnaise sandwich. Like writing, I believe that teaching can improve with time and effort. I recognize that in Korea, my teaching was mostly flat and derivative, but through careful observation, sustained research, determined practice in creating a space for dialogues, and critical reflection, I think it has grown and will continue to develop in both complexity and efficacy.

## Appendix A:

### Circumstances creating positive and negative past writing experiences based on the written responses of 59 Big Sky High School seniors – Autumn, 2013

#### What made writing a positive experience?

Ownership – passionate about or personally connected to the topic

Exploring one's own self, experiences or memories

Hands-on experience with the topic

Writing to better understand a text, self, or topic

Fun genres: Journals, diaries, newspaper articles, fiction, personal essays, poetry, lab reports, memoirs

Writing outside the classroom – self-motivated purpose

Inspired rather than assigned

Choice in topic

Place-based writing

Audience – teachers and peers liked it

Got a good grade

The teacher kept the writing as a model for future students

Positive mentoring experience

Learning experience (inquiry-based learning)

Seeing different perspectives

Writing with partners (Social vs. solitary act)

Moments of inspiration (“ideas swirling & leaping from the tip of my pen”)

Creating imagined worlds (Sci-fi & superhero writing)

Use of humor

Letter to one's future self – honesty in reflection (limited audience)

Letters to a friend (in the army) – (audience, purpose)

Poetry remembering a friend who passed away

Freewriting that isn't graded

**Appendix A: continued****What made writing a negative experience?**

Felt like filling space to meet length requirement

Writing as punishment (e.g. an apology letter)

Grades with little or no feedback

Writing to meet points on grading rubrics

Self-censoring ideas

Feeling like every sentence has to be perfect

Shame in breaking grammar and spelling conventions

Overwhelmed by too much research – difficulty deciding most important points

Teacher had too many students and gave too little help

The teacher exerted too much control over the topic, tone, etc.

The teacher doesn't recognize (or believe) the effort invested

The teacher embarrasses or insults the student

Forced creativity ("poetry is just fragments of thought")

No place for creativity

Unfamiliar with the topic, subject

A new format (genre) that neither the teacher nor the students understand

Unsure of teacher's expectations

Didn't understand the assignment

No instructions of guidelines (too much freedom)

Assigned writing (teacher is the only audience)

Timed writes (ACT, AP)

Deciding the tone – too serious, too childish, too formal, etc.

Weariness in redrafting – loss of interest in topic

Report writing

Not in the mood

Can't see writing after high school (no purpose)



## **Appendix B: *Personal Narrative Essay Sketch***

### **Hidden Identity**

Long ago, I was a sadist. I tortured using needles and fire, I maimed, I amputated limbs, and I arranged countless fights to the death all because I found a sick satisfaction in witnessing suffering. At the age of 11, I was a monster – at least to the insects and arachnids near my family’s house in Red Lodge.

It started years before with ants when we lived in a smaller house on the west side of town. I must have been six or seven when I noticed that if I crushed one ant against the sidewalk with my shoe, other ants would scurry to retrieve the flattened corpse of their comrade. Like the most merciless military leaders, I trampled the rescuers, and even more ants ventured from the safety of the grass to the wide-open perils of the August-heated cement to meet their death by the treads of my sneakers. By the time I lost interest, the sidewalk was specked with the disfigured corpses of what must have been a hundred ants.

Grasshoppers were my favorite victims because they were large enough that I could murder them in more precise ways than smashing them flat. On the south-facing blue siding of the house, fat brown and gold winged grasshoppers sunned themselves. I captured them pinching their backs; their hopper legs kicked at the air; their front forelegs wriggled; they secreted a brown fluid I called tobacco juice from their mouths. With the Lego knight figures I brought into the backyard, we were ready to play execution. I skewered bodies onto a plastic spear like a living shish-kebab and severed off legs with a plastic sword. I tried to use a plastic axe for decapitations, but since the edge wasn’t sharp enough to cut clean through, when I pulled the head away, it came with a slick dark trail of grasshopper guts.

In a place where the grass was sparse in the front yard there was a colony of small black ants; in the backyard near the garage lived a few wiry-bodied red ants, and next to a vacant house across the alley, there was a massive anthill teeming with red and black ants that released a vinegary smelling chemical when I touched them. I collected specimens from all three colonies in a Frisbee I put on the picnic table. Inside the green plastic ring, they went at each other like gladiators. Some days, I caught beetles, daddy long legs, and grasshoppers, ripping off their hind legs to prevent any easy leaping escape, and sacrificed them to the swarming multitudes of ants. On other days, I sent high-pressured jets of water from a Super Soaker into their burrows or used my dad’s lighter and a can of my mom’s aerosol hairspray to rain fire upon them. I must have killed thousands.

**(Appendix B: *Personal Narrative Essay Sketch continued...*)**

I wonder now what possessed me to kill and torture the way I did. In most other ways I was a good kid: I was quiet around adults and responded politely when spoken to, I did my homework and earned good grades in school, I never fought and rarely swore like a lot of boys my age; I liked reading, baseball, Legos and chess, and for some reason, insect cruelty. Maybe if my parents had bought me a video game console I could have satisfied my thirst for violence through pushing buttons and seeing the 16-bit sprays of Mortal Combat characters' blood on the screen. Maybe if I had scratched the eyes out of the face of Chris, the kid who always ragged on me for not being able to afford anything but cheap Payless shoes, I wouldn't have had to take my frustration out on the bugs. But I was a coward, and there was little to do during the summer. The devil had set up shop in my idle hands. The worst thing is, I knew it was wrong. When my mom asked me why I spent so much time outside killing insects, I denied it. "I'm not killing them," I lied. "I'm just watching." I felt such shame that I swore I'd never intentionally slay or maim another insect, but a day or two later, I'd be in the backyard stabbing a dried pine needle up through the mouth and out the top of a grasshopper's head.

Perhaps a trained therapist could have helped me understand my morbid fascination with killing bugs, but I'm not sure to what extent my parents were of my depravity; if they were, we would've had to drive 60 miles to Billings to visit the nearest child psychologist, and we wouldn't have been able to afford it if we did. If I had gone to a psychologist, she might have asked about my home life, as psychologists are inclined to do. I might have told her that my mother suffered from bipolar disorder and was often loving and affectionate but sometimes sullen and withdrawn, and that she had attempted suicide the year before. I might have told her that my father's dream of being a radio disc jockey never panned out, that he worked construction until the varnish fumes made him vomit every day, and now he was unemployed. I might have told I felt too ashamed to go shopping for groceries with my father because he paid using food stamps. I might have told her that my parents constantly fought and a few of the times when my dad said something I couldn't hear, my mother shrieked something like, "Don't blame him for being born." I might have told the psychologist that I had done the math calculating that since my parents' wedding anniversary was a mere five months before my birthday, my mom had been four months pregnant, and they probably would have never gotten married if she hadn't been knocked up with me. I might have told her I often thought things might have been better for everyone if I'd never been born.

I never went to a therapist though, and it wasn't until after the incident with our family cat LeBaron that I stopped brutalizing insects. When I was twelve, our neighbors moved. They left us a collection of cups and saucers, worn sheets and towels, and a six-month-old, black-haired kitten they had named Sable. For a few weeks, our family's running joke was coming up with other car names for him. We called him Taurus, Cherokee, Impala, El Camino, Monte Carlo, and Datsun before finally settling on LeBaron. Don't worry; I never did anything worse to

(Appendix B: *Personal Narrative Essay Sketch continued...*)

LeBaron than harass him with a squirt gun, but once, I did make him into a tool, a weapon really, for exploring my morbid fascination with pain and violent death.

One spring morning, I discovered a robin hatchling in our back yard. I crouched down and watched the downy gray creature lurch in the grass, opening and closing its wings, still unable to fly. I went into the house, found LeBaron, and brought him outside. I wasn't really sure what would happen, but I was curious to find out. At first, like I had, he just crouched, tail switching, and stared at the bird. My heart rate accelerated. I simultaneously anticipated and dreaded the coming spectacle of brutality. LeBaron, playfully batted the hatchling. It was a gentle, almost loving touch, and I thought, *you are not a killer, and I am not a killer's accomplice; both of us are curious, but no harm will come of it.*

Then, LeBaron pounced, pinning the hatchling under his front paws. Before I could pull him away, he had delivered two or three vicious bites. It was strange seeing the way he bit and twisted his head, instinctually making his teeth's puncture wounds into gashes. I gathered him in my arms, and he squirmed and scratched, desperate to get back to the dying bird. I held on and took him inside. When I came back out, the hatchling was still barely alive. There was a deep pink tear on its gray neck – not much blood, but I could see the threads of glistening sinew.

After that, I lost my taste for killing anything, even bugs. Don't get the wrong idea; I didn't suddenly become some pillar of compassion shedding copious tears after accidentally stepping on an ant; I still swatted mosquitoes and flies when necessary and didn't even think then about giving up eating meat. What I mean is I never felt compelled to torture or mutilate insects after that. LeBaron, however, went on to become a serial murderer of birds. His skills climbing trees and pouncing only improved after that day, and for the next seven years of his life, he hunted for the pure sport of it, killing probably two or three birds a week except when the snow was too heavy and the birds had flown south. Whenever he brought to the back porch a chickadee with bone and tendons exposed where its wing was half chewed off or a sparrow with its skull caved in and blood matted in its feathers, I felt sick with guilt.

## Appendix C – Student Survey

Senior English

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Hi everyone,*

*I hope that you all had a wonderful holiday break. It was truly a pleasure getting to know you all this semester during my student-teaching field experience. I'm now living in Portland and writing my master's thesis on whether teachers who consider themselves as writers might be able to teach writing more effectively than teachers who just assign writing but don't actually engage in it themselves. I hope that you all might be willing to answer a couple of questions for me; I plan to use your answers as part of my research (I will use pseudonyms, so either you can make one up or I can). Thanks so much for your cooperation.*

*- Yours, Eric Lynn*

1. At the beginning of the year, we had you write about your best and worst writing experiences. Think about your experience writing your senior paper. Would you rate it as good, bad, or somewhere in between. Please explain.
2. Also, please think about writing your personal narrative essay. How would you rate this experience? Why?
3. Before you wrote your personal narrative essay, I had you write a "Where I'm from" poem, a travel poems, a description using active verbs, and a character analysis. Which of these was the most helpful in learning or practicing the skills for writing your narrative essay? Do you have any suggestions that could help me make these or other activities more useful?



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