Forum

Teacher-Writers: Then, Now, and Next

Anne Elrod Whitney
Penn State University

James E. Fredricksen
Boise State University

Troy Hicks
Central Michigan University

Robert P. Yagelski
University at Albany, State University of New York

Leah Zuidema
Dordt College

In this article, we reflect upon "the teacher as writer" and describe how we see this concept and movement developing. We articulate a view of the teacher-writer as empowered advocate. Using examples from our scholarship, we illustrate how this powerful idea can transform research conducted about and with teachers. Finally, we draw attention to the potential of the teacher-writer stance as a means of resistance to current reform efforts that disempower teachers.

Many developments in English education—such as process-oriented pedagogy, the National Writing Project, and teacher inquiry—have grown from the simple idea that teachers can be writers. As scholars who focus on teachers and writing, we want to assert a particular view of "the teacher as writer." Through our work, we have developed a stance toward teacher-writers, understanding that teachers produce a variety of texts and that the production of such texts embodies a *way of being*. Studies of teaching tend to erase the act of writing (for example, reflective writing becomes merely "reflection"), often without consideration of complex writing activities and rhetorical situations. Our stance views writing as transformative, reaffirms teaching as professional practice, and positions teacher-writers as agents who can resist troubling current educational reform efforts.

THEN: A Brief History of the Teacher-Writer

We see at least three phases in the development of the teacher-writer: the writing process phase (1970s and 1980s), the teacher research phase (1990s and 2000s), and, currently, teachers as advocates and intellectuals. Each phase foregrounds trends in writing purposes and practices proposed for teachers. These phases are

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additive: rather than one idea-set replacing another, each augments the concept of the "teacher-writer."

The 1970s and 1980s promoted teachers as writers in relation to process-oriented pedagogy and the rise of the writing workshop. Teachers should write, it was argued, to better "walk the talk" when asking students to write (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; Gray, 2000; Murray, 1968; Shaughnessy, 1977). This idea was not without controversy—as evidenced in a lively debate in *English Journal* (Christenbury, 1990; Jost, 1990a, 1990b; McAuliffe, Jellum, Dyke, Hopton, & Elliott, 1991). Still, it remains important today (e.g., Kittle, 2008).

The 1990s and 2000s saw the advent of the "teacher-researcher," writing about inquiry as a mode of professional development and generating useful knowledge (e.g., Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Maclean & Mohr, 1999). As Ray (1996) reminded us, "teacher research is a distinct form of writing and representation that has value on its own terms" (p. 295). Teachers, this argument goes, should write for the field, generating knowledge *and* increasing teachers' representation within the research literature (e.g., Dahl, 1992; DiPardo et al., 2006; Fecho, 2003; Fleischer, 1994; Ray, 1993; Root & Steinberg, 1996; Smagorinsky, Augustine, & Gallas, 2006; Smiles & Short, 2006; Stock, 2001; Whitney, 2009a, 2010; Whitney et al., 2012).

Today, we see a third phase—advocacy—gaining momentum. From No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top, the context for teaching has been affected by privatization and standardization—forces that de-authorize teachers while emphasizing market forces as engines of educational innovation (e.g., "choice," "vouchers," "right-to-work"). These reforms—which assume that measuring outcomes will uncover the sources of educational problems and, consequently, "motivate" teachers to "improve"—position teachers in disenfranchising ways: as consumers of educational products, as workers in need of discipline, as representatives of a status quo (e.g., Apple, 2006; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Spring, 2012; Torres, 2008; Turner & Yolcu, 2013; Whitney & Shannon, in press). In this context, teachers write as a form of activism and resistance. Thus, whereas earlier teacher-writers wrote for other educators, now teachers also write for the press, parents, and the public, whose opportunities to understand teachers' perspectives may be few.

NOW: Writing and Researching with Teacher-Writers

How do we, as researchers and teacher-writers ourselves, incorporate these concepts of the teacher-writer into our work? In this section, we illustrate how we conduct research with and about teacher-writers in ways that embody our stance of agency, advocacy, and intellectualism, taking into account the writing practices and purposes described above and conceiving the teacher-writer as agent and public intellectual.

Such research is possible because we situate ourselves among teacher-writers. Each of us engages in (and studies) teacher writing groups emphasizing inquiry, agency, and advocacy, with our roles ranging from convener or facilitator to participant, researcher, and/or coauthor. Troy facilitates a group that meets through Google Hangouts to write and share (Hicks, Busch-Grabmeyer, Hyler, & Smoker,

2013). Leah has led lesson roundtables, mentoring preservice and experienced teachers as they write through cycles of planning, teaching, observing, and critiquing lessons. Anne has convened a group of teacher-writers who author a column for the local newspaper as well as occasional journal articles and blogs (Whitney & Badiali, 2010), and leads another writing group of school principals and district administrators.

We also conduct (and research) courses, retreats, and institutes for teacher-writers that are focused on professional writing. Bob, Jim, Anne, and Troy have done this work through the NWP; Anne's and Leah's university courses for teachers include explicit attention to professional writing, with articles for publication as final products. This leads to related projects in which we mentor teacher-writers seeking to publish their work. Bob established a blog where teachers from the Capital District Writing Project can post essays on teaching; Leah coedits the Writers Who Care blog, which invites reflections on authentic writing instruction and provides presubmission coaching for authors new to writing for a public audience (Zuidema, Hochstetler, Letcher, & Turner, 2014).

Additionally, we routinely collaborate directly with teacher-writers to co-create knowledge. For instance, Troy has worked with teachers through inquiry-based projects as a participatory action researcher (Hicks et al., 2007; Reed & Hicks, 2009) and has coauthored a book with a teacher (Hyler & Hicks, 2014). Anne has coauthored articles with teachers and teaching assistants about shared classroom practice (Whitney & Olcese, 2013; Whitney, Ridgeman, & Masquelier, 2011). We regularly co-present with teachers at NWP annual meetings, NCTE conventions, and other professional conferences.

As researchers, we have found that writing can change perspectives that shape teaching practice. For example, NWP writing groups and peer feedback have fomented teacher transformation (Whitney, 2008), and personal and professional writing helped NWP teachers claim identities as writers and make concomitant shifts in teaching practices (Whitney, 2009b). Yet in a culture where teachers are attacked from the outside and sometimes gloss over "messy" classroom moments from within (Bush, 2000), teacher-writers sometimes feel daunted by the threat of criticism. Our studies suggest that when teachers write for colleagues, they position themselves within the larger arguments they want to make about what it means to teach (and teach well) (Fredricksen, 2008; Zuidema, 2012). The complex rhetorical and political contexts teacher-writers navigate yield links between authoring and authority (Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, 2014).

Our work with teachers sparks questions about what their writing can make possible—and about the constraints they encounter. Our layered, historical view of teacher-writers then shapes the scope and reporting of our research into those questions, helping us to frame studies showing *how* teacher writing works within complex discourses about teachers and their "proper" roles. Through our aforementioned relationships, we have seen teacher-writers become better teachers, but also knowledge makers and advocates. We see teacher-writers being authors in every sense: professionals who claim authority with their own words and their work.

NEXT: Actions with and for Teacher-Writers

In this light, where does our work lead? What can the field do to better understand, support, and advocate for the teacher-writer? In the current climate of policies and initiatives that tend to ignore, willfully exclude, and blame teachers, our stance is radical. We assert the following needs with a desire for deep and productive understandings of teaching on the part of our fellow researchers *and* with a hope that this type of research might promote teacher agency more broadly.

Action 1: Better Conceptualize the Writing That Teachers Do

Reconceiving the writing activities of teachers can help researchers develop theoretical lenses to better understand teacher-writers, their activities, and the sites in which they work. For example, we are especially interested in ways in which acts of writing-in-the-moment are connected to our very sense of being in the world (Yagelski, 2009, 2011, 2012). From this perspective, the *experience* of a writing act is as important as—perhaps even more important than—the text produced. Accordingly, distinguishing between the *writer's writing* (the text) and the *writer writing* (the act of writing) can help researchers and writers realize the transformative possibilities of writing (Yagelski, 2009, p. 9).

Action 2: Use More Appropriate Approaches to Researching Teacher-Writers

Methodologies for studying teacher-writers should reflect our sense of writing as a way of being and account for developments in the location and nature of teacher-writers' activities. Most available studies focus on writing in formal professional development contexts such as school-based teams, NWP sites, or university courses. What about other spaces where teacher-writers gather, including "parawork" sites (Zuidema, 2008)? These may include out-of-school environments (like living rooms) as well as private or open virtual spaces (like Google Hangouts and online communities) that both enrich and complicate the rhetorical situation while also extending the teacher-writer's reach. What about third-space writing activities such as writing marathons and Twitter conversations? In and across such spaces and activities, how are teachers positioning themselves as individuals, advocates, and representatives within a broader conversation about education? What effects does their writing have?

Further, researchers should consider both writers and their texts rather than one or the other, using the same tools they would bring to examinations of other discourse communities—tools sensitive to power relationships among members of communities. One fine example can be found in Godbee's (2012) use of conversational analysis to examine transformative group processes. Another is Dawson's study of an online teachers' writing group—about which, not incidentally, she cowrote with teacher-writers (Dawson, Robinson, Hanson, VanRiper, & Ponzio, 2013). We admire the way these researchers have considered acts of composition and talk in connection (vs. isolation), along with their attention to both individual and group trajectories.

Action 3: Be Teacher-Writers Ourselves

The five of us frequently remind ourselves that we, too, are teacher-writers. We ask ourselves, and we ask readers of this article: Do we act like it? Do we write in literary genres, in research genres, and in advocacy genres like the blog post, the op-ed column, and the tweet? Do we claim for ourselves the rationales of helping students, advancing professional knowledge, and advocating for the right to teach?

And do we share our microphone with teacher-writers—creating opportunities to cowrite and copublish? Do we advocate tangibly for teacher-writers by sharing our spaces, activities, and funding and by mentoring those seeking their own opportunities and resources?

With these commitments in mind, remembering the rich history of "the teacher as writer," we encourage *RTE* readers to see writing as integral to teaching practice and professional development, as a way for teachers to claim authority in decisions about education, and as a means to include their voices in debates that affect their work as teacher-writers.

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Anne Elrod Whitney is associate professor of education at Penn State University.
Troy Hicks is an associate professor of English and director of the Chippewa River Writing Project at Central Michigan University.
Leah Zuidema, associate professor of English, serves as associate provost and dean for curriculum and instruction at Dordt College.

James E. Fredricksen is associate professor of English at Boise State University and codirector of the Boise State Writing Project.

Robert P. Yagelski is associate professor and director of the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry at the University at Albany, State University of New York, where he also directs the Capital District Writing Project.

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