

"A More Complicated Human Being"

Inventing Teacher-Writers

What does it mean to be a writer? I think it comes down to the essential nature of writing. Writing is something that you *do*, not something that you *know*, and when you think about it that is an incredibly important understanding for us to have as teachers of writing.

—Katie Wood Ray, *The Writing Workshop: Working through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)* (2001, italics in original)

It was also a nice chance to shift and think about myself as a writer, but to also think about myself as ... a more complicated human being than just a teacher.

—Karen, reflecting on our writing group experience

"I remember the first time I came," Jillian reminisces, a year after we began meeting. "I kind of was thinking I had to have almost a finished piece [of writing]." She laughs briefly at the memory. "And I only had a little section, and I was like, 'okay, here's a poem I think?' And I felt kind of, you know, self-conscious. That I didn't have this *great* grand piece. But just the fact that, you know, I got support from the group and feedback of what they liked . . . what *you* liked about it, and directions I could take it. I mean that was *huge*."

Having people enjoy our writing and receiving generative feedback, even about small pieces or ideas for future writing, has propelled each of us to write more and try new things as writers. Across our first year as a writing group, we each learned to bring our writing at all stages to group meetings, and we shared a range of personal and professional texts, written for a variety of audiences. In the process, we composed texts we are proud of and used our writing to explore and shape our ways of being in the world.

As we reflect on our first year together, during the same writing group meeting that opens this book, Christina adds, "I think . . . even though as first-year teachers, carving out this extra time to be a part of the group could initially seem daunting, I think it was a really healthy move for us. It gave us each a way to connect with each other. It gave us a way to talk to each other

at critical moments. And like [Karen] said, it helped you to affirm that you are more than a teacher.”

Christina’s words, which echo Karen’s observations about the value of thinking of herself as a “more complicated human being,” have continued to resonate with each of us in our writing group. Teaching can loom large in our lives, sometimes casting other complex ways of being into shadow, as we find ourselves planning lessons while in line at the grocery store or thinking about a student while having coffee with friends. Having the opportunity and support to focus on being writers, and through writing to explore our interests within and beyond the walls of our classrooms, has indeed felt healthy.

Christina’s and Karen’s comments also help foreground teacher-writers as whole people. Much of the literature on teachers as writers tends to emphasize our *teacher* roles, often depicting writing in service to our students and profession, either on the local classroom level or the larger educational landscape. The explicit intention of much of this literature is to encourage teachers’ writing for just these reasons, recognizing that when we write we are better able to shape instruction from the inside, as a fellow writer in the classroom. Yet these are just some of the benefits that teacher-writers can experience. The examples in this book show us, as teacher-writers, creating space for writing, finding inspiration amid our everyday lives, nurturing ideas in our heads and on paper, and building cohesion across our writing lives.

This final chapter looks across the preceding chapters, in an effort to synthesize strategies and outcomes, as well as begin to look beyond this first year in a writing group. We formed our group based on our interests and goals, and we adapted our choices based on our unfolding experiences. My hope is that you, as a teacher interested in writing, may adapt and combine strategies from across this book to fit your own needs and priorities. The goal is not to reproduce our writing group in other contexts, which may not honor the individuality of our writing group members or of other teacher-writers. Rather, I hope you will feel empowered to craft your own commitments, routines, and practices, as you seek to create a supportive and generative writing community.

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE WRITING GROUP—IN PERSON OR ONLINE

I began Chapter 2 with an excerpt of Judy Brown’s (2006) poem “Fire,” which reminds us, “What makes a fire burn/ is space between the logs;” piling on too many logs can put out a fire as “surely as a pail of water.” Within the pages of this book, I have tried to show that writing may be experienced as the space between the logs, a “breathing space” we can create and protect amid those other things that both fuel and sometimes smother our fires.

Each member of the writing group helps create space, for the self and for others. By engaging in discussions, shaping group commitments, sharing writing, and providing feedback on others’ texts, each member helps articulate practices that other members may then adapt and use. Creating space is a collaborative process, and support matters. The following strategies and themes run across the preceding chapters of this book.

Articulate Shared Commitments

In seeking to create space for writing, our writing group found it critical to articulate our priorities about what types of writing we wanted to do, as well as what we hoped to experience *during* meetings. These conversations helped us prioritize feeding our “fires” as writers.

As you contemplate beginning a writing group, consider your priorities. Part of what will draw you and other members back to your writing group will be the experience you have while you are there. What will make you enjoy meeting together? How much planning or organization do your particular members need in order to feel productive and also comfortable? Keeping our writing group routines simple, yet flexible, has worked well for us. We value our reconnecting time, as it allows us to prioritize our relationships with each other and build on our foundation of trust. And we value ensuring that each member has time to talk about writing during each meeting, even if all someone brings is an idea for future writing.

In our own writing group, we spent early meetings experimenting, trying various technologies and playing with different structures and routines. We are flexible even now, as we sometimes decide to write together during a meeting if no one has brought a text, or as we share resources and writing ideas we glean from other sources. In the past several years, we have tried other strategies, such as reading a shared book about writing or engaging in a joint inquiry into a particular genre. For example, one month we all decided to work on humor writing, reading mentor texts and even inviting a local guest author to join us for a writing group meeting.

In our group, we prioritize *doing writing* on a regular basis, which requires us to commit ourselves to flexibility and choice. Because we want to *write* for ourselves with enjoyment, we often emphasize our processes and practices as writers over our production of texts. So we choose what we share, how we share it, at what stage we bring writing, and even if we share at all. As authors, we also choose what happens to our own texts. Sometimes we spend a great deal of time on a text, taking it through many revisions, and sometimes we set a text aside for a while to follow our energy and write something else. Protecting this range of choices may seem counterintuitive, especially if you are seeking an incentive to write and develop specific texts, yet it has been a critical element of our particular group’s flexibility and success. From the start, we did not want to feel the need to

apologize or feel guilty if we did not bring writing to share. Just coming to meetings to talk about other group members' writing allows us to build writing practices and ideas for the future. For us, the most important goals are to keep participating and keep writing.

With that said, there have been moments over the past several years when each of us has had to step back and miss several meetings in a row. Significant life events, work conflicts, and other obstacles have interfered at times for each of us. When these situations arise, our approach has been to make sure that every member continues to feel welcome, and to reach out to each other outside of writing group meetings. In this way, we continue to connect with each other, sometimes even just individually, until the member is able to once again participate in meetings.

We have designed a writing group experience that focuses on supporting writing that matters to us, rather than an experience that focuses on how our writing can shape our teaching. This decision does set us apart from other teacher writing groups. Aside from our reconnecting time, we spend the rest of our meetings discussing our writing, giving full attention to what each writer wants, without then feeling obligated to analyze our moves or how we could use these experiences to inform our teaching. In many ways this has been a freeing decision for our members, so that we can deliberately foreground ourselves as whole people and explore topics for writing freely. When ideas for our teaching come up organically, we talk about them, but we do not typically dedicate meeting time to discussing our teaching.

Take the Writing Group Online!

After articulating goals for your writing group experience, it is easier to begin to define routines and logistics. Many of the practices shared in this book would work as well for an in-person writing group as they do for our online meetings. In our case, we were geographically dispersed, so we faced a challenge of how to create the experience we envisioned in an online setting. While we could have focused primarily on textual response, with group members electronically exchanging writing and then receiving only written feedback on the texts, such an asynchronous approach would not have allowed for the rich conversations and expanded ways of participating that our group was seeking.

It did not take long for us to realize that our online necessity may have offered us one of our greatest opportunities as a writing group. Because we meet exclusively online, our group has been able to maintain a sense of flexibility and responsiveness, which has allowed each of us to continue participating. From the start, Karen and Nell lived too far away to drive to an in-person meeting, and within the first year I, too, moved out of state. For a face-to-face writing group, each of us would have been cut off once we were too far to drive comfortably. Because we just need a computer and

an Internet connection to gather, however, we have been able to set meetings to fit everyone's schedule. Nell was even able to continue participating when she took a fellowship opportunity in China one year; we just had to do some creative time zone adjustments to make sure we could find a common meeting time.

For our actual meetings we most commonly use Skype or Google Hangout, and we try to use video conferencing if possible. It is really nice to be able to see each other as we meet, but sometimes members' poor Internet connections or computer issues require us to go back to audio-only conference calls. We use text messaging and the chat feature on our conference call to supplement our communication, letting each other know if we are running late or need to briefly step away from our computers. We also use these features to quickly share websites, music, video, or other texts that may be relevant for our conversations. In this way members can find and share resources that may relate to our writing, perhaps in content or as a mentor text. Over the years, we have expanded our ways of sharing writing as well. The most important thing for us has been trial and error, trying a new technology when someone hears about it or uses it elsewhere and collaboratively deciding how to adapt our usage to our needs and priorities.

CREATING SUSTAINABLE WRITING PRACTICES

As the previous chapters have highlighted, our writing group drew on a number of strategies to help us compose texts and writing practices. These strategies include discussing what we do and experience as writers, considering audience and purpose, foregrounding talk and relationships, expanding what we count as writing, and making connections across our writing lives. These strategies may be readily adapted and combined by other teacher-writers, as you seek to craft your own writing practices and writing group experiences.

Notice and Name Writing Opportunities and Strategies

There truly can be writing opportunities all around us. In our writing group, we try to stay open to writing opportunities by noticing and acting on ideas, even in a quick piece of writing. The more regularly we write, and the more we anticipate and think about our writing, the more readily we begin to find inspiration for writing all around us. Jillian noticed the feeling she had when reading a student's note, I observed the poetry in my aunt's email language, and Karen imagined writing a quick parody of an administrator's email. In each of these cases, we not only shared the texts that we wrote as a result of a triggering idea, but we also shared our ways of finding ideas. As a result

of our writing group meetings, I now look at notes and emails in a different light, because I have seen writing emerge from them.

Even the ways we “do” writing are worth discussing. In Chapter 3, Nell shared her quandary over whether to handwrite or type, as well as how these physical acts shape her experience composing and her ability to share her work. Technology can offer additional opportunities, such as Christina’s use of a blog and Twitter to collect and develop writing ideas. As you work with your own writing partners, discuss your experiences with different ways of writing.

We also embrace sharing writing across all stages of a text, and in this way we seize opportunities, even if it is just the 20 minutes before a meeting or during a lunch break. The writing we accomplish in these found moments can be just enough to share and spark future writing. Once again, we share not only the writing, but our ways of doing it. We discuss when and where we write, which helps other members begin to see opportunities and ways of writing. And we share and name some of the writing techniques we use, so that our own texts can become models for each other. Thus, as we talk about the specific things we admire in each other’s texts, we are noticing techniques for strong writing that we can try in our own work. And as we question each other and are questioned about our writing, we expand what we might try in current and future projects. Peter Johnston (2004) reminds us that noticing and naming are “crucial to becoming capable in particular activities,” and “once we start noticing certain things, it is difficult not to notice them again” (p. 11). As you invest in your own writing group experience, try to include time to talk about what you are doing as writers, to notice and name your strategies, so that you can collaboratively expand your sense of what is possible.

Acknowledge and Articulate Constraints

Like other writers and other teacher-writers, the members of our group face obstacles that sometimes threaten to block our writing. Sometimes the audience or context presents an obstacle to our writing. In those cases, discussing the interests and purposes of the audience, features of the genre, or aspects of the rhetorical situation can help us find ways to begin or redirect a piece of writing. Discerning the limitations and the expectations of particular writing tasks can help writers feel less constrained, often enabling us to figure out ways to adjust boundaries to fit our own needs or interests.

We are busy people, and limited time and energy also pose significant constraints to our writing. In our writing group, we have found it useful to acknowledge and articulate the challenges we face in order to create ways to overcome them. Our reconnecting time plays a key role in this process, as we talk about our busy schedules, the demands on us in our jobs and home lives, our energy levels, and how we are feeling in general. These are

not simple therapy sessions; rather, we listen and respond, as friends and colleagues, about what is blocking us. We also discuss where we feel more free and energized. Acknowledging that constraints exist and are difficult to overcome can be an empowering move. It can be tempting to be hard on ourselves when we have difficulty as writers. In your own writing group, talk through your challenges together. Acknowledge these life situations as constraints and address them explicitly, so you might help each other create space for writing.

Sometimes the constraints we experience have less to do with external pressure and more to do with our own energy for a piece of writing. Our interests and life experiences may sometimes call us to write about some topics and may block us from writing about others. We have tried to respect and discuss our energy as writers. When Nell did not want to work on her poem about loneliness anymore after starting to date someone, or Karen did not want to write about teaching anymore because she needed a change, or I did not want to work on my found poem for my aunt because it made me sad, we experienced limitations as writers. Rather than looking at these moments of avoidance as problems to be overcome, we allow ourselves to set pieces of writing aside and follow our energy into a new piece of writing. Often we make our way back, when our energy shifts again. Of course, sometimes we have to persevere, especially if a text is required in a professional or academic context. Even then, talking about our energy and articulating what feels constraining is a useful strategy for getting "unstuck" and moving forward.

Talk in Varied Ways About Writing

Engaging in a talk-based writing group is a good way to foreground writing practices and relationships with other writers. Prioritizing our reconnecting time offers us opportunities to build community and trust with each other, which in turn supports our willingness to share deeply personal texts. Our writing group conversations include a variety of types of talk, which may be equally useful for other teacher-writers, as you tell stories, question texts and each other, and orally play with language possibilities.

Storytelling can be a powerful composing strategy, particularly when it is tied to even a beginning draft of a written text. In our group, we often tell stories to provide background information or context for a text, describe our audience or purpose, or even extend beyond what we have written to explore related themes. Often these stories help us generate content and take on a decidedly performative quality; in these moments we often tell each other to "write that down!" or find it useful for another member to scribe, to help preserve language that may be useful later.

One way to begin to generate useful stories among group members is to ask questions. For example, it was not until Christina asked me why my

aunt is so significant to me that I began to tell stories of our experiences together. We ask genuinely curious questions, rooted in a respect for the author's expertise about her topic and text. We ask questions to help us understand (and help the author articulate) the audience, context, and overall purpose of a text. We inquire to clarify moments and encourage an author to expand on the significance of details in a text.

It is also critical that authors pose their own questions. In our writing group, we often ask group members to read our texts with certain things in mind, helping ensure that the feedback is focused on the author's needs. Authors also ask questions throughout the discussion of a text, to follow up on and clarify some of the feedback we receive. As we inquire, we often experiment with new language, rehearsing possible revisions that might respond to group feedback. As you work with your own writing group members, consider the role of storytelling and inquiry as you reconnect and as you explore your writing together.

Experiment with Genre and Technique

Playing with genre also can open up writing opportunities, in some cases creating energy for a text or expanding ways of representing a topic. For example, when Karen first shared journals about her teaching, she told us she wanted help finding a new genre, and she was considering writing fiction to give herself a mental break from the challenges of her job. When she then shifted to a multi-genre text to explore her first year of teaching, rather than writing *about* her frustration when receiving high-pressure emails from administrators, she actually composed parodies of those emails. Her use of exaggeration and humor allowed her to imagine several other genres that she could include in her piece. Similarly, Christina used poetry mixed with narrative to explore her first year of teaching, allowing her to represent her struggle through a metaphorical battle between herself and a shadowy creature. Nell's approach to her wedding toast offers another example, this time of Nell's purposeful switch from a speech-toast to a poem-toast, through which she was able to reimagine a difficult text in a more familiar genre. In all of these cases, the writers use genre strategically to help them gain traction and energy for writing.

Experimenting with genre also can help us explore our identities and ways of being in the world. By writing oneself as a particular type of character in a story or narrative, a writer can deliberately highlight or obscure certain aspects of reality. When Christina positioned herself as a solitary fighter, embroiled in a battle with a faceless creature, she was able to invent a sort of identity for herself in related situations. Even the decision to not place oneself into a text, to keep it distant or more formal, can have interesting results. In some ways, trying out different genres encourages us as writers to follow the maxim of "show, don't tell," enabling us to bring our

readers more directly into an experience we hope to create. As you write and talk with other writers, consider how you might play with genre to foster energy and create opportunities.

There is a playfulness associated with this experimentation with genre and technique. There are wonderful resources available for writing teachers, with techniques and exercises designed to help us shape instruction and inspire our student writers (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 2005; Dunning & Stafford, 1992; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Heard, 1989; Hicks, 2013; Kittle, 2008; Ray, 2006). Consider mining these resources for writing exercises to share with your writing group as well. Similarly, there are inspiring guides designed for writers, which groups can explore in a shared study (e.g., Elbow, 1998; Goldberg, 2005; Heard, 1995; Lamott, 1995; Murray, 1996). Even if you just partner with another member of your writing group to play with techniques you find in outside resources, bring what works back to the full group for discussion and reflection.

Expand What Counts as Writing

In our writing group, we write and share a variety of texts, ranging from fully developed drafts to lists, outlines, character sketches, questions, journals, timelines, and freewrites. We share texts that we initiate, which are personal and may align with notions of "creative writing." We also write and share texts that we do not initiate, which we may feel compelled to write. In recognizing and sharing these varied types of writing in our meetings, we mobilize strategies for invention across contexts, and we include many more genres in what we count as "writing."

Expanding what counts as writing frees us to explore genre and follow our interests more broadly. It demystifies writing to some degree, allowing us to bring pieces that are still emerging. It also helps us use strategies across our personal and professional writing lives. In the literature on teachers as writers, work-related texts are often downplayed when teachers are encouraged to write. What our teacher writing group does, therefore, is explore ways that even job-related writing is worthy of attention, especially when we are able to mobilize writing strategies across personal and professional texts. As researcher Anne Elrod Whitney (2009) observes, a teacher's writing is "never neatly divided into personal or professional" (p. 253), but rather these strands are complex and often intertwine. Whitney encourages support for teachers to engage in both personal and professional writing, and to explore the purposes for each and the relationships between them.

Strategies like playing with style, writing about the professional in multiple (and not always traditional) genres, and analyzing a rhetorical situation in order to discover opportunities to manipulate genre can be seen as expanding what we consider as teacher writing. As you collaborate with other teacher-writers, consider ways to deliberately welcome and share a

wide range of texts in writing group meetings, enabling you to observe and discuss varied ways of mobilizing familiar techniques. In doing so, you may find it easier to foreground your *ways of writing* and build cohesion in your writing lives.

FOREGROUNDING TEACHER-WRITERS' CREATIVITY

Across the chapters of this book, I have emphasized the significance of teachers' writing on its own terms, beyond whatever written texts or classroom benefits may also emerge. I focus on the creativity that teacher-writers display as we pursue our own writing, for our own purposes, in partnership with each other. This is not to say that other lines of inquiry, which consider how teachers' writing relates to their pedagogies or participation in the field, are not fruitful or needed. Instead, this book looks beyond those benefits to also consider how we craft ways of being writers, and how we may be shaped by our experiences writing together.

I hope this book has fostered inquiry into the possibilities associated with foregrounding creativity and play in teachers' writing lives. Across the social interactions presented in this book, as teacher-writers we endeavor to "do writing" in varied ways. We acknowledge the writing that weaves through our lives, and we create opportunities to pursue writing that has personal meaning. We endeavor to build cohesion, to use strategies across personal and professional texts, and to draw on our writing techniques to help us shape in-person interactions. In doing so, we compose not only texts but identities and ways of being writers and people in the world.

This book presents an extended view into our first year as a writing group, in an effort to spotlight how we got started and what we were able to create across that formative year. Currently, our writing group is preparing to begin our 8th year together, and we are still going strong. We continue to share a broad range of writing, emphasizing personal and self-initiated texts, but also including space for professional and academic writing. We keep trying new things, including collaboratively writing and presenting on our work together. Across our interactions, we continue to emphasize what we do as writers, taking notice of our writing strategies, discussing our energy and challenges, and seeking to participate regularly in writing group meetings.

In foregrounding our identities as *writers*, showing teachers as whole, "complicated" people, I hope to expand discussions about teachers as writers. We are siblings and parents, spouses and partners, friends and nieces. We dance and we coach, we read fantasy books and travel abroad, we live in cities and in small towns, we garden and tweet and send text messages. And we teach. Amid all of these other things we do and all of these people we are, we build relationships with our students, write lesson plans, grade

student work, make bulletin boards, serve hall duty, and teach classrooms full of talented young people. We are teachers who value teaching, who want our students to see themselves as writers, and who think a great deal about our students and our pedagogy. We also *write*. In our writing group, and in our own time, we create space for writing and engage in acts of writing. Thus we are complex, teaching and more-than-teaching people, who savor success and fear failure, who can find poetry amid the little moments in life, and who can find truth and meaning among the lines of each other's poems.