Embracing Your Inner Writer

What It Means to Teach as a Writer

> A lot of people think that writing is about being read. I find that writing is about knowing what I think and understanding myself better. The fact that people read what I put on the Internet is secondary to the fact that I understand now what I was trying to say in a way that I wouldn't have if I hadn't bothered to write anything down.
>
> —Bud Hunt, educational blogger and Chief Technology Officer, Poudre School District

Most teachers we know self-identify as readers. We may have fond memories of being read to as a child or of curling up in a favorite chair with a good book on a rainy afternoon. We are not alone. Try entering the term *reading* in a Google image search, and you'll find numerous pictures of smiling children huddled under the covers secretly reading books by flashlight. The message is that reading is so compelling, children are willing to risk staying up past bedtime to do it. Another image proclaims the message that "reading is delicious." Substitute "writing" for "reading" in a Google search, however, and no parallel images exist. Instead, most images associated with writing reveal students and adults alike in various attitudes of despair—bodies slumped over keyboards, Calvin (of the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons) wearing his exasperated homework face, writers searching for the right word with head in hand. Unlike the delicious act of reading, one image shows a frustrated man with a thought bubble over his head that reads, "Writing is HARD!"

These aren't just idle speculations confirmed in a Google image search. One of NCTE's greatest hits is "Writing in the 21st Century," a report written by Kathleen Blake Yancey in 2009 as "a call to action . . . to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future" (p. 1). While it's true that we're a couple of decades into the 21st century at this point, Yancey's report still holds up, not only because this call for action still remains relevant, but because she provides a historical review of literacy practices in the United States that explains why the jarring contrasts between these images still exist. Yancey remarks on the privileged

place reading holds in our culture, evidenced by the prominence it holds in the family, church, and other contexts dear to one's life; the act is at once intimate, social, and sensory. For many teachers as well, a love for books is what attracted us to the profession in the first place; we want to inspire the same love in our students.

When we ask our own students who are studying to become English teachers to reflect on why they chose this career path, they often tell us it is because books were, and are, essential to their lives. They can't remember a time when they didn't identify as readers, and they want their future students to do the same. Yet regardless of the content area you teach in, in this chapter we challenge you to add the pose of Teacher as Writer to your teaching identity by taking on the following habits of mind. Doing so is essential not only because it maximizes the learning outcomes of your students, but also because it can be central to your own professional growth.

Teacher as Writer: Develop an identity as a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes by:

- engaging regularly in the practice of writing in order to better understand the rewards and challenges your students will experience as writers;
- recognizing that assuming a writer identity is essential to educational equity; and
- joining a community of writers and committing yourself to sustained professional learning in the area of writing instruction.

Admittedly, the Teacher as Writer pose may not feel intuitive at first, especially if you aren't an English teacher, because as you imagine yourself teaching in your own classroom, you're more likely to see yourself at the front of the room with a book in your hand rather than a writing device. Why is this the case?

Yancey (2009) notes that writing has historically been physically laborious. Her examples include writing on a slate, smudging parchment with ink from a quill pen, or practicing penmanship with a stubby pencil. Perhaps this is why writing has been "associated with unpleasantness—with unsatisfying work and episodes of despair—and thus . . . a good deal of ambivalence" (p. 2). Cindy has observed the same ambivalence among preservice teachers when she teaches a class called "Teaching Composition." Early in the course students complete an assignment in which they recount memories of learning to write in school and draw on these memories, for better or worse, to imagine the kind of writing teachers they hope to be. Almost every student reveals a checkered past as a writer in school. Although a few remember the standout teacher who encouraged them to write, others remember spelling

lists and grammar exercises that did nothing to improve their writing because they still aren't sure where to place a comma. The majority are still haunted by weeks devoted to test prep and papers bloodied with red ink from the pens of teachers who missed the point of a paper they had really cared about writing. They know they don't want to inflict the same tedium or pain on their own students, but they aren't sure how to meet that goal, and so they wobble mightily around questions such as these: How do they design effective assignments? How do they make writing groups worthwhile? How do they do more than just assign writing, but instead really *teach* students how to write?

By the end of the course, our students usually have some ideas about how to do all these things, but a national study conducted in 2016 showed that only one in three elementary and middle school teachers, including ELA teachers, was required to take a course devoted solely to writing instruction in their teacher education programs and that, since becoming teachers, the professional development they'd received in this area in the last 5 years was spotty (Troia & Graham, 2016). The study concluded that if teachers are to embrace writing standards and help students meet them, they need to be "armed with deep knowledge about writing pedagogy and [to] believe they are capable of executing such pedagogy in the classroom" (2016, p. 23).

When teachers don't have adequate preparation that leads to these inclinations, the common alternative is to default to the "lore" of teaching in the ways they were taught to write (Hesse, 2017; National Commission on Writing, 2003). After all, they turned out okay as writers, so won't their students do the same? Yet only a handful of our own preservice teachers remember being required to write on a routine basis during school. (And they *are* ELA teachers!) They aren't the exception; students still have few opportunities to engage in extended writing beyond a paragraph in length (Applebee & Langer, 2011, 2013). A study of middle school writing assignments (Santelesis & Dabrowski, 2015) revealed that fewer than 10% of them required students to generate more than one paragraph. The remaining 90% of the assignments consisted of "writing without composing" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 15) (i.e., taking notes from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets, answering questions in a sentence or two, labeling diagrams or maps). Students who are labeled as English learners receive an especially heavy diet of such assignments (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2017).

This perhaps explains why our own students often express reluctance when we ask them to meet weekly word-length goals in their blogs or even to quickwrite for 7–10 consecutive minutes during class in response to a prompt related to the topic of study at hand. Even though we ask our students to reflect on this phenomenon together as a class and explain our own rationale as educators for using these methods, we can't help but wonder if our students are convinced enough to take up similar methods when they have their own classrooms.

Nevertheless, we keep pressing because we believe that an important step in redressing this omission is to ask preservice teachers to engage in practices

aligned with the very same standards they will expect their students to meet. Equally important is supporting new teachers in critiquing time-honored practices that continue to exist, even though decades of research have shown that these have little positive effect on students' writing development (see Hesse, 2017; Hillocks, 1984, 1995). Assignments like the five-paragraph essay, for instance, are so common in most of our schooling experiences that it's initially unthinkable not to pass them along to our students. Giving up this and other academic rites of passage can feel downright painful at times (especially if you were really good at writing five-paragraph essays). Shifting practices often requires shifting paradigms and inevitably entails wobbling.

We dismiss the assumption that teachers don't want to fiddle with theory and research because they're only interested in implementing "best practices" for writing instruction in their classrooms. Assuming that this is the case would only perpetuate the deprofessionalization of teachers by underestimating their capacity to make informed decisions about why they do what they do in the classroom (O'Donnell-Allen, 2007). Understanding and utilizing theory and research matters for the growth of this profession. Furthermore, theory and practice coexist in a dynamic, dialogic relationship, with the "what" usually coming before the "why." That is, when a practice appears to "work" or doesn't, reflective teachers naturally ask questions and develop theories about why this is the case. Those theories guide subsequent practices, and ideally the cycle continues, even though it takes a substantial amount of time, energy, and commitment to sustain. Teachers don't have to go it alone but can draw on the knowledge of other theorists and researchers, including teacher researchers, about how to teach in ways that will best support students' learning.

ASSUMING THE POSE OF TEACHER AS WRITER

Of all the identities teachers are expected to assume, being a writer may be the last item on the list. Consider for a moment the time-worn—and we think terribly mistaken—assumption that "those who can't do, teach." Teachers are expected to be readers, confident speakers, and full-fledged members of the grammar police force. But if you apply the same phrase to writing—"those who can't write, teach writing"—others are likely to buy wholeheartedly into the notion, including teachers. Cindy distinctly remembers *the* moment when she challenged this assumption for herself. She was traveling to a conference when the gentleman seated next to her on the plane posed the customary question "What do you do for a living?" Unexpectedly even to herself, she blurted out, "I'm a writer," even though her day job was definitely teaching high school English. Maybe it was because she had recently published a few feature articles in venues outside of education, but whatever the reason, it was liberating for her to say the phrase out loud: "I am a writer." Admittedly,

it felt like a personal risk even though she didn't know a single soul on the plane. But it was the first moment she had intentionally voiced her conviction that "those who teach writing also write."

Of course, not everyone agrees with this assumption. In fact, the discussion of this topic has caused ire in our preservice teaching classes; students tell us they "get it," but as we mentioned before, when it comes to expecting them to write as part of the class, we get significant pushback. And the debate has been ongoing for years in the English education world. Karen Jost's 1990 letter in *English Journal* titled "Why English Teachers Should Not Write" caused such a stir that an entire forum was devoted to the topic two issues later. In her original article, Jost begins by locating this emphasis on writing in the world of academia: "From the mountain heights of academia a new dictum has been passed [. . .] the dictum is this: writing teachers should write" (1990, p. 65). In describing writing as a "pleasant hobby" and "condition for future employment" for professors, Jost claims that unreasonable expectations are thus placed on K–12 educators.

Responses in the follow-up issue (September 1990) ranged from challenging the assumptions of Jost's comments to offering pragmatic, rewarding models of writing with students in the classroom, such as Christenbury's explanation that "I do write with my students, and, in my opinion, what I do is sufficient. Maybe my low level approach might be more workable than whatever heroic efforts you [Jost] feel 'the academics' have in mind" (1990, p. 30). Likewise, Krest (1990) describes how her own writing practices affect the way she can describe to students "how to allow their personalities to show through their words" (p. 7). And though Jost's appeal to teachers was largely challenged in the pages of *English Journal*, the editors also published a smattering of letters that applauded Jost's forthright concerns. We want to acknowledge our view that writing isn't always the "pleasant hobby" Jost describes; we further admit that our insistence that our preservice teachers need to be writers may look self-serving (we do, after all, make our living in the "high mountains of academia"). However, as we note below, this dictate is grounded in research, our own personal experiences as teachers and writers, and our awareness that larger issues of equity are at stake.

ESTABLISHING A PRACTICE OF WRITING

Taking on the pose of Teacher as Writer requires that you do what writers do—that is, write, and write often. Establishing your own personal routines around this practice can help you maintain it.

The more we write, the clearer it becomes to us that writing is a practice in the same way that shooting free throws is a practice. To write requires *doing what writers do*. Writers must create routines and habits that help them embody their writing identities. One key aspect of the practice of writing that

is often ignored in schools (and that we found difficult to develop in some school settings) is the way atmosphere affects writing practice. Cindy, for example, looks for a cup of a coffee and a quiet place to write or, paradoxically, one with ample ambient noise. At home, she typically sequesters herself in her study, or she haunts local coffee shops, earbuds in place, scribbling on a notepad or tapping on a keyboard. Antero, on the other hand, is more focused when he writes in spaces by himself. He often has music blaring (to the chagrin of the people who share office walls with him): frenetic bebop, punk rock, obnoxious noisy *stuff*. He slouches on couches or perches above his computer at a standing desk.

As collaborators, then, our respective writing routines demand that we write in separate physical spaces, even though our manuscripts live in a common space online on Google Docs. Now that we teach in separate institutions, we meet frequently online in order to calibrate, outline, and move forward with our entwined projects. We have become attuned to the kinds of writing environments that are conducive for sustaining *and* generating writing ideas. Something as seemingly innocuous as atmosphere—the need for good lighting, for instance—has become inextricable from our identities as writers because it helps us get in the right headspace to "do what we do."

For this reason, we ask you to pause for a moment and consider what makes up an optimal environment for you as a writer and what might be detrimental to your practice:

- Where do you write? What does the environment look like? And if you don't have a regular writing routine (yet), what do you wish you could have in a future writing space?
- Building from this, how are your senses engaged? What do you hear, smell, feel? (Antero reflects on his college days wanting to be a writer and instead learning how to make an abundance of snacks.)
- What are the factors around you that inhibit you as a writer? When you sit down (or stand up or crawl into a corner) to write, what are the factors that pull you out of focus?
- How are you using technology to effectively compose in this space? How is technology using you? Does your computer chime with reminders? Does your phone vibrate with text messages? Is the Internet too great a distraction?

To adopt a Teacher as Writer pose means to commit fully to *being* a writer. If technology is a distraction, remember that there are temporary and systematic ways to turn it off. Plus, your texts, email, and all those social media posts will still be there in an hour when you're done. If you are of the peckish variety and snacks beckon as soon as your words falter, have them at the ready. It may seem strange to place so much emphasis on your own writer identity in a book focused on your reflective teaching practice. However, the

changes that come about within our classrooms and with our students start with ourselves.

It is no coincidence that Patrick Camangian chose "Starting With Self" as the title for his 2010 article on critical caring literacies and autoethnography within classrooms. If we are unable, in Camangian's perspective, to understand the challenges, assumptions, and predispositions that affect our work with students, we are destined to fall into the mire of noncaring pedagogies. Extrapolating from this, we believe that the writing practices we employ with our students in classroom spaces are actually reflections of how we hold ourselves as writers and of the routines we use to support this pose.

In this sense, perhaps the biggest question that isn't on the list above is this: *Is writing, for you, a daily ritual?* Take choreographer Twyla Tharp, for instance:

> I begin each day of my life with a ritual: I wake up at 5:30 a.m., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st Street and First Avenue, where I work out for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and the weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual. (In Currey, 2013, pp. 222–223)

In *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (2013), editor Mason Currey documents the productive, ritualized lives of more than 150 different artists and writers. It should come as no surprise that there is little in common from one artist to another. What worked for philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (lots of walks!) is strikingly different from what helped Truman Capote work ("'I'm a completely horizontal author,' Capote told *The Paris Review* in 1957. 'I can't think unless I'm lying down'" [2013, p. 126]). *Coffee* is a big factor for many of the artists profiled (as it is for us, too). One aspect that *is* noted across the many examples of artists' routines, however, is the emphasis on consistency. *Every day*, these artists get up and go about their very different processes of production.

Every day.

Some take off weekends; a few don't. But the last word in the book's subtitle, *How Artists Work*, must be emphasized. Writing and *being* a writer is work. Some days it may be so joyful and exuberant that we lose all track of time, and ourselves, in our work. But often that is not the case. One's practice as a writer is developed through one's writing practices. We find that part of adopting a Teacher as Writer pose requires us to assume the work-like ethos of writing every day. It is important for teachers and students alike to realize that labor begets habits, which beget identities in return.

As we mentioned previously, that's why we often require the preservice teachers in our classes to maintain blogs on a weekly basis in spite of their

inevitable annoyance about this assignment. Their most frequent complaints are they don't have time to blog, they can't think of ideas, and they don't have anything significant to *say* in such spaces. These are wobbles that will be familiar to many of us as we attempt to take on writing identities as part of this pose. Some of our students acknowledge that they aren't writers and are frustrated by the project. But we remind them that at least part of the rationale for the assignment is *because* they will experience this frustration. We want our students to see themselves as writers, and we know from personal experience that this worthwhile identity is earned through struggle. Writers commit themselves to the routine of squaring off against the blank screen and trusting that the words will come. In fact, they never really go away. We find that we're constantly "writing in our heads," which is why we both carry around pocket-sized notebooks or hurriedly open the Notes feature on our phones to scribble down observations that might lead to more extended writing when our laptops are handy.

Keeping up with a practice aligns with the advice of some of our beloved writers. In 1813, Jane Austen wrote in a letter to her sister, "I am not at all in a humor for writing; I must write on till I am" (Republic of Pemberley, n.d.). More recently, the uber-prolific writer Neil Gaiman confesses that there are days when he just doesn't feel inspired. On those days, he still goes to his writing space and gives himself permission not to write, with the precondition that he has to remain in his chair:

> "I'm allowed to sit at my desk, I'm allowed to stare out at the world, I'm allowed to do anything I like, as long as it isn't anything," he explained. "Not allowed to do a crossword, not allowed to read a book, not allowed to phone a friend, not allowed to make a clay model of something. All I'm allowed to do is absolutely nothing, or write." (famouswritingroutines, 2022; https://famouswritingroutines.com/writing-routines/neil-gaiman-writing-routine/)

You may be wondering, "But what about writer's block? What about the ever-so-elusive muse?" Barbara Kingsolver says, "It would be easy to say oh, I have writer's block, oh, I have to wait for my muse. I don't. Chain that muse to your desk and get the job done" (as cited in Morscheck, 2018). Maya Angelou has similar advice, but suggests a gentler approach: "When I'm writing, I write. And then it's as if the muse is convinced that I'm serious and says, 'Okay. Okay. I'll come'" (Hall, 2022).

If the routine of just showing up works for Gaiman, Kingsolver, and Angelou (and us, for that matter), chances are good that it will work for you. Carving out the necessary space and time helps writing come more naturally, yet it's not enough if you don't get your butt in the chair. After interviewing around 100 academic writers about their writing practices, Helen Sword deducted that "[time] and place will remain empty containers for failed ambitions unless you fill them with your writing" (Sword, 2017). Establishing

your own idiosyncratic routines can be the missing link that will help you experience flow with this particular pose.

WHY ASSUMING A WRITER POSE MATTERS FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Connecting to the previous chapter's focus on writing for civic purpose, we propose that the Teacher as Writer pose is one that civically empowers teachers and students alike. Contrary to Jost's (1990) framing, writing isn't a task reserved for teachers with leisure time and smooth-sailing advanced honors classes. Instead, it is important for all students, but particularly for BIPOC students and students from other historically oppressed groups, to *see* their teachers write. As we've stated above, doing so lets students in on the secret that there *is* no secret to being a writer, although the act of writing is often *hard*. By modeling how to weather wobble—those moments when writing feels strenuous and frustrating—we, too, are reminded that this is the same frustration that our students go through each day in our classrooms. Moreover, they can see how our resistance mirrors theirs. Making writing something that is acceptable, encouraged, and *expected* of youth who are historically marginalized has a significant impact on youth identity and social transformation (Martinez, 2017). In her book by the same name, Gholdy Muhammad (2020) draws on her Historically Responsive Literacy framework to argue that it's key to "cultivating students' genius."

In Antero's experiences with teaching BIPOC high school students in historically marginalized schools, writing was not something typically embraced in classrooms. The social norms of urban schools characterized writing as something that *other people* did. These interpretations fall predictably in line with the notion of labeling academically successful youth as "acting White," as noted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). Expanding on and clarifying this research, Ogbu has reframed his work to explain that youth who resist dominant cultural practices take on an "oppositional identity" (1991). Finn (2009) also emphasizes the direct connection between the need for equity and students' writing identities: "Members of the oppressed group come to regard certain beliefs, skills, tastes, values, attitudes, and behaviors as *not* appropriate for them because they are associated with the dominant culture. Adopting these is seen as surrendering to the enemy" (p. 42).

Literacy researchers have also addressed resistance and identity with regard to writing, and diverse language use more generally, in schools for many years (Baker-Bell, 2020; Delpit, 2006; Everhart, 1983; Smitherman, 1996). The same is true for professional organizations made up of classroom teachers and college professors like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and their sister organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). In 1974, NCTE passed a

resolution affirming "students' right to their own language—to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity." This stance has persisted and expanded, as demonstrated by more recent position statements made by both organizations, on the incorporation of "heritage and home languages" in student writing (NCTE, 2011); gender and language (NCTE, 2018); Black Linguistic Justice (CCCC, 2020a); multilingual language practices (CCCC, 2020b); and white language supremacy (CCCC, 2021). These resolutions make it clear that the resistance that many students from historically marginalized groups feel toward writing in school is connected to the problematic reality that the dialect of standardized American English is still privileged as the "alpha dog dialect" in schools and the workplace (Crovitz & Deveraux, 2016, p. 23). Because this view is often a foregone conclusion in classrooms, these students routinely experience "linguicism," or "linguistic violence," as former classroom teacher Danny Martinez (2017) refers to it.

To further emphasize this point, the book *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy* includes a chapter titled "Be Yourself Somewhere Else: What's Wrong With Keeping Undervalued English Out of the Classroom?" In it, linguist Rusty Barrett highlights the very real consequences for students when a "Standard-English-only" policy is employed in school. He points out that because "undervalued varieties of English are the strongest marker of social identity," such a policy "subjects children to potential criticisms of 'wanting to be White' or failing to be proud of their ethnic identity" (Young et al., 2018, p. 51). In sum, it's important to understand how even the baseline practices we ask students to use every day in our classrooms, like putting a pen to paper (or fingertips to a laptop) or participating in class discussion, reflect the extent to which systemic inequities are built into the structure of schools.

The good news, however, is that intervention in this phenomenon is possible. To address these linguistic inequities, all of the researchers, classroom teachers, and professional organizations we mention above draw on critical language pedagogy to recommend mindsets and methods teachers can use to help students uncover what they already know intuitively about how language is used within and beyond schools so that they can exercise their *own* agency as writers. BIPOC youth already use language in powerful ways for the purposes of civic engagement, advocacy, and activism; why not provide them opportunities to do so as a matter of course in our classroom (Martinez, 2017)?

In ELA classrooms, for instance, teachers can make the study of a range of dialects a formal part of the curriculum, asking students to become linguistic sleuths by collecting examples of what linguists refer to as "language-in-use" in everyday settings, like classrooms, school hallways, their homes, commercials, song lyrics, and social media posts and hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter. They can then share their examples and analyze them together in class, leading to

rich discussions regarding the language choices that people make daily to express identity, make connections, critique inequities, and speak truth to power. When students understand the implications of their informal research for the linguistic choices that they and others make, literacy tasks like this help them develop "metalinguistic awareness" and reinforce their rhetorical power as writers.

In all content areas, students benefit from strategies and projects that center writing. In social studies classrooms, students can investigate how writing in all forms has been central to forging solidarity and enacting resistance social and political movements across history, then use writing for similar purposes in their own communities. In science classrooms, students can study how youth like Greta Thunberg have leveraged language to fight against climate change and then use similar techniques to share their own views on course-related content. In music classes, students can explore how musical organizations like Music to Life work with "musician change makers" who write songs about such topics as civil rights, climate change, environmental justice, and poverty (musictolife.org). They can examine the lyrics and lives of socially conscious musicians from various eras, then write and perform lyrics of their own about social issues relevant to their lives. Similarly, when students are given opportunities to use mathematics as a tool for understanding and proposing solutions to social problems, such as food insecurity, writing also functions as a tool that allows students to (a) explore their thinking while solving problems, (b) communicate their reasoning to peers and teachers, (c) support arguments using mathematical evidence, and (d) engage in "mathematically creative writing" to propose new questions and out-of-the-box solutions they can bring to bear on other contexts (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2017). Infographics, public service announcements, or other solutions-based genres would be ideal for highlighting their viewpoints. As an added bonus, every one of the above suggestions meet academic standards and performance expectations for the disciplines we've covered. (We checked!)

We could go on, but two points are key in all of the above examples. First, writing is a powerful tool for helping students gain deep understanding of their disciplines in ways that are relevant to and consequential for their everyday lives and their engagement in the world. As Antero and his coauthors have observed elsewhere, teachers must provide students with opportunities to "compose new texts, disseminate them to the world, and invent new expressive forms for the purpose of building expansive and just social futures" (Lysicott et al., 2021, p. 5).

Second, strategies and projects like these require *writing in community*. As such, they provide a clear picture of what *being* a writer looks and feels like, a picture that is too often absent in school for students from historically marginalized populations. There is a romantic image, we suspect, in many students' heads of the individual writer off in a picturesque cabin clacking

away at a beautiful typewriter, hour in and hour out. The image portrays a writer fully immersed in their words, content with a steaming cup of joe and pages to fill. Even today, with several books and articles under our individual belts, we still conjure this archetype when we think abstractly of "writing," and we suspect that students share that image. And while several of the artists profiled in Currey (2013) do indeed clock in to their writing spaces each day, generally that's not how the literary sausage is made. Students at 2:00 a.m. staring at the winking cursor know this. Instructors know this. We *know* that writing is hard and that the hardest part about it is just doing it. It is easy to pay lip service to the value of writing with our students, but actually writing *with* our students visibly addresses their need for a more realistic image they can see right in front of their eyes, while at the same time reinforcing and clarifying this value for adults.

That's why from the time Cindy became a high school teacher, she has begun most of her classes with a routine she calls "Writing Into the Day," adapted from a practice that Julia Cameron, author of the classic book *The Artist's Way* (2016), calls "Morning Pages." While Cameron recommends three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing in longhand on any subject without stopping, Cindy typically sets a time limit, beginning at 5 minutes near the beginning of the semester, then gradually ramping up to 10, where she asks students to freewrite to a particular prompt related to the focus for that day's class. Students can choose a different angle if they like, as long as it's connected to the subject in some way. She writes with students, too, so they can observe moments when she gets stuck, looks up from her paper, and chews on the end of her pen before returning to the page. When the alarm on her phone indicates that time is up, the class debriefs what they wrote, sometimes all together and sometimes in pairs. Especially near the start of the semester, Cindy also asks them to briefly share their process: Where did they get hung up? How did they keep writing anyway? Hearing from others, including herself, about both the content and process of their writing provides a natural entry point into that day's focus, allows students to hear a range of viewpoints on the subject, and goes a long way toward establishing a community of writers.

While this example addresses how to support students' identities as writers more generally, both the views of professional organizations and researchers, as well as the teaching strategies and assignment ideas we've mentioned throughout this section, emphasize how writing functions as a powerful tool for shaping student identities and attitudes toward social justice.

Pleasurable escape? Sure, it would be nice if every single one of our students fell in love with writing just for the pure joy it can bring. Some will. Even those who don't, however, deserve the example of teachers who demonstrate the critical role writing plays in our lives as human beings and as social agents in schools. When students see teachers as fellow writers, the power dynamics are realigned so that classrooms become more democratic spaces that reflect sustainable social futures.

POWER IN NUMBERS

We have found that participating in a community of writers is essential to achieving flow within the Teacher as Writer pose, both for moral support through the previously described struggles writers face and for the cross-fertilization of ideas these communities afford. The "bootstraps myth" in the United States, which is hyperfocused on the accomplishments of the individual, is also often generalized to the areas of creativity and innovation. This tradition ignores the emphasis that many Indigenous cultures place on the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their communities, as well as the historical fact that most celebrated individuals operate within existing domains that depend on the input and support of others (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; John-Steiner, 2006). Even though we typically picture one painter poised in front of the canvas, one composer puzzling over a score, one scientist holding a beaker to the light, none of them creates in a vacuum. Painters depend on patrons and draw inspiration from artistic circles and popular culture; composers have always practiced remix; the trend for Nobel Prizes in chemistry to be awarded to individuals has reversed in recent years. Whether they acknowledge it publicly or not, creators devise their work in a cultural context (Sawyer, 2012).

Writing is no different.

Our personal commitment to writing in community extends beyond traditional forums for professional development like conferences and district workshops. We both consider X (formerly known as Twitter) and other social media platforms to be part of our "professional learning network." As often as we use these tools to post personal updates and pictures of our undeniably fascinating dogs, we also link to education-related websites, retweet smart things other literacy researchers and our own students have said, and participate in professional conversations on timely subjects by searching relevant hashtags. We also write, read, and comment on educators' blogs and build rudimentary, short-term communities with other participants during webinars and online conference sessions via the real-time chat.

Both of us have shared our work in writing groups over the years, and many of our publications are coauthored. Even though these have historically "counted less" than single-authored publications in the metric our university uses to measure scholarly output, we have argued again and again that this ought not be the case. Writing in community actually takes *more* time, not less. So why do we choose to do it? Because it sharpens our thinking. It improves our final product.

It also allows us to speak with authority about the writing process from the inside out. We aren't just the assigners and evaluators of our students' writing; we are their fellow writers. We support and commiserate with our students through the process because we are writing, too. We comment on works in progress on their blogs and posts on class forums, and ask them to do the same

for ours. During face-to-face and online discussions, we are genuinely able to say, "I've been thinking and writing about [INSERT SUBJECT OF THE DAY HERE], too, and your ideas are really making me reconsider my views. Now I'm wondering. . . . ," and so forth.

Engaging in written "exploratory talk" and writing (Barnes, 2008) on challenging topics with students in this way over time builds a sort of collective consciousness that deepens everyone's learning, including yours. Furthermore, it allows students to get a firsthand view of how you, as an expert in your own discipline, are still curious about the subject you're teaching and are committed to deepening that thinking with the help of others; in short, it allows them to eavesdrop on you as the lead learner in the classroom. Celebrating the completion of our respective final drafts with our students completes the circle. Through all of these processes, we flatten the teacher-student hierarchy by conversing writer-to-writer and simultaneously demonstrating the value of engaging in the long tradition of participating in a community of writers.

In November 2013, we joined a much larger writing community by participating in the legendary annual event called NaNoWriMo (short for National Novel Writing Month), which you may already be familiar with. Along with more than 200,000 other people, we launched into 30 days of *intense* writing. NaNoWriMo challenges people to write 50,000 words in the month of November. It's a staggering number of words, but when broken into daily doses, it amounts to just shy of 1,700 words per day and feels (slightly) less daunting. Though most of the other participants who were writing had volunteered for NaNoWriMo, we were committed to AcWriMo—a contingent of other academic nerds writing papers and dissertations and presentations.

The NaNoWriMo website (nanowrimo.org) formalizes a social network of online support through a forum, pep-talk letters by professional writers, and announcements of local, face-to-face NaNoWriMo write-ins. What we think is important to share here isn't how awesome it feels to have so much writing completed on projects we are working on. Instead, we are interested in how the practice of writing is supported and fundamentally different in today's digital age. When we write in the morning and add our progress to a growing number of tweets where we share our progress, we join a community of other writers. Technology helps hold us accountable by connecting our own literacy practices with others'.

To be sure, NaNoWriMo privileges quantity over quality. The question at the end of a month of writing *isn't* "Did you write something good?" It is instead, "Did you write the number of words you said you would?" Significant editing and pruning are required to get verbiage from NaNoWriMo into something publicly presentable. You aren't winning Pulitzers with your NaNoWriMo text. You are, however, building a writing *habit* and doing so with a collective. While we took a few days off after the marathon-like process of committing to NaNoWriMo, the 30 days of continual gunning down the

blank screen made writing in December that much easier and familiar and even generated initial drafts of some of the materials for this book.

And this brings us to a significant tension: At its heart, what makes NaNoWriMo a *somewhat* sustainable model for us was the fact that we balanced each other's writing as well as that of a community. This writing space during the month of November helped us eliminate excuses in our lives. Unsurprisingly, our email inboxes remained as cluttered as they had been at any other point in the year. Our students were still alive and relatively well attended to. We didn't look like estranged relatives to our family members. Best of all, we were relatively unhampered by writer's block because a friend-driven pact buoyed us toward completing our daily word count. Over the month, both our occasional frustrations and Ray Bradbury's sense of "joy" in writing were shared. As he notes:

> I've never worked a day in my life. The joy of writing has propelled me from day to day and year to year. I want you to envy me, my joy. Get out of here tonight and say: "Am I being joyful?" And if you've got a writer's block, you can cure it this evening by stopping whatever you're writing and doing something else. You picked the wrong subject. (University of California Television, 2008)

Moving beyond the excuse of writer's block, we recognize that writing is laborious. (This is why doctoral students never have houses so clean as they do when writing their dissertations.) Yet writing in a community—whether face-to-face or virtually—definitely helps.

Joining a community of teachers who write is equally important to maintaining a Teacher as Writer pose. Over many years, the National Writing Project (NWP) has been one such community for us. While the organizational structure of NWP has evolved in recent years, it continues to be affiliated with programs that help K–16 teachers in all content areas across the nation network with one another, not by offering a set of universal teaching strategies, but by providing professional development experiences and other resources that are rooted in the principle that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves.

As a matter of course, teachers participating in NWP professional development programs not only study theory and research on writing pedagogy and learn strategies for teaching writing, but, as the NWP explains (nwp.org), they also have "frequent and ongoing opportunities . . . to write"—a phrase that echoes the practices that academic standards require students to engage in as well. The organization's model communicates that one doesn't learn to teach writing once and for all; rather, getting better as a writing teacher is best done in the company of others who are committed to deepening their classroom practice through sustained opportunities to write, learn, and lead together. Furthermore, because of NWP's emphasis on equity-based practice, these communities are frequently populated by educators across all disciplines who share a commitment to anti-bias, antiracist teaching. Rather than

promoting "groupthink," however, NWP colleagues typically fall into the category of "critical friends" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), who push one another's thinking around thorny issues related to racial and other forms of oppression in constructive ways (O'Donnell-Allen & Robbins, 2023a). In our own experiences and those of many of our NWP colleagues, the support NWP provides through its many programs has spanned the entirety of our careers.

We recognize that the above expectations and practices can feel at once intellectually intimidating and liberating for educators who assume the pose of Teacher as Writer. Yet because NWP teachers belong to their own writing communities, they carve out similar spaces in their classrooms for their students. They open their classroom doors to share their learning with colleagues, and they develop an inquiry stance toward their work. Furthermore, extensive research indicates that the writing practices all teachers participate in in NWP professional development programs (not just those who have been officially inducted into the NWP network) inevitably result in lasting changes to classroom instruction and to their students' motivation and achievement in writing (National Writing Project, 2010).

We describe NWP at length because it has been so essential to achieving flow in our own development as teachers who write and writers who teach writing, but you can find other communities online. For instance, NaNoWriMo sponsors "Now What" programs that connect writers and provide other resources to help them maintain writing momentum beyond the month of November. Scribophile (scribophile.com) is another longstanding, award-winning site that connects writers from around the world and every stripe. Members serve as beta readers for one another's writing, provide support and inspiration for one another, and have access to numerous resources designed to "take the loneliness out of our solitary craft."

If face-to-face interaction is more your cup of tea, you can even create a writing group with teachers at your school site like Cindy did when she taught high school English. Antero has also met regularly with writing groups online. At a prescheduled time, he and several friends log on to a digital platform and turn off the speakers by "muting" themselves (no one can hear them if they talk or pick up background noise) while they write for 30–45 minutes at a time. The process provides community and accountability, even when they are all writing from homes and coffee shops thousands of miles away. Whether you join a national network or form a writing group with the teachers down the hall, participating in a community with other writing teachers can play a significant role in your personal and professional growth as a teacher and a writer.

CONCLUSION: SO, YOU'RE A WRITER. NOW WHAT?

In this chapter we have described how the pose of Teacher as Writer can translate into powerful, critically conscious classroom pedagogy. As you

take on the dispositions and practices necessary to *be* a writer, we want to remind you that wobble is part of the package. Yet as should be clear by now, we do not see wobble as a liability. Feelings of uncertainty and tension as a learner, while not always comfortable, often signal powerful opportunities for development and growth (Vygotsky, 1986). As we discussed in Chapter 3, by intentionally moving into spaces of discomfort and unfamiliarity, we become vulnerable learners who are open to the possibility of uncovering new ideas and embodying new identities, like seeing ourselves as teachers *and* writers.

While the Teacher as Writer pose can feel daunting, strategies like finding a conducive atmosphere for writing, developing daily writing routines, and participating in writing and teaching communities can help you move from wobble to flow. We have found this pose to be personally and professionally fulfilling, but we also see it as an imperative rooted in educational equity. The act of writing and its accompanying identity are more than privileges enjoyed by those with time for leisure. Even though writing is often cast aside in the education of historically marginalized student populations, all students—particularly those in academically impoverished school spaces—must be able to see their teachers as writers in order to see themselves as writers. By reframing writing not as mere schoolwork, but as work students do in and on the world, we help them recognize their own agency as learners as well as their civic responsibility to enact social change.

Provocations

1. Look back at the list of questions on page 102. How does your own physical space reflect and foster the pose of Teacher as Writer? (If you don't have a personal space for writing yet, create one that reflects the identity you want to develop.)
2. Likewise, to what extent does your classroom space enable students to develop a writing identity?
3. What is the activity that allows writing to become a daily ritual for you? For your students?
4. What networks for writers in your local and online communities can help you and your students sustain your writing practice? If no such community springs to mind, how might you create one with generous, like-minded colleagues?
5. Also consider the many networks available for teachers who write and invite their students to do the same. We've focused on the National Writing Project, but that is only one example. How can you connect with these professional networks to sustain your own writing practice and pedagogy?

Connections

Explore the following resources for further insight into creative processes and professional networking:

Burke, O. (2023). *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals.*

This book, whose title reflects the average length of the human life span, can light a fire in helping you exercise your creativity by "embracing finitude," based on your own definition of a meaningful life.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (2008). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.*

The research of Csikszentmihalyi offers clear guidance on how to attain states of "flow" and how such routine practices can improve one's creative output.

Currey, Mason. (2013). *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work.*

This book acts as a collection of more than 150 artists' and writers' production practices. In looking *across* the examples, Currey's work offers inspiration and tactical suggestions for readers on how to systematize and solidify consistent writing.

Famous Writing Routines (famouswritingroutines.com)

Just as its name indicates, this site features articles and interviews that provide an inside view of the rituals, practices, and resources used by successful authors from the past to present day.

The Marginalian (themarginalian.org)

If you want to jumpstart your creativity, we think you'll love this site, which was formerly called "Brain Pickings." For close to 20 years, curator Maria Popova has captured and connected the profound insights of writers, artists, musicians, scientists, philosophers, photographers, and other creative thinkers on every subject you can imagine that is relevant to the human condition. Every entry describes the inspiration behind some of their biggest—and most obscure—ideas and demonstrates the cross-fertilization of their thinking with others over time.

The National Writing Project (https://www.nwp.org)

With a network of more than 50,000 teachers, the National Writing Project supports teachers as writers and writing instruction for learners across schooling contexts. Their network of sites in every state in the United States has helped ensure community-sustaining writing practices for more than 50 years. You can visit nwp.org to find your local Writing Project site. To connect online with other educators who write and teach writing in all content areas, you can also join NWP's "Write Now Teacher Studio" for free (https://studio.nwp.org). It's a one-stop shop "where teachers write, share, and talk shop about writing and the teaching of writing."

The Writing Cooperative (https://writingcooperative.com)

This site, associated with the online network Medium, provides a huge collection of writing resources, advice, encouragement, and opportunities to connect online with other writers.