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Keeping Life's Work on File

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I teach a children's literature course to teacher candidates that opens each semester with a week of reflective practice. Many of my students have never heard of or participated in such an endeavor. I explain that this is a great way to begin research because considering how you read books provides insight as to how young people approach books, and making these connections is necessary for understanding children's literature. Students find that this initial self-reflection leads to ideas about why some children become reluctant readers, why certain genres appeal to specific age groups, and how a comfy chair or harsh criticism can play a role in memories of a book. In other words, reflection is the first step in turning practice into theory—a process of praxis.

This ongoing practice of reflection keeps teachers connected to their pedagogical values while also making adjustments as necessitated by new contexts, new courses, and new knowledge. Over time a legacy develops from harnessing memories and generating new knowledge. This is particularly relevant to educators today as broad-based educational challenges arise from the changing landscape of literacy education.

Presumably all teachers have bits and pieces of what "feels right" in the classroom. By giving our practices more thought, documenting what we do everyday, and organizing those materials in accessible spaces, English language professionals can use self-knowledge to gain professional understanding. Documentation leads to discoveries of how classroom contexts impact teacher performance and identities. This, in turn, allows educators to move daily experiences into theoretical frameworks. Building off of the premise that acknowledging the relevance of self is the necessary groundwork for professional growth, the following discussion focuses on practical advice for documenting English instruction. Rather than provide a "fail-proof" plan, this is a practical guide for compiling, assessing, and sharing representations of teaching English. Keeping life's work on file does not place documents into stone; they are mean to be revisited and revised in order to discover what works, what needs to change be changed, and how classroom environments evolve over time. Recognizing influences from theories, pedagogies, and practices can provide teachers with useful ways to assess and engage in conversations about their work.

Building Reflective Habits: Compiling

In *Teaching Lives*, Wendy Bishop describes the habit of reflection as "wandering determinedly, composing myself here and there" (294) as she jots down tidbits as they present themselves to her. As a reader I am drawn into Bishop's experiences, while at the same time I consider my own memories of teaching and learning. She encourages readers to try these "writing in the gaps" and "scribbling end-notes" (x). Bishop shares her stories so that teachers come to understand their teaching and eventually share their stories: "I hope this collection speaks to teachers who are seeking to learn their own ways, who are busy (re)constructing their own teaching lives and who care to share stories together . . .If this collection acts as a teaching journal, encouraging others to keep their own, formally or informally, or to write teaching essays for professional journals in composition, then it will have accomplished my goals" (x-xi).

Keeping a teaching journal provides what Ruskin-Mayher calls the "heart and soul" of concentrated reflection or meaning making (139). Consider breaking your journal into sections where you can keep track of the daily operations of your classes (lesson plans, ideas for upcoming units) in one section and personal reflections (snatches of ideas that need to find a home) in another. Write on only one side of the page so that the backside of each page remains available for future comments. Leave

space for compiling a detailed table of contents, date each entry (including the year), and leave room at the end of the journal for creating an index of particularly relevant passages.

Today I keep my journal on my computer and return to it each morning along with a cup of coffee and clear head. This journal has a table of contents and is broken into monthly files. Joan Bolker, a writing psychologist and consultant, helps her clients get beyond this tendency towards procrastination by encouraging them to write first everyday (with one day off a week) and by granting them permission to write for only 15 minutes once seated. The way I interpret writing first, however, is to literally schedule writing as the first thing to do in the day. The easy-to-follow schedule also makes the writing habit more effective each day it is followed. The daily habit of writing quickly transforms itself into the habit of recording the professional nuances of daily life, and this information is what is necessary for building a personal/professional portfolio.

Aligning Personal/Professional Goals: Assessing

According to Lee Shulman, when teacher portfolios entered the professional arena in the 1980s, they were heralded as an alternative assessment tool. Shulman and his associates talked to architects and other arts-based professionals who historically rely on portfolios for employment and advancement about their processes and products (26). Shulman's research argues that teachers should decide what types of material to include, what organizational structure works best, and what presentation format is most suitable.

Not all portfolios are designed to be evaluated by others. Private portfolios, or working portfolios, are collections that form a framework for self-assessment and goal setting (Campbell et al 3). Campbell and colleagues argue that engaging in this form of portfolio development helps educators gain a clearer picture of themselves as an emerging professional (7). High school English teacher Sarah Lorenz views her files as reflections on personal approaches to her professional life. The bulk of Lorenz's legacy is student-produced book reviews, stories, and newspaper editorials. The rest of her files contain books and articles that she uses with her students and those that inform her teaching (19-20). When choosing which materials to save, Lorenz explains that "[f]iles are a personal, idiosyncratic thing. A filing cabinet is a scrapbook of a career, especially in education" (19). Reconstructing her filing cabinet into a professional portfolio involves further selection.

Institutional requirements often dictate that teachers follow a prescribed list of items to include in teaching portfolios. While the potential for teaching portfolios remains strong, Shulman warns educators about four dangers to address when constructing and/or evaluating teaching portfolios: lamination (portfolio as exhibition), trivialization (portfolio as inconsequential), perversion (portfolio as cumbersome multiple choice test), and misrepresentation (portfolio as underplaying weaknesses) (34-5). Because Lorenz's files are constantly evolving, she sidesteps Shulman's concerns over "lamination."

Experienced reflective teachers and teacher educators recognize the value in constructing ongoing daily routines of "critical reflection" that "integrate theory, observation, and practice" (Yagelski 225), but they struggle with how to bring their pre-service teachers to embrace such notions. This difficulty may arise from the fact that while many pre-service teachers are trained with reflection in mind, the means for encouraging reflection often revolve around teacher portfolio development involving little more than collecting and commenting on specific artifacts. How can each of us tap into the powerful benefits of teaching portfolios without falling into Shulman's warnings regarding lamination, trivialization, perversion, and misrepresentation?

Each component to my portfolio reflects who I am and/or wish to be personally and professionally. The first "fantasy" section opens with reflections on professional goals I hope to accomplish balanced against thoughts about how I wish to spend my time ("fantasy" at the planning

stage). For example, rather than ignore the frustration I felt as a graduate student who never had enough time to be both social and productive, I combined the two by organizing a reading group. By inviting friends to join me to read books we should all be reading anyway I started a project whereby we selected a book a month to read and discuss. This simple plan evolved into a semester of lively dinner parties full of academically relevant discussions on seven professional texts that had been put off for years and a published article describing our teacher reading group.

The second step in the fantasy-reality-fantasy portfolio development model is the documentation of what transpires throughout the duration of each project. At this stage I gain a sense of how far I've grown; collecting artifacts provide quantifiable justifications for how I spend my time and energy. I consider each artifact in the "reality" collection, remind myself of my "fantasy" goals for day-to-day living, and write out my reflections on how these previous experiences and ideas can amount to dream jobs, goals, and aspirations.

Teachers need the time and space to customize their portfolios into "proving tools" that contextualize their teaching performances for themselves and their readers (Campbell et al 49). To do this portfolio development processes should address the shifting professional needs and demands experienced by a teacher during different points in his or her career. In this way the portfolio starts as a means for self-discovery with an eye toward an eventual public and rhetorical presentation.

Sharing

Rather than only using teaching portfolios as evaluative tools for accountability, portfolios can be viewed as a mechanism for dialogue. My "in sync" file is a storehouse of articles and annotated bibliographies of theorists, teacher researchers, and scholars whose ideas are aligned with the pedagogical practices with which I believe. An important component for writing a teaching philosophy, an in sync file is also a helpful resource for backing up teaching practices if they are ever called into question. After keeping the file for a while, you may begin to notice authors and professional journals that consistently match your teaching philosophy or a particular theoretical tradition. This file becomes a resource to help you articulate your ideas to yourself and others, and eventually grows into a review of literature that is the foundation for your teaching philosophy.

For example, I have a one-page section from Quintilian that I use for students as they revise their writing. I had the Quintilian piece in my "in sync" file because I like what he has to say about revision strategies. Once I figured out a way to bring Quintilian directly into my classroom, I made a new file including the excerpt from Quintilian, background information about him, a lesson plan, general information about revision strategies, and some reflections about revision strategies copied from my teaching journal. As I continue to teach the process of revision to student writers, I add to the file. Today the file includes a set of alternative style essays, student-produced (re)writing, and a multitude of revision activities built from the original ideas posited by Quintilian and supported by more recent theorists. This filing system supports ongoing reflection and is particularly helpful in demonstrating how philosophical views are put into practice over time.

As I struggle to articulate my views on literacy, writing instruction, teacher preparation, reading and other hot-button topics related to the teaching of English, I often turn to teachers who have published accounts of their own professional struggles by sharing their inner thoughts with an English teaching audience. I find that these texts, written by teacher-scholars who describe the "workings" of their teaching, provide me valuable insights into my own practices. While there are numerous published accounts of teaching written by teachers, *A Peaceable Classroom,* by Mary Rose O'Reilley and *Teaching Lives*, by Wendy Bishop have been particularly valuable examples for me.

Peter Elbow provides an example of what I am talking about when he describes the concepts of teaching that resurfaced for him when reading

A Peaceable Classroom. Elbow interrupted his reading of the book to ask himself questions about his own teaching practices and posed the questions, "If I remember it [a student's inner life] more; if I asked myself, 'What does today's teaching plan have to do with my students' inner life? And with my inner life?' Then I think I would teach differently: better, less frantic, less troubled, less chronically torn, with more calm assurance" (xi). Striving for inner peace when reading this book also makes sense because of O'Reilley's deep commitment to constructing a learning environment that supports and literally engages in peace, making a text that was written as she "simultaneously discovered" herself corresponds with the need for teachers to tell their stories because stories are how we come to know who we are as teachers and learners (Elbaz).

In Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives*, she considers her practice in a set of essays drawing from many years, institutions, and experiences in her teaching life. She opens the preface with the question: "Why include autobiography with research, classroom stories with theories of genre and reading and writing, facts with fictionalized explorations? And why bundle this up now?" (vii). Readers learn how Bishop's practices have evolved over time because of the grappling nature of the essays. Bishop calls her meanderings "partial maps" as she shares practical classroom knowledge to "try to illustrate the ways a teaching life improves when a teacher reflects on classroom communities" (1). Often when I read books written by teachers that discuss their practices I develop my own index in and around the margins of the chapters. It is here that I tell my own stories back to the writer by commenting on what is being said. When I finish reading a teacher's "portfolio," I return to my teaching journal to record thoughts and transcribe favorite passages. These are quiet moments when I combine reading and writing—that provides me the peace and meditative practices necessary when composing a teaching self. I gather strength, motivation, and the creative energy necessary for building ideas I want to share with other English language professionals.

Publishing ideas or research in professional articles is one way teachers can open up communication and transform self-knowledge into community knowledge. Forming professional writing and reading groups is another way teachers can discuss important information about real classrooms. Often these examples of reaching out help insulate teachers by forming a responsive community of peers. Stepping out into the public domain is another issue. Taking teacher practice into the public is possible through book talks at local libraries and bookstores and by writing for community newspapers. While this decision to go public has its dangers, teachers who have foundational support on file are in a good position to inform interested parties about educational issues from a firsthand perspective. This attempt to branch out is a personal and political decision individuals must make for themselves, but it is also a viable way for the teaching profession to gain strength and support throughout wider communities. Whether strictly personal, or increasingly public, keeping life's work on file is yet another way teachers gain strength through classroom learning.

How is this practice of keeping one's life work on file relevant to others? Filing away ideas never to be used again is not the purpose of these activities, rather, this essay is meant to provide a set of ideas for gathering information in such a way that it becomes more accessible. Sharing one's life's work is a risk, but the act of sharing as a step worth taking so that others and the profession as a whole may gain strength. Giving credence to classroom practice involves sharing classroom stories and tells us something about who we are as people—as learners, thinkers, workers, and dreamers.

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