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Becoming As Teachers In The Wake of September 11

Marcy Taylor

Our students may ask professors of English studies and English education how they should behave when they get in the classroom or in central offices, but what they really need from us, what we do that educates them more profoundly than any good advice, is our response to this implicit request: "Show me who to be."

—Collette Dilworth and Nancy Mellin McCracken, "Ideological Crosscurrents in English Studies and English Education" (8)

It is not my intention to leave the reader with a sinister or defeated image of me. I am a contradiction of sorts, I suppose. I love to be fun and make people smile (after all, I am a teacher), and I am a very positive person . . . It's just that my writing reflects my hidden emotions and fears—and there's no stopping it. As Calkins says, we must be honest with our writing.

—Nichole Putman, from ENG 315 Midterm Portfolio

[First-year teachers] found that certainty/uncertainty and possibility/impossibility exist within the same space of becoming.

—Ruth Vinz, "Opening Moves: Reflections on the First Year of Teaching" (172)

When I met my class of preservice elementary teachers on 12 September, I started the class

period by asking: "Imagine that you are teaching and something like this happens. What will you say to your students?" I started this way not only to get them to reflect on their own practice but, frankly, because I hoped that through their responses they would let me know what I should say to them. What sort of response was ethical and productive?

Many students responded that they would have their students write and then share their writing as a way of beginning a discussion about the uncertainty, fear, sadness, and anger they were feeling. My students were just beginning to experience the possibility of writing workshop for themselves, and they saw writing as a logical way to respond to such a jolting event. In our class that day, we also spent much of the time writing and sharing, and I'd like to focus here on some of those writings as a way of illustrating one way in which new teachers can use writing to cope with the disjunction and tension of change (both in the sense of healing from a tragedy like 9/11 and in the larger sense of developing as teachers of writing).

Becoming as Teachers: Dis-Positioning and Change

English educators working with preservice and first-year teachers have emphasized a sense of rupture—of thinking deeply and differently—as a necessary component of reflective practice. Vinz uses the metaphor of "dis-positioning," which she describes in terms of the question, "How Am I Becoming as a Teacher, as a Knower, Enabler, and

Believer?": "Becoming" requires continuous reformulations of the self as teacher. I emphasize agency. Hence, the dispositions that I'm trying to make explicit through the question are really dis-positions—continuously learning to *un-know* and *not-know*" ("Becoming" 139). *Un-knowing* involves bringing to the surface and interrogating certain assumptions that have become implicit in our teaching or learning. Vinz helps prospective teachers to do this through "narrative recitation," in which students recount events from their schooling history in the present tense and then reflect on them. *Not-knowing*, on the other hand, is the quality of trusting in uncertainty (the space of possibility in our teaching). In her study of first-year teachers (see also Vinz "Opening Moves"), she found that

trust in *not-knowing* was not often present in their repertoire (*too often absent from my own*) nor did they value uncertainty as a space wherein they could negotiate with the students in the classroom. More often, they thought of uncertainty, the *not-knowing*, as a weakness. . . ." ("Becoming" 141-42)

Maxine Greene echoes Vinz in arguing for the need for teachers to embrace uncertainty. In a piece entitled "Teaching for Openings: Pedagogy as Dialectic," Greene tells of her own struggle to trust *un-knowing* and *not-knowing* in her teaching life:

I am tempted . . . to remain within what Foucault called "the established order of thing"—pedagogical things, liberal educational things. I am drawn to affirm the timelessness of what I have come to love over the years, of what I choose to think of as the very sources of my self . . .

But then I think of how much beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility. And I think that if I truly want to provoke others to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken-

for-granted, I myself have to experience breaks with what has been established in my own life; I have to keep arousing myself to begin again. (1-2)

Vinz describes *un-knowing* and *not-knowing* as "literacies" that are developed through writing—in particular, through reflection on the culture of classrooms and schools as prospective teachers work as anthropologists. In her program at Teachers College, prospective teachers are asked to "conduct artifact studies, to videotape and critique their and others' teaching, and to self-evaluate their work through portfolios. Additionally, we ask prospective teachers to prepare case studies of one practicing teacher and one student in that teacher's class" ("Opening Moves" 204).

I have written elsewhere on the potential of this kind of writing-as-fieldwork to help students dis-position themselves as they construct their teaching identities (see Taylor). What Vinz fails to emphasize, however, is the equally powerful role of writing-as-creative-work—that is, expressive, typically non-academic pieces that students create during our in-class writing workshops and publish in portfolios twice during the semester—in helping preservice teachers to explore the dis-positionings brought on by their changing senses of themselves as writers, teachers, and citizens in a altered world.

"Embrace the Uncertainty": Writing and Becoming

In my elementary language arts methods course, my students and I participate in a writing workshop throughout the semester. We study various genres and writing techniques through minilessons and reading, we draft and revise pieces of our choice, we participate in conferences with peers, and we produce finished pieces in portfolios twice during the semester which are shared during a publication celebration. The majority of my students come into this class not having written "creatively" since junior high; they are full of negativity spawned by teacher criticism of their

work in the past, boring and irrelevant writing assignments, and constrictive “rules” regarding style and form, and they exude trepidation about their ability to teach a subject from which they feel so disconnected. Our writing workshops are absolutely invaluable—in conjunction with reading and reflective writing on composition theory and writing pedagogy—in demonstrating what a difference writing can make in developing confident and self-expressive language users. These workshops also provide a place for my students to explore their identities as they teeter on the verge of moving from college student to teacher, adolescent to full-fledged adult. The themes of change, loss, nostalgia, and identity permeate these portfolios, and they became especially prominent in the wake of September 11.

Melissa’s midterm portfolio is particularly illustrative of these themes. She included two poems that, while not ostensibly related, coalesce around the issues of change, loss, and growth, which Melissa explains eloquently in her portfolio introduction (which I quote in full here):

Fall 2001 is my last semester of classes before student teaching in January, and my entire life revolves around deadlines and appointments while leaving very little time for anything else, i.e. being with my son. I know that in order to achieve my goals and gain a sense of security I must sacrifice precious time away from my son, but it is still difficult. As a result, my writing tends to center around him. Bryan is always in my thoughts and writing to him and about him helps me feel closer to him when we are apart for long periods. I have never written a poem before and I am proud of it. Ever since I was in second grade and my teacher told me I was creatively challenged I have never tried to do anything special. I know I will never be an acclaimed poet, but I will be able to coach a child to express his talent or lack thereof without him feeling discouraged.

The second piece of writing in my

portfolio is a Dada poem¹ about the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001. I was compelled to express my feelings about the tragedy in some way because I could not stop thinking about what had happened, not only to New York, but also Washington and Pennsylvania. The morning of the 11th was like that of any other Tuesday; my son hopped on the bus and I traveled to classes. I was feeling overwhelmed as usual after receiving my homework from my first class, but my life changed as soon as a girl in my social studies class announced, “A plane just hit the World Trade Center.” The class came to a screeching halt and my professor immediately demanded more information. I left campus after watching the initial footage because I needed to distance myself from the horror and thank God that I had not lost anyone in the disaster. My life was altered that day for the better because I now appreciate my family more, and I am so proud that I live in a country that is rallying around each other to do whatever they can to help the families who lost their loved ones that fateful day. My Dada poem is a tribute to those who were lost and a first step toward understanding why innocent lives were sacrificed. The poems were a challenge to put together because I wanted to choose the most precise words and images to convey what I was feeling inside about my son and the events of September 11, 2001.

I have grown as a writer in these last few weeks because I am able to transform raw thoughts into eloquent words on paper rather than giving up. My self-confidence has greatly improved because I know my writing is of higher quality than it may have been a semester ago, and I know as I progress it will only get better for me and become a benefit to my students.

This wonderful introduction was followed by the two poems:

Bryan

*My little piece of heaven,
 Bryan Day.
 He is short and loud,
 But always brightens my day.
 I sometimes wonder,
 Should I shout or hug
 My very stubborn boy?
 But Bryan owns my heart, and
 I am wrapped around his finger.
 His smile, laugh, and playful nature
 Force me to think about the future.
 But at night when he is breathing deep
 In his sleep
 The world stops
 The moon shines down
 Peace is all around.*

Untitled

*United States Under Attack
 Another day that will live in infamy
 Terrorist strike
 World Trade Center Catastrophe
 America's sense of security is shattered
 Fear envelopes the country
 The day the Earth stood still, and watched in
 horror
 Anger Shock Victims' Heartbreak
 Campus shocked
 Mourning
 The losses
 Thousands lose lives, national tragedy
 Rescuers
 Brave
 God Bless America,
 Land we love.*

The two pieces in Melissa's portfolio work together, and she has done a remarkable job in her introduction of explaining the connections between fear of change and growth, even reconciliation. It is not surprising that the poem

about her son was placed first in the collection; he becomes the central pivot around which her life revolves. In fact, her decision to return to college to become a teacher is motivated by consideration of his well-being. However, in this poem the child is not simply the adored being-in-himself, but rather the occasion for reflecting on her world, a world that was radically altered on September 11. Although she chooses to close the portfolio with the sort of list-like litany of emotions and facts in her dada poem about the tragedy, her first poem redeems us with its final section: "But at night when he is breathing deep/ In his sleep/ The world stops/ The moon shines down/ Peace is all around."

Melissa's portfolio is full of "becoming" and the requisite dis-positionings that entails. The familiar themes of worry about the future and fear of change (highlighted that semester by September 11) are balanced by a maturing sense of herself—as mother, writer, teacher. She says, "I have never written a poem before and I am proud of it. Ever since I was in second grade and my teacher told me I was creatively challenged I have never tried to do anything special. I know I will never be an acclaimed poet, but I will be able to coach a child to express his talent or lack thereof without him feeling discouraged." In Melissa's case, writing these pieces has been a way for her to un-know the past judgments about her writing and to risk future judgments by sharing her very intimate fears and hopes.

Misty understands what this kind of risk requires as a writer/teacher. Her portfolio introduction opens with the following argument:

In my life I have found that it is always advantageous to follow the path less traveled and take chances despite the risk of failure. With my writing I feel the same way. People become very vulnerable when they expose intimate parts of themselves on paper. I think that through the writing process we awaken parts of our subconscious that are usually in limbo, not quite hidden, not quite noticeable. I wanted to illustrate this idea through my writing.

Her portfolio also consists of two poems that obliquely speak to her position on the verge of scary life changes. The dis-positioning she feels forces her backward in the first poem, entitled "The Old Maple," in which she uses the tree as a central symbol for exploring her nostalgia:

The Old Maple

*Do you see me watching you
when the winds blow through?*

*Have you ever noticed how my tears
are a mirror of your own,
trickling down my face like rain
drops?*

*How long has it been since we first met?
It seems like an eternity ago, yet
not a leaf on you has aged!*

*If only I still possessed the youth
that we used to share.
Perhaps, we would still be close.*

*Only now, I don't see you with the same eyes
and no longer do I hear you whispering to me.
I simply see an old maple, waiting, yearning. . .
for that little girl to return.*

The sense of nostalgia—of somehow postponing aging and adulthood—reappears again and again in these portfolios. Many students focus on pieces reminiscing about their college years or focusing on friends and family. In the wake of September 11, however, the nostalgia appears more pointed. Like Misty, Linda wrote two poems related to the terrorist attacks, even though she admits that "writing always made [her] anxious." Her first poem is an extended metaphor that focuses on the nostalgia that her dis-positioning has produced:

Untitled

*One
begins
so
insignificantly.
A small, tight flower bud
swells and ripens
without our eyes.
Unfurling petals stretch and grow
until
we look back from tomorrow
to see
a
shimmering, full-blown rose
veiled in the mists of time
yet
felt with heartache
so poignantly
bittersweet.*

Interestingly, both Misty and Linda countered the nostalgia and sense of loss with poems that emphasize the importance of living life fully and deliberately. This kind of "carpe diem" theme recurs in the portfolios of this group as they face what they perceive to be the scary, oppressive world of work and adult responsibility. After September 11, however, the theme took on new urgency. Linda created an amazing dada poem using words and phrases assembled from various magazines. As she explains in her intro, she worked very carefully to achieve the juxtapositions that result in her homage to living life well:

The dada poem's appeal was using other people's words, a support technique I found enormously helpful. After all, if the final result was less than good, it would be because I could not find the right phrases. However, as the poem developed, I wanted very much to have the right phrases. I invested extra time to find them. I considered and reconsidered the print, the size, even the color of the words I used. I wanted to create the right

image for what I was saying. The poem was becoming mine. In addition, I was enjoying the decisions of word placement and background. I felt I was releasing emotions through a creative process and I am a person who does not express emotions easily. I am very pleased with the final piece.²

We see in this explanation the sense that in the midst of the rupture of change, Linda uses writing—really for the first time—to develop emotionally and creatively. This writing will help her to “become” as a teacher as she chooses to live the riskiness (*not-knowing*) with her students that she urges in her poem:

Life

*you're born
How had this miracle occurred?
fragile packages with hope and stars in their eyes
The journey begins. Who am I?
You live. It's a series of surprises.
Grand
extreme performance and voyages
Soar with eagles. . . dream, cry, work, change
Love, believe, be strong, enjoy it!
Add variety, subtract nothing.
Challenge the popular notion
Don't do ordinary
Kick derriere
Are you keeping your
mind on the road? Every milestone and memory
you lose track of
time
hours encircled by accumulating minutes
A short life intensely lived:
you die.*

What was that middle part again?

Misty chooses to express the same sense of risk and hope through carefully chosen metaphors:

Remember

*Live everyday, treasure every breath
like a leaf that never knows when the wind
will sweep it away.
Embrace the uncertainty
that drapes life, allow it to cover
every inch of your being
the way a fitted sheet clings to a mattress.
Never accept another's opinion as your own.
Always acknowledge those around you;
there's no guarantee that
you'll experience them again.
A missed moment may become
An eternity of looking back!*

Misty's call to “embrace the uncertainty” could be the mantra for all teachers, and maybe especially for writing teachers. For my preservice teachers, September 11 became another occasion for them to explore the themes of loss and changing identity through their writing. No matter how scary or difficult, this exploration is crucial to their developing sense of themselves as teachers, particularly in terms of disrupting negative images of writing from their pasts and replacing them with a writing pedagogy that allows for choice, sharing, possibility. This is exactly this kind of positioning that Greene urges when she reminds us “how much beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility” (1). Our writing workshops should be about creating such beginnings—that is where healing and growth become possible for teachers and students.

“A Kind of Ardor”: Teaching for Openings in a Changed World

During our workshop on 12 September, I too began a poem that I revised throughout the semester. I used some lines from that day's newspaper and later added some from magazines interspersed with my reflections. Like my students, I focused on the sense of change and loss:

Infamy

It was just another day until 8:45.

No idea that by the end of it, we would feel, as the Poet Laureate of the U.S. said, that we had “lost our virginity.”

“A Day of Awakening”

A lost day for me. I feel hungover and it doesn’t stop:

The images of burning—

The rhetoric already starting that will, no doubt, persuade us to retaliate, to escalate—

The killing (words)—

The explanations that only make things worse, more surreal

(George Will, in his column, supposes that we were attacked because of our “virtues,” as though we are so completely

blameless)—

Unanswered questions and missing persons.

thousands lose

lives

altered, shaken, saddened. Changed.

The changed nature of the country also means that our classrooms are changed—but then, they, like we teachers, are always in a state of becoming. That is, perhaps, the key issue that I hope my preservice language arts teachers learn through their writing and their work in the methods course: that teaching means changing, unknowing the past that constricts and makes us complacent and opening ourselves and our students, as Maxine Greene urges, “to act in such a way that we do break loose from anchorage, that we become different, that we reach beyond where we are” (2). Our writing workshops and integrated language arts classrooms can allow us to “teach for openings” if we are willing to cultivate what Greene describes as living life in “tension and [in] a kind of ardor, with the dialectical struggle never quite resolved” (3).

My preservice teachers, on the verge of so much change as they prepare to leave the safety of college behind and begin their student teaching, would

prefer that our methods courses and our writing workshops reduced tension, produced resolution and certainty. But, as their work shows, writing through the tension and the “dispositioning” that change produces is the only way to truly construct themselves as writers and teachers of writing, to “reach beyond where [they] are.” Tom Romano, in *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres*, argues for the kind of ardor (and the necessary tension it produces) in our writing classrooms that Greene urges for our teaching in general:

Say the word slowly and mean it. Passion.

It can sound dangerous, can’t it? Illicit. Reckless. Consumed. Passion might lead to ecstasy, but it might also lead to entanglement, despair, and irrevocable loss.

Red lights flash.

Let’s be levelheaded. Be wary of passion. If you fail when you’re passionate, you’ll suffer terribly. Let’s have balance, moderation

Moderation didn’t get Guernica painted, Sergeant Pepper composed, Fences performed.

Moderation didn’t get Normandy invaded, the House Committee on Un-American Activities confronted, the infant born, GRE scores that soared.

Moderation didn’t get the classroom converted to a reading and writing workshop.

Moderation didn’t get the mural painted on the gray walls of the handball courts behind school.

Moderation didn’t get the scholarship extended, the job offered, the lover won.

Moderation didn’t get the writing done. (25-26)

This special issue of *LAJM* is about using language to heal, and it may seem foolish to court tension and passion as ways of healing, especially in these uncertain times. But how else can we show our students who we are? Lucy Calkins argues that “we cannot teach writing well unless we trust that there are real, human reasons to write” (12). The writing my students produced last semester was full of

tensions and questions and fear and hopefulness—real, human responses to tragedy and change. I trust that as they continue to “become” as teachers, they will continue to use writing to compose their teaching selves.

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About the Author

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Notes

¹ A dada poem is a kind of found poem made up partially or entirely of others’ words. Writers use newspapers, magazines, song lyrics, poems, and so on to discover appropriate words and lines, and then the author arranges the bits and pieces into a coherent whole. My students and I borrowed the idea for the genre from Kirby and Liner’s great chapter on teaching poetry in *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing* (Boynton/Cook).

² Dada poems achieve some of their power from the visual effect of various fonts and colors of the assembled pieces. Unfortunately, I am unable to adequately represent this variety typographically, although I have tried to remain true to Linda’s original line breaks.