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Cover Page Footnote

Artifacts are valuable—especially for teachers. In the foggy mire of standardized tests and norming sessions, we need reminders of what made us writers in the first place. We need to again think like writers and artists—as people who compose because of something elemental inside of us all. Robert Yagelsky tells us that writing is “transformative” (7). He suggests that “writing is an ontological act” because “when we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world” (7-8). On those yellow pads of paper, I was engaged in something that truly was transformative. It was removed—at least during those moments of crafting my world—from the teacher, the thesis, the clincher sentences. It was more intimate—not about them but me. That’s what writing must be when we teach it. That’s why artifacts like those old yellow pads can be valuable. They reintroduce us to the writer who teaches writing.

Yellow Pads and the Return of the Writer

GREGORY SHAFER

One should accept bad writing as a way of priming the pump, a warm-up exercise that allows you to write well. –Jennifer Egan

In the corner of my basement—far away from the books and desks and the fancy new computer—is an old plastic milk box. At one time, it was used to carry milk to people’s houses early in the morning. Now, as it sits in my basement, fighting a constant battle with spider webs and dust, it contains nothing but some old legal pads of paper filled with writing.

“Why don’t you throw those old reams of paper away?” my daughter asks me during one of our many attempts to clean the basement. “This is nothing but old writing you did in college. And why,” she continues while staring incredulously at the blurred ink on the pages, “didn’t you simply type this? I mean you did have typewriters back then—right?”

To be clear, we did have typewriters in the 1970s and 80s when I went to college, but for reasons I understand more and more as I get older, writing on a tablet of paper—where I could slip away to some secluded place and never make a commitment to write anything of substance—was not only preferable but necessary. You see I grew up as an aspiring English teacher in the waking moments of the process movement. Many of my teachers, especially during my undergraduate years, were still quite sure that process—with all of its hippy-like features—was a fad that would quickly evaporate along with team teaching and journals.

And so, without those legal pads, which I collected in bulk, I would have never made it through countless classes where a “theme” was expected to be done “right the first time,” after one constructed the proper outline and thesis statement. Indeed, without those pads of paper, I would have never been able to practice the process of multiple drafts that was soon to become the norm among all of those who were reading Peter Elbow and Donald Murray.

Some artifacts are simply pieces of our past, but some

become symbols of values and practices that should be exulted. I’ll never dispose of those old reams of legal paper because in each sits some priceless lessons about writing—lessons that I have occasionally shared with my students. There are countless scribbles and pictures and half-baked poems. On those pads of paper, I was never looking over my shoulders, never wondering what the teacher wanted. On those pads of yellow, I cursed and wandered and inserted lyrics from a song. I was my most inventive self, and if my teacher was fortunate, some of that imaginative wandering found its way onto my paper—to imbue it with some of me.

This is why artifacts are valuable—especially for teachers. In the foggy mire of standardized tests and norming sessions, we need reminders of what made us writers in the first place. We need to again think like writers and artists—as people who compose because of something elemental inside of us all. Robert Yagelsky (2009) tells us that writing is “transformative” (p. 7). He suggests that “writing is an ontological act” because “when we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world” (p. 7-8). On those yellow pads of paper, I was engaged in something that truly was transformative. It was removed—at least during those moments of crafting my world—from the teacher, the thesis, the clincher sentences. It was more intimate—not about them but me. That’s what writing must be when we teach it. That’s why artifacts like those old yellow pads can be valuable. They reintroduce us to the writer who teaches writing.

There is clearly a need for such artifacts—for such reminders. Applebee and Langer’s (2011) “Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools” suggests that “students are not writing a great deal” (p. 15) and when they do write it is very short and aimed more at answering questions than exploring extended ideas and passions. According to the authors, only 7.7% of the observed writing was “extended writing (writing a paragraph or more),” leading them to conclude that the writing students do is not providing them “opportunities to use composing as

a way to think through the issues, to show depth or breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 16). Susan Arpajian Jolley (2014) suggests that much of writing pedagogy today is infected with the specter of standards, testing, and prescription, concluding that "it is amazing that with all the scholarly analysis from the 1980s and 1990 warning of negative effects of standardization, we have only become more standardized" (p. 82).

April Brannon (2019) adds to this by reminding us: "As teachers, one of our goals is to help students produce skillful pieces of work, but it is equally important—perhaps more so—to help students recognize why the act of putting pen to paper matters in the first place (p.).

Perhaps this is why artifacts are necessary. Despite our best efforts to teach writing that empowers students and invites them to explore, we often become mired in standards and prescriptive short cuts. We abandon those poetic adventures that made us writers and resort to short answer "essays" that serve only to make writing an impersonal act of service. My yellow pads of paper have often guided me to design assignments that invite students to write for themselves, to transcend the "good enough writing" and to feel license to become writers in the spirit of those pads.

Discussing Writing as Expression

In fact, last semester I brought many of the pads into class, as we discussed what it means to engage in a writing process, what it means to write and revise and rewrite some more. As I passed them around the class, I told students about my earlier years as a student and how desperately I wanted to be a writer, how I wanted to find my voice in the writing I did. "It was on those old pads where I experimented without judgment," I tell them wistfully. When you write on paper," I added, "the words are evanescent seeds, sparking new ideas while refusing to anchor a writer to a single implacable idea. No typewriter could do that for me. If I wanted to be free to let the words "cook and grow," as Elbow recommends, I needed something that was as equally dynamic, ephemeral. "It was on those pads," I add, "where I could play with words and find my topic—and myself."

Earlier, many of my students had written short papers on their experiences in past composition classes and more than a few had lamented the prescriptive themes that dominated their teacher's approaches. "I'm used to writing the paper once and always being aware of what my teacher

wants," writes one student. Added a second, "the goal is to find out what the teacher wants and to do it. Creativity often doesn't exist because it's too hard to grade."

Writing for Ownership

Peter Elbow (2000) has argued that "students don't feel much ownership over the writing they do in school. What they write," he adds, "often feels like it is someone else's" (p. 40). Artifacts like the old writing pad are significant beyond its nostalgic pull, reminding us, as teachers, that writing always begins with the writer and the need to feel some ownership over what we do.

Early in the semester I ask students to do a writing exercise that is predicated on the idea behind the writing pad. On the second day of class, I ask them to pull out a clean sheet of paper and write for three minutes without stopping. Their goal, I tell them, is to play with ideas, to write for the personal and artistic pleasure it brings. After three minutes of free writing, they are told to pass their paper to the person next to them, who writes continuously for three more minutes, again focusing on unimpeded writing and the development of the story they have been given. Then the papers are passed for a third and finally a fourth time. With each draft, students' only caveat is to not stop, to free write so as to find their ideas through the chaos of exploration. Finally, when the stories are returned to the original writer—the person who started the story—it is a much different story—one that has been imbued with the visions of many eyes from fellow students. As students read over the finished drafts, I ask them why writing came so easily, why, despite the lack of time or instruction, they were able to generate such clever and often poetic writing.

"I think it had to do with the fact that you weren't going to read it," said one student.

Added a second student, "It was because I was able to just write for myself. It was fun because I didn't think about it. I just enjoyed it."

The goal of the three minute drill, of course, is to experience unbridled writing, devoid of judgment or requirements. Writing blocks don't exist when students simply write for the sake of generating ideas and pursuing their own goals. After reading their essays, most students have very different view of writing blocks. "I guess I never thought seriously about free writing until we did this," said Kayla. I did some really good work here, but I think it was mostly because I didn't try."

In his acceptance speech after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, William Faulkner (2004) talked about fear “The basest of all things is to be afraid. With fear, Faulkner, added, the writer “labors under a curse” (p. 119). I would argue that to be a good writing teacher, one must begin with the artifact, the memory of being a writer, of remembering the fear that comes with school and judgments and alienating tests. They must take these memories and replace them with the joy they felt at sitting down with paper—even a yellow pad—and writing poetry hours after midnight. They must reconnect with the muse that made them teachers, teaching composition as an activity that invites risks and exploration—that allows students to disappear into their own cultural artifacts and write for themselves. As Pamela Hickey and Vickie McQuitty (2018) remind us:

Words are power(ful). As teacher-writers, we know the power of crafting our world by strategically crafting our words. We wish for our students to realize this power, but too often, they experience the opposite. Rather than crafting words for meaningful and important purposes, they write with neither conviction nor commitment: to placate their teachers, to get a grade, to just get it done.

More Assignments Based on the Yellow Pad of Paper

Students want to write. They want to take risks, but as Elbow (2000) reminds us, teachers must build a “foundation of safety” for this to happen (p. 41). In my class that begins with a policy that honors the yellow pads of paper that animated my own writing process. It is a policy, for instance, that allows for multiple revisions and the promise that rough drafts will not be graded. It begins with students being encouraged to write on subjects that are truly personal and empowering—subjects that emanate from their lives and imaginations. My first major essay is a Letter to a Loved One and is predicated on the notion that students have a long list of people and objects to which they would like to write. At the same time, it honors the notion that writing is an artistic endeavor, something that takes shape as it is done—not with a prewriting prescription.

Especially appealing about this assignment is the informality and lack of teacher-driven caveats. Writing a letter—especially to an object or person—can be incredibly idiosyncratic, weird, and imaginative. It can also be both fun and still very thoughtful. And so, teachers relinquish much of their power and requirements and simply provide room for students to write.

Such open, expressivist assignments are consonant with the image of the yellow pads of paper. They are exploratory in nature, offering few prescriptions or right answers. Students are inventive because they have to because they want to be—and quickly learn that they enjoy a process of writing that is based on personal discovery. Paul’s paper becomes a letter to his car, a classic Impala that is given to him by his father and that seems to link their two worlds. As Paul drives the car, he feels he is traveling back to his parent’s time of drive-ins and malt shops. He revels in the time-machine feel that he experiences each time he drives it. This is not from his “modern” era, but the car is an ideal conduit to his parent’s world. And, as we all could quickly see, he is able to delve into these feelings without worry that he is breaking rules as a writer.

I’m writing to tell you how much I love you. You’re not just a car to me. You’re my dad. The red and white leather seats, the old dashboard—it all screams 70s and, yes, my dad. So I’m writing to say thank you and that I love you. You’ve brought me closer to my dad, each time I sit down inside of you.

Of course, letters can be sad and dripping with honest pathos. Irene’s letter is crafted as a much needed response to her father, who passed away after a life of alcohol and violence. Because it is a letter, Irene is able to write on her own terms, feeling ownership over the language she uses and the potential for structuring the piece to fit her intimate emotions and sense of regret and anger. As she read her response, the class is riveted, but I found myself smiling, knowing that the assignment had provided Irene with license to write with a genuine sense of empowerment. This was not “good enough” writing but prose that radiated an honesty and liberation.

So it’s been two years, and I have been thinking about you for a very, very long time. Sometimes it’s at night, when I can’t sleep and the walls scream your name. Sometimes it’s during the day and I can’t help but notice the TV that you surprised me with on my birthday. That was you, Dad, always surprising me, whether it was a quick slap of my face for no reason I knew, or a new present because you loved me. Good or bad. . . Always a surprise.

When I read such essays, I am reminded of the many pages of personal prose that filled the pages of my own pads of yellow pads. The key to such artifacts, for me at least, is the intimate connection to my writing and the concomitant link to myself. “Students and teacher have a fundamental

human need to create meaning by loving and creating and by pursuing higher levels of aspiration” (p. 86),” argue Nash and Viray (2014). When we cultivate a setting for writers to write like writers—and as people—rather than as students and subjects, when we return to the yellow pads of paper—or any relic that reminds us of our fundamental desire to express ourselves through writing, we become better, more humanistic teachers.

“Merging artifacts with literacy offers a method for teaching and learning that opens up more space and understanding for students,” (p. 3) argue Pahl and Roswell (2010) in their book *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object tells a Story*. Indeed, as students wrote love letters to their rooms, desks, and even a hamburger, they were able to transcend the platitudes that are so ubiquitous in academic writing and play with both words and themes, feeling ownership in the process. “Artifactual literacy acknowledges that everyone has a story to tell, and they bring that story into their learning” (p. 3).

Writers as Columnists

This more personal prose can also be realized in the research paper, which can achieve all of the scholarly expectations and argumentative acumen required while also permitting the personal intimacy that is emblematic of the yellow pads of paper. In my class, I ask students to become magazine columnists and do research based on their personal passions. For some, this means they will write a weekly column for a music magazine like *Rolling Stone*. For others, it introduces them to a magazine that follows the lives of celebrities. And for others, it requires that they delve into the world of relationships through a column on romance and family relations. In each case, students are introduced to the research paper by beginning with the values and passions that animated them to write in the first place. Many do not want to do another perfunctory essay on the controversy surrounding cell phones or illegal immigration, but many of our students are more than ready to research and argue for a specific sports figure or musical phenomenon.

In asking students to write as investigative journalists I do not forfeit any of the high standards required of the research paper. Students are still expected to interrogate reputable sources and quote scholarly works in buttressing their arguments about important topics. Perhaps the only difference I have found, is the investment many feel as they go about doing this. For most, there is a sense of alacrity that

reflects their investment in the topic.

For instance, Tara wrote a very impressive essay on violence in sports, suggesting that the “Me Too” movement is needed not only because of celebrities in Hollywood but those in athletics as well. In her essay, which was written in response to violence in sports, she contended that sports today, like actors, create an atmosphere of misogyny. Her essay, while focusing on the sports world, also included impressive research on the feminist movement and quoted Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Most important for me, she seemed genuinely inspired about her work. While I suspect she never sauntered down to a basement to scribble notes on a legal pad, I do believe that she carried her ideas and verities to bed with her, wondering if her paper would make a difference in her own life as a woman and athlete. Her final paragraph was especially articulate and endearing:

The world of sports is sexist. It has always been that way, and it is time that we acknowledge this, so we can attempt to fix it. There, I said it. And yes, I am a feminist who will invoke the words of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. In many ways, life has not improved that much for women in sports, since they lived and wrote.

Tara’s essay on feminism was followed by other impressive and very personal works on football and head injuries and a fascinating work on skin color and the challenges of interracial dating. With each of these papers—and many more—I felt a little of the private author, the emerging poet that was reflected in those yellow pads of paper. In each of the student essay I felt that I had provided students with the freedom to practice writing as a personal act of ownership and development.

Assessment

A final important step, I would like to add, is assessment. Students need to know that their creative journeys will not be punished when it comes time to be assessed. In other words, writing process—replete with freedom to explore personal topics—is meaningless without a democratic evaluation process. With this in mind, I eschewed placing grades on final drafts, choosing instead to place comments and asking students to meet me for a series of short conferences. In moving in this direction, I asked students to collaborate on final grades as well as giving them a chance to revise papers throughout the semester. Such conferences can be short, offering students a chance to participate in the evaluation of their essay and the crafting of the final draft.

Whether in high school or college, classes can work on other assignments while individual writers meet with their teacher so as to engage in a collaborative assessment process. In most cases, students work cooperatively to decide on a final grade for papers done. “I thought I improved a lot from draft one to draft three and wanted to include improvement in my final grade,” said Damian while conferencing. Collaborative assessment is clearly important and was inspired by the recent scholarship by Warrington, Graeber, White, and Saxton (2018) who changed their own assessment processes so as to better engage their students:

Instead of remaining the sole authority on assessment decisions, we wanted to include students by asking them to assess their progress as writers. Together, we examined ways that we could empower students’ developing writer identities by including them as participants in the assessment process (p.32).

The Context for Writing

“The goal of teaching writing,” suggests Peter Elbow (2007), “is to develop the self” (p. 168). And, as Elbow argues, it is not difficult in a context that is liberating and empowering—one that gives a clear message to students that their voices, their worlds, their artifacts are important. When we open up the classroom to different cultures—and we do this when we honor their worlds—we create a setting that is quintessentially free, safe, and creative. Much like the yellow pads I have romanticized, the classroom can be a sphere of inclusion and self actualization. Students can see that writing is important because it honors their literacies. With this in mind, I suggest that we do all that we can to advance this expressivist approach. In the early stages of a writer’s life, it becomes imperative that emphasis be placed on self discovery. There is no better way to provide for a student to become a writer. “So voice is alive in our classrooms. Students at all levels talk and think about voice, or their voice in their writing, and tend to believe they have a real or true self—despite some of their other teachers” adds Elbow (2007, p.170).

Conclusion

In teaching composition, we, as teachers, tend to look condescendingly at the notion of the artist/writer, wondering off to a secluded garret to compose and reflect. While we laud Thoreau and his iconic trip to Walden Pond,

we teach students as if they are in “real world” of prescriptive assignments and stringent due dates. The clarion call from most classrooms I have visited involves instruction for a world of high demands, where literacy is defined narrowly and skills are often taught and even tested.

It is in such classrooms where we need to remember the artist, the burgeoning poet, the muse inside that animated every line, every song lyric. “I want the life in my classroom to be lived. I want us to be a group of real people doing real work,” argues Anne Elrod Whitney (2017, p. 21). In asking students to write personal papers and immerse themselves in a more dynamic, hueristic process, I see myself as honoring the practice of the lived author, the wandering poet, who does not write to pass tests or complete prescriptions but to connect with the viscera. In a world of standardized essays and mandated testing, writing for its personal empowerment is essential

So many years ago, I picked up a thick pad of yellow legal pads of paper and began to write. Three decades later I still use them as reminders, as artifacts of why any of us write. At our most fundamental places, we write to discover, to explore, to learn about ourselves. We do this best when we feel safe, when we can make mistakes and play with ideas and values. Writing, then is a messy business, and inside of our artifacts we can still find our own voice and best teacher.

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