The Serious Work of Writing

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As I glanced out the tiny panel window at the rear of the classroom, I could see that the sun had already set. It was going to be another late evening puzzling over the pile of papers on my desk. Having returned to teach at my high school alma mater just a few years after graduation, I found myself looking for subtle ways to convince students and colleagues (including some who were my former teachers) that I should be taken seriously. In misguided attempts to show that my classes were going to be “hard,” I piled on assignments and marked up students’ written work with fervor. The young people in my classroom rightfully remained dubious in their estimation of my competence, and those who actually completed the onslaught of writing I assigned did so with the essay equivalent of an eye roll. I quickly grew frustrated with the formulaic and clichéd writing they turned in.

On one of those late evenings while I was still at school at 7:00 p.m., I read Alan Ziegler’s advice for providing feedback, particularly for lifeless and clichéd writing: “Many times, young writers do not know that what they are writing has been written repeatedly by others. When a student writes, ‘Sometimes I feel so alone it is like I am the only one alive,’ it can be a sincere revelation” (101; italics added). I sat back in my chair, realizing for the first time that I was not the only person in the classroom who deserved to be taken seriously. Rather than working with my students to foster their writing development, I had embraced the faulty expectation that young people “wouldn’t read and couldn’t write.” In essence, I was using the workload to differentiate and distance myself, my knowledge, and my expertise from the youth in the classroom, something Robert Petrone and Mark Lewis found in their work with preservice teachers. I was presuming a lack of ability, interest, and care on their part, for what I considered my more mature and educated concerns. It was only years later, after multiple faculty meetings during which my colleagues and I rationalized disconnections in our classrooms as resulting from the immutable characteristics of teenagers, that I realized just how pervasive and persistent this vision of adolescents is (see also Lesko). I often heard well-meaning colleagues refer to youth as erratic,

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Writing the Self and the Social World

When we ask youth to compose, especially if we’re asking them to build an argument or describe a scene in a fresh way, we are not simply asking them to complete a task. We’re asking them to expose their thinking and emotionally charged opinions, revealing (at times even to themselves) connections they may not have seen before. And when writers do this, they are not just manipulating words on the page; rather, they are working and reworking their senses of self in the greater social world. Science fiction author Orson Scott Card explained it this way, “You know how writers create themselves as they create their work. Or perhaps they create their work in order to create themselves.”

I was reminded of this recently while working with four students in my research study focused on understanding young men’s writing development. For about two years I traced their writing practices in and outside of school, including the ways they wrote and engaged with others about their writing online. Over that time, I met with them regularly to discuss the ways, places, and purposes of their writing. In those conversations I came to realize that I was witnessing more than just their writing practices. I was becoming privy to the ways these young men were thoughtfully using their writing—leveraging assignments in school, as well as projects of their own making—as venues for making sense of themselves and their relationships with others. Their writing in school was more than a perfunctory completion of assignments. It was part of a larger sincere effort to work out their place in the world.

Their writing in school was more than perfunctorial completion of assignments. It was part of a larger sincere effort to work out their place in the world. And this work—this “serious writing” as one of these young men, Mike, called it—had an indelible influence on their development as writers.

Writing as Serious Work

Mike was a soft-spoken 16-year-old when we first met. Loud, heavy metal music and skateboarding were his go-to activities when he wanted to “get away from it all.” Mike had an acute sensitivity for others as well as a keen interest in maintaining quality relationships. Relationships surfaced in many of our discussions about his writing, but his relationship with his father, and concerns about his father’s parental fitness, dominated our conversations. Due to his father’s violent tendencies and erratic behavior, Mike saw great difficulty writing directly about the social tension they were experiencing. Instead, they each crafted a literary trope, such as an extended metaphor, a recurring image, or a series of emblems that worked symbolically, signifying the social tensions almost as personal code. Mike’s relationship with his father was not dealt with directly in most of his writing; rather, Mike alluded to his father through a range of emblems that worked to signify disturbing aspects of his father’s personality. Describing the process of composing one piece, Mike recounted: “When I write about the symptoms of being ‘black-hearted like a sickness, like a hand that never can form or build, but crush and destroy,’ ‘legs that move baggage for the violence.’ Like right there, I really thought of him a lot.”

From a vocabulary assignment to a research report to a series of spoken-word poems, these signifying emblems surfaced in nearly every written piece he shared with me during the study. After a few months of using these emblems in his writing, Mike explained how his fixation with making sense of being related to his father drove him to compose: “I just really write, and I just feel like I can’t really get over it. I can just—I can’t live with it, cope with it, and I just begin to write, because it just fits.” Over time Mike came to a series of reconciling realizations about himself and his relationship with his father. These realizations came about as he worked through written products and reworked his writing practices to explore and come to terms with the tremendous pull he felt between
wanting to be close to his father, yet not wanting to be like him. Through this purposeful, extended literary work—writing, rewriting, choreographing, designing, rehearsing, and performing across multiple contexts—the young men’s literary tropes, and eventually their social tensions, were reimagined.

**Taking Teenagers’ Writing Seriously**

In talking about crafting and using these literary tropes, Mike and the other young men expressed a desire for their writing to effect change in their lives and in the lives of their potential audiences. Each displayed acute interest in the needs and interests of potential audiences and others with whom they engaged in and across contexts in relation to the messages they wanted to express. For instance, Patrick felt an urgency to communicate what he saw as the value of a “clean slate” mentality about the past: “There’s an opportunity to start all over. No one makes a clean slate but yourself, you know. You make your clean slate. You start, you start building your life and if parts aren’t correct then you fix them. You fix them and you keep moving. So like, that’s—I want so much for people to understand that.” As with Mike, Patrick and the other young men aimed to compose in ways that epitomized Paulo Freire’s idea of praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51). Robert Yagelski, a National Writing Project director, aptly discussed writing as “rhetorical praxis,” or the creative, critical, and rhetorical work of composition as a form of social action, realized in a social world of relationships and tensions (see also Ackerman and Coogan).

Mike’s term for rhetorical praxis would likely be “serious writing.” To Mike, serious writing was the kind of composition, whether his own or others, that explored a concept that mattered in the world and portrayed a personal and honest reflection of the author’s emotion in content, style, and delivery. It did not matter so much if the content included a clichéd “clean slate” or “black heart.” When composing “serious” writing Mike felt his intellect, emotion, experience, and imagination come together. He explained this most succinctly once when discussing that he had found that people often didn’t take poetry seriously. He argued that it was, in fact, the most serious of all his writing, and should be treated as such: “So like when my people think of poetry like it’s coming from my soul da, da, da, da, da. And it really does. But it’s like coming off of like my knowledge, and like my experiences, and my imagination, kind of thing. So it’s like—and you get into like some of, some of me inside.”

These young men used writing to engage in “serious” work, the kind of transformational composition that engaged their emotions, imagination, and knowledge. In my experience, and the experience of other teachers I know, these young men are not alone. Having opportunities to conduct creative, critical literary and artistic “serious” work is important to many young people. From journals to fanfiction series to movie review blogs to curated YouTube pages, we don’t have to look too hard to find other teenagers similarly engaged in seriously rich, writerly lives. Today, when so much attention is given to common standards and high-stakes assessments, we are seeing a narrowing in our school curricula of what youth should write about, and the forms that writing should take—all in the name of rigor and quality. We must remember that, besides the “core” subjects of English, math, science, and social studies, young people have other serious work to do—deciding who and how they want to be in the world, and working to shape their world into the one they want to inhabit. Writing and composing are powerful tools that help them do this, and we must provide opportunities and access to a range of resources for crafting symbolic, artistic, critical compositions. Let’s trust students’ sincere interests in learning and make room for such “serious writing.”

**Works Cited**


Teachable Moment

It’s last period of the day and the week
The weak hour of the day
Last Period

Teaching “Marigolds” to a class of twenty:
Five listening to the story CD;
Ten daydreaming of marigolds in their own weekend;
The others? Sneak peeks to their phones,
Texting on the sly,
Planning their fun.

One student asks, “May I have a hall pass?”
“Okay.”
He returns with a large Pizza Hut cheese-stuffed pizza,
A bag of soft parmesan bread sticks,
And a big bottle of Sprite.

Everybody is focused on him;
The delicious cheese tomato parmesan
Aroma
Wafting through the room,
Setting off smiles.

He smiles and shares freely.
Marigolds come to life.
Marigolds in my class.

“I will give you extra points for sharing, Nick.”
And extra points for
Teaching me about “Marigolds.”

—Maria Sanchez

*“Marigolds” is a short story about growing “marigolds” in a neglected ghetto.

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Maria Sanchez has been teaching English at William Daylor High School in Sacramento, California, for nine years. She was encouraged to write by her mother who wrote her a poem on her birthdays. Maria has read her poetry and been published locally. She has been published in the CATE journal and presented a poetry workshop at a CATE conference. Email: Maria326@mac.com.