Notes on Intergenerational Exchange: The View from Here

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Intergenerational is such an interesting term, and given my childhood, for me something of an abstraction. My extended family—the four grand-parents, the two aunts, the two uncles (until the very unhappy divorce), the seven cousins—lived in the Bay area, we in metro DC (then more DC than metro), before moving even farther east, to West Germany, for four years. We were distant. When I was 10, we traveled to California to visit the entire family for a full month, and I remember being envious of my cousins' rela-tionships with my maternal grandmother especially. Not that she loved us any less, I thought, but that she knew my cousins in ways she did not know us, that they preferred sugar cookies to oatmeal raisin, spent every Wednesday afternoon at the swimming pool, caught fireflies before watching TV together on Saturday evenings. By the time I next saw my grandmother, when I was 18, my grandfather, who genuinely wasn't always sure who I was, referred to me simply, as *that girl*.

The abstraction began to take form as I began teaching, or perhaps it's more accurate to say that through my teaching I began to understand what intergenerational could mean, or perhaps that I began to define it, and refine it, through my own experience. My first year teaching, as a TA, and before that, even my student teaching, was unremarkable: pretty much, students liked me; pretty much, the classes went well. I taught, they learned, and we all walked happily out of the door. All that changed when I began teaching 8th grade. It wasn't just that one student literally could not read, although he could not. And for him, it wasn't a matter of smarts, of course, since he arrived in 8th grade not because he could read, but rather in spite of *not* being able to read. Still, how could I help him? Worse in its own way: although most of his classmates could read, they could not read the class textbook—and we had only one set of textbooks for the five classes I taught—so students weren't going to be sup-ported by that textbook very well. Not only could they not take the book home, but they also couldn't highlight, underline, annotate, or even doodle in it: they could not make it, or the reading of it, their own. Almost desperate—such a teaching/learning situation was precisely *not* what my teaching credential prepared me for--I adopted an adage I'd heard from elementary school teach-ers: follow the child. What that adage meant, a colleague explained, was that the teacher takes her cue from the child in order to understand what he or she is ready for so as to plan learning opportunities, materials, and support. So it was with those 8th graders: they signaled what they were ready for—reading

shorter texts, writing about them, mapping them, illustrating them, making posters of them, sharing their re-texts—and I drew on that readiness as a design principle for the curriculum. In other words, while the school district supplied a curriculum, the children and I worked intergenerationally to remix it with what they knew and could do so that it was usable for *their* learning. As important, this intergenerational dialogue then became the way I thought of all classroom teaching: as a site for *our* learning.

If differently, I found something of the same thing when I directed a testing center at Purdue University. The center, the Office of Writing Review (OWR), administered a writing test that specific populations of students, including all graduate students and selected undergrads, in education and engineering, needed to pass. When students failed the test, I met with them, ostensibly to help them by reviewing the test results and then recommending a better approach to help them pass the re-test. We met those goals, but not in the way that I had originally imagined. As a teacher and as the OWR director, I had thought that after looking at the student text and its accompanying score, I'd pretty much point them in the right direction. But the texts didn't tell me what I had thought they would. One student's text, for instance, displayed fairly serious organizational difficulties, so the recommendation seemed to be something like "plan before composing." When we talked, however, the student explained that he hadn't engaged in any invention activities: he'd just jumped into writing, and the writing got away from him. "Is that the way you usually write?" I asked. "Well, not really," he replied, "but it's a test, you know?" With this explanation as a point of departure, the student described how he usually wrote, the inventional strategies he ordinarily employed, and how he considered ways to meet a purpose and engage the audience. With his description as a foundation, we outlined an approach, based on his outside-of-testing writing practices, that could be adapted to a testing situation. (And he passed the test!) Put more generally, I'm not sure how one can be a writing teacher *without* working intergenerationally.[1]

I might make the same kind of observation about much of the kind of research I do, particularly research directly involving students. I like lenses and frameworks, but I don't want those to overwhelm what students say, so I tend to work inductively, which means that I count on student accounts to help me see what I hadn't seen before. Such work is inherently intergenerational: I bring context and questions; students bring experiences and articulations; we learn from each other.[2] Of course, this approach can also mean that my learning lands other than intended. One student I interviewed several times was interning at Florida State University's Museum of Everyday Writing (MoEW); I had hoped she would tell me about how her writing had changed as a function of the MoEW internship, but what had changed was not so much her writ-

ing, but rather her *conception* of writing. Of course; that makes perfect sense and raises other kinds of questions. In a different study, when I interviewed a graduating senior about her writing development in hopes of learning from her about transfer, I learned instead about how her visual writing practices had *not* transferred and about how a critical incident in high school had exerted a profound influence on her writing ever since: all good, but not as expected.

In other situations, it's not a choice or a question of disposition, but rather one of need: because I can't play one or more of the roles a research project requires, I engage with others, thus incorporating other layers into what is already a layered practice. In one case, I was asked to contribute a chapter to a book on reflection; what I wanted to talk about was how smart some of my students' ePortfolios were, so I asked them, please, to co-author. In another situation, I wanted to write about undergraduate ePortfolios, but I wasn't teaching undergrads, so I invited some TAs to join me. Since they all drew from the same class, a junior-level class in writing with a succinct but clear set of outcomes, I learned how they interpreted those outcomes and then enacted them variations-on-a-theme-like in the different iterations of the course. And for more than a decade now, my research has taken transfer of writing knowledge and practice as the focus. Once again, because of my own teaching responsibilities, I couldn't teach the first year composition (FYC) classes that provided the original focus for the inquiry into writing transfer. Luckily for me, Kara Taczak and Liane Robertson were teaching FYC, and together we began a line of research on the efficacy of a given curriculum, the Teaching for Transfer curriculum, that was only possible because of intergenerational exchange. As interesting, over the decade, this intergenerational exchange has widened to include six other researchers from across the US, collectively including boomers, generation X, and millennials. It's probably worth noting that in this project, instead of emphasizing our intergenerational exchange, we highlight its inter-institutional nature. That's important, of course, but I wonder what we'd see if we thought about the project in terms of intergenerational exchange.

As I came into rhetoric and composition in the 1970s, intergenerational exchange was another kind of abstraction. Although the field included people of different generations, it didn't have many generations of its own. Put another way, the field was too young to boast many generations—unless, of course, you count Aristotle,[3] and you might: one form of intergenerational change, an important one, is surely textual. Still, when I thought of the field-now-becoming-if-not-already-a-discipline, I always took my first CCCC, in Kansas City in 1977, as a touchstone: a large tent with many people figuring out somewhat on the fly how to teach better, how to study writing, how to create the spaces, traditions, journals, and books that would constitute a field, people in rhetorical history, FYC, technical communication, writing centers.

Later generations—since we now have generations—entering the field see it much differently. I remember one graduate student who patiently explained this to me. I had asked her why she seemed to identify more with computers and composition, which I saw as an important subfield, rather than with the field at large. Her reply: "Dr. Yancey, when you came into the field, it was smaller, easier to navigate. Now it's so large that we need another way into it; that's what a subfield does, provide a way in." Clearly, I was reading the field out of my context, my history; she from her context, her history. I was better at capturing the history I'd lived; she was better at articulating the current moment. Through this kind of intergenerational exchange, we create meaning of both past and present as we also, concurrently, set the stage for the future.[4]

Since early pandemic times, I have written weekly letters for our three grandchildren.

(circle one): February 5 6 7

Dear Grandad and Nana~~

How are you? Today I thought I would tell you about my school. This is the thing I like

doing best at school: _____ My favorite teacher is

_____ . One of my favorite friends is _____ .

On the other side of this letter is a picture I made for you. Please write back soon!

Love (write your name),

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Circle the indoor rhymes (two rhymes in each column):					
Rug	Bed	Chair	Bath	Sheet	Refrigerator
Hug	Pillow	Stove	Math	Sleet	Sink
Table	Said	Clove	Toilet	Blanket	Wink

Find the mistakes: what 3 numbers are missing? _____ _____ _____

37 39 40 41 42 43 44 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64

Each letter also includes a templated letter for each grandchild to "write" to us, with fill-in-the-blank sentences, spaces for the letters of their names, rhyming words to circle, numbers to identify. The grands complete them, draw a picture on the back, and mail these letters to us: we've exchanged weekly letters now for over nine months. About two weeks ago, an additional letter from our 5-year-old grandson Calder was tucked into the envelope. He'd created this letter for me to complete: it includes spaces for my name, just as I create for him; numbers for me to identify, just as I create for him; and a picture that he drew--so he drew a picture for me rather than asking me to draw one for him. I knew that in our weekly exchange he was learning a lot and variously—about forming letters of the alphabet, about being creative, about writing letters to people at a distance, about writing to loved ones--but in this letter, he took the lead, playing back to me what I had shared with him and making it anew. Here, too, I think, is (yet) another form of intergenerational exchange, in this case of a grandmother writing letters as a form of affection to a five-year-old grandson returning that affection and demonstrating what that letter writing means to him, all as he learns to write in the middle of a pandemic.

One way or another, we all live intergenerational exchange; it's how we live it, and what we learn from it, that matter.

Notes

1. Often students are the same age as the teacher, but they are generationally different in what they know about writing.

2. As a testament to that, I often hear from students I've worked with, even years later; it's quite rewarding to learn from them about what they are doing now.

3. As Victor Villanueva explains in this issue.

4. The field now has structures to foster intergenerational exchange: see, for example, the CCCC Standing Group for Senior, Late-Career, and Retired Professionals in RCWS, which has been explicitly designed to foster such exchange.