

Writing Well/Writing to Be Well: Rethinking the Purposes of Postsecondary Writing Instruction

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In this article, we identify student well-being as a primary goal of postsecondary writing instruction. Reconceiving the purpose of writing instruction in this way rests on valuing the experience of writing and its impact on the writer's sense of self. We draw on posthumanist theory and empirical research to illuminate this impact as the foundation of a pedagogy that promotes students' well-being and also supports their development as writers and as human beings.

Introduction: Finding Joy

In March 2022, Dan taught students face-to-face in a classroom for the first time in two years. Dan had not been on his campus, much less in a classroom, since March 2020, when the pandemic forced the shutdown of our normal daily lives. It was a lovely and disjointed week, that first week in class. There was writing and conversation about writing. There were introductions made and future plans made clear. On the second day of class, the focus of discussion was “The Other Education,” an essay by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. In this text, Brooks argues that our formal academic training constitutes our primary or first education, but what he refers to as our “second education” takes place outside school, in those spaces and activities of personal investment and passion and community participation.

Brooks identifies his own second education in the music of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, which he encountered for the first time in 1975. “From that first night in the winter of 1975,” he writes, “I wanted the thrill that Springsteen was offering. . . . Rock, when done right, is jolting and exhilarating” (Brooks). According to Brooks, a second education fosters this heightened state of being—of joy and of life. Dan's students understood this. When Dan asked them, “When was the last time you were jolted and exhilarated?” a rich conversation ensued:

Last summer. In a club in the Ivory Coast, Africa.

When the new Spiderman movie came out.

Whenever I am skating.

When I became an older sister.

This past Christmas. It was so joyous because the pandemic did not allow my family and me to get together the year before. I learned there are no guarantees, and to take nothing for granted.

The students' passionate responses to Dan's question underscored Brooks' argument and intensified the joy that filled that classroom in the spring of 2022. Later, one student wrote in a response to Brooks, "A second education should make us feel happy, complete, excited, calm even, at peace. It's what you love." And, we would add, so should a "first education."

In those first few in-person classes in March of 2022, Dan's students' writing and reading—and being together—was as much about their well-being as it was about the development of their writing abilities. And that, we believe, is as it should be. Those seemingly mundane classroom moments demonstrate that writing teachers can focus instruction on key skills—close reading, for example—and, in the process, foreground students' experiences in the world and, ultimately, contribute to their well-being. Dan's experience in those moments reminds us that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and, in many ways, exacerbated so many learning and living challenges that pre-dated it (Ihm et al.), including fearful increases in mental health problems among students (Lipson et al.). In this regard, the wrenching experience of the pandemic has energized the growing interest on the part of educators, and in particular among writing scholars and teachers, in the well-being of students. This historical moment seems especially appropriate for rethinking the purposes of college writing instruction, as we continue to struggle with the impact of COVID-19, the social unrest related to systemic racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression, the deepening inequalities of American society, and the ongoing restructuring of American higher education. Even in the best of times, well-being is not a given; nor is well-being a likely outcome for all people. As educators who teach at institutions with diverse student populations that have been historically underserved in their education, we know this well.¹ But this moment of duress, when our students are navigating extraordinary challenges that may affect their ability to achieve academic success, has reinforced the need for a more explicit focus on well-being as a central goal of writing instruction.

In this article, we center student well-being in a reconceptualization of the primary purposes of postsecondary writing instruction. Here, fostering well-being, broadly defined, becomes the central goal of writing instruction. Embracing well-being as a goal of writing instruction does not replace the conventional emphasis on developing academic writing competence in the service of the broader postsecondary curriculum. These goals are not mutually exclusive but can be pursued in tandem, for as we hope to demonstrate, writing competence, as traditionally understood, can and should be a component of

well-being. That is, writing self-efficacy, which research shows to be correlated with writing competence, is implicated in one's sense of self and thus contributes to well-being. To state it somewhat differently: writing well and writing to be well are part of the same process. We propose that writing instruction should be configured in such a way that students do both.

This reconceptualization of the purposes of writing instruction rests on (1) understanding the potentially transformative impact of the experience of writing-in-the-moment on a writer's sense of self and self-efficacy, and (2) shifting the focus of instruction away from an obsession with the quality of finished texts and toward an engagement in writing as a vehicle for inquiry into one's experience of self in relation to the world. We believe that this shift encourages the development of more inclusive pedagogies and helps to redefine competence in ways that are consistent with the goals of antiracist and progressive educators who see the pursuit of a more just and equitable world as the fundamental purpose of education (Baker-Bell; Freire; Inoue). To make this case, we draw from relevant research and posthumanist theory to illuminate the experience of writing, and we describe a pedagogical approach that can give students access to the transformative capacity of writing as a way to support their well-being and their development as writers, thinkers, and human beings.

Well-Being Defined

In recent years, college educators have increasingly turned their attention to well-being as an essential component of an education that honors the student as a whole person (see Harward).² Reich argues that this recent interest in well-being “is not about some superficial or even transient experience of being happy or even about feeling happy, but rather it turns to that more important, sustainable quality of purpose that underlies our sense of self, our motivation to persist, our trust in agency, and our responsibility to act for the common good” (2). Similarly, focusing on student well-being as an outcome of teaching and learning spotlights specific human qualities, including “the resilience to tackle hard questions; the self-esteem or confidence to challenge oneself; the persistence to fail and try again” (Finley 4); in this regard, teaching becomes about creating conditions to challenge students “to counter convention, to seek alternative perspectives, to suspend judgment, to defend contrarian views” (7). Ultimately, seeking well-being is an opportunity for self and social exploration and a chance for meaningful engagement with the world (13).

Well-being, then, is grounded in the intent to live a purposeful, meaningful life, working toward one's aspirations with available resources, regardless of existing challenges (Dodge et al. 230). It is a state of being more than a transitory emotional moment, a way of being in the world that leads to resilience.

We see the writing classroom as a unique space in which instruction can bolster the well-being of students and provide opportunities to develop their potential for rich, meaningful, engaged lives. Writing Studies scholars have long been engaged in conversations about purpose and meaning, notably in debates about the universal first-year composition requirement (Crowley); in discussions about transfer (Yancey et al.); and in advocacy for critical pedagogy, anti-racism, and inclusive approaches to writing instruction (Inoue; Muhammad; Olson). We locate our argument for re-imagining the purposes of writing instruction within these debates. Writing, as a meaning-making activity, has distinctive attributes that make it especially well-suited for developing and maintaining well-being. But to take advantage of those attributes—to access the potentially transformative power of writing as a vehicle for well-being—requires rethinking the very nature of writing by focusing on the experience of writing as a site of transformation.

The Experience of Writing

Several years ago, a student we'll call Sarah enrolled in the teacher education program at the university where Bob teaches. Sarah, who was in her mid-twenties at the time and studying to become a high school science teacher, enrolled in a required course in literacy instruction. For the initial course assignment, students were asked to write about their own experiences as writers and readers. Sarah wrote an essay about a kind of private book club that she and her grandfather created when she was a young girl to read books together that reflected their mutual passion for the outdoors. Sarah's essay made it clear that she enjoyed a special relationship with her grandfather and that the time she had spent with him was precious. But the essay seemed distant, even detached at times. Only near the end did she mention, almost in passing, the significant fact that her grandfather had recently died. She wrote nothing more about that death, which must have been one of the most important events in her life.

In class after the assignment was due, Bob asked the students to reflect on it. Sarah was the first person to speak. "This assignment was interesting," she said, "but I hated it." Given the conventional purpose of such assignments, which tend to value the quality of students' prose, it was reasonable to assume that Sarah meant that she disliked writing or that composing a personal narrative was challenging for someone accustomed to writing scientific reports. But what Sarah found difficult about the assignment was writing about her grandfather, which, she said later, dredged up painful memories of his death and intensified her sense of loss. Writing the essay, in other words, was a difficult emotional experience for her. However, she also confided that writing that essay helped her realize what a wonderful gift her relationship with her

grandfather had been. Despite the difficulty of reliving her loss, she found the experience of writing affirming and, paradoxically, both painful and joyful. And significantly, although she wished to earn a good grade and worked hard to produce an essay that met the standards of the assignment, what ultimately mattered to her was not the text she produced, but the experience of writing about her grandfather.

Sarah's essay described, in compelling and vivid ways, her relationship with her grandfather and the special role that books had played in that relationship, but the text itself conveys nothing of the experience that Sarah said she had in composing her essay. As she wrote, she said, she relived past moments that she was trying to describe in the piece, but she also relived experiences that do not show up anywhere in her finished essay. The powerful emotions she felt while writing are largely absent from the text. In the end, the profound experience she had while writing her essay is rendered into something else in her text. The two are different: her experience while writing and the text itself.

What should we make of this?

Mainstream theories of composition provide limited insight into the writer's experience. For example, prevailing sociocognitive theories (Bereiter and Scardamalia; Flower; Hayes), which describe writing as goal-directed problem-solving, focus on the writer's decision-making in the construction of a text that meets the needs of the rhetorical situation. These models subordinate affective dimensions of writing, such as motivation, to cognition. Emotion, self-efficacy, and other affective dimensions of writing are assigned to broad categories, such as "long-term memory," that might influence the writer's decision-making (Hayes 371). The moment-to-moment experience of writing as described by these models is a function of the writer's effort to solve the problem of constructing a text that serves specific rhetorical purposes; the experience of writing, in other words, is an intellectual one driven by the development of the text as a solution to a rhetorical problem. Significantly, this kind of model does not account for the emotional, psychological, or physical impact of the experience of writing-in-the-moment on the writer, which might in turn shape the writer's decisions about the text—or not.

Recent scholarship on cognition in writing, informed by developments in neuroscience and driven by an effort to account for diversity and individual variation (Portanova et al.; Rifenburg et al.), moves beyond a focus on problem-solving toward a more complex conception of cognition. As Peter Khost, Wendy Ryden, and David Hyman note, "a gradual paradigm shift has been occurring in some areas of cognitive theory: roughly, from representational models to various embodied theories of human cognition" (28). Interestingly, these newer lines of cognitive inquiry acknowledge the experience of writing, in some cases updating earlier scholarship on voice and what Sondra Perl

famously described as the writer's "felt sense" in composing a text (365). For example, using what she describes as a "neurophenomenological approach" that draws on psychology and psycholinguistics, Arlie Rose examined seven participants' "inner experience of language during reading and writing presented in the context of their lived experience" (60) and concluded that "some inner experiences of language are more compatible with success than others" (71). Consistent with established cognitive models, Rose's study retains a focus on understanding writers' "inner experiences" in the production of a text. However, some participants described their own "inner experiences" while writing as encompassing much more than a concern for the text itself. One participant (Tom), for example, described being "deeply immersed in an image [as he was writing], a moment in time that he had spent with the friend he was writing to" (66); but the "highly developed image" in Tom's mind, which included "kinesthetic sensations, weather, conversation, and visual imagery," was not reflected in "the sparse words" Tom produced during this writing activity.

This example, strikingly similar to what Sarah described, conveys some of the richness of the experiences of these writers in the moment of writing. Nevertheless, little attention has been devoted to the impact of that experience on the writer's sense of self. Similarly, despite the complexity of sociocultural perspectives on writing (Brandt; Nystrand), which illuminate the ways in which writers construct identity in all its manifestations—gender, ethnicity, race, social class, sexual orientation, among them—through writing, sociocultural theories assign little value to the experience of writing in the moment and the potential impact of that experience on the writer's sense of self and well-being.

However, some recent scholarship has challenged the humanist conceptions of writing that are the foundation for cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, opening up new possibilities for illuminating the importance of the experience of writing. As Marilyn Cooper has noted, "Posthumanism, new materialism, and the nonhuman turn from epistemology and ontology challenges the assumptions that writing is simply a cognitive activity of symbol use [. . .] and that writing is an activity that is dominantly directed to understanding or [. . .] interpreting the world" (4). Writers, she asserts, "are affective and kinetic as well as cognitive bodies. [. . .] Writing is no longer conceived of as an epistemic or even a socio-epistemic practice of understanding the world but rather as a behavior of intra-acting in the world in which writers participate in their own and the world's emergence" (5). This emerging posthumanist conception of writing shifts attention from the text to the embodied experience of the writer engaged in an act of writing within what Byron Hawk has described as "assemblages" of relations and expression ("Reassembling" 77). In other words, although posthumanist theory (Cooper; Hawk, *Counter-History*; Hawk, "Reassembling") retains an abiding interest in writing as a rhetorical act, it expands

the conception of writing to encompass the affective and the physical, and it undermines the idea of the writer as an autonomous being functioning primarily in a cognitive or intellectual realm.³ In that sense, posthumanism provides fertile ground for reimagining the purposes of writing instruction in a way that values the writer's experience and its impact on the writer's sense of self.

If writing is the "behavior of intra-acting" that Cooper (5) and other posthumanist theorists describe, then it is reasonable to conclude that the writer's evolving sense of self as a being in the world—as always becoming—is bound up in an act of writing (see Yagelski, *Being*).⁴ Indeed, Cooper's analysis of writing relies heavily on Barad's theory of agential realism, which redefines ontology in ways that have significant implications for how we conceive of the writerly self and the experience of writing-in-the-moment. According to Barad, "That reality within which we intra-act—what I term agential reality—[. . .] is not a fixed ontology that is independent of human practices, but is continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions" (104). Within Barad's formulation, writing is a specific "material instantiation of language" (108)—and thus a different kind of phenomenon from speech—that results in different kinds of intra-actions with different effects. The self that emerges in an act of writing—which is not fixed, not *a priori*, and not separate from the act—is not necessarily the same as the self that emerges in a spoken utterance. Nevertheless, a self does emerge in that act of writing-in-the-moment. The specific embodiment that is writing—the "material instantiation of language," in Barad's terms—has the potential to effect (as opposed to affect) a self.

Cooper draws on this idea of intra-action in her exploration of what she calls "enchantment ontology," which "envisions individuals as entangled in intra-active phenomena from which they co-emerge contingently in an ongoing process of becoming" (9). To conceive of an act of writing as part of the process of becoming is to direct attention to—and assign value to—the experience of writing and to the self constructed from this experience. In this regard, Cooper usefully complicates prevailing notions of writing that valorize textual production to the exclusion of other purposes (or effects) of writing and takes an important step toward assigning value to the experience of writing-in-the-moment.

Taken together, these lines of inquiry point to the experience of writing-in-the-moment as both affecting and effecting a writer's sense of self and well-being; in this sense, writing-in-the-moment becomes a powerful site of potential individual and collective transformation.⁵ For this reason, the experience of writing, as distinct from the text itself, should be the focus of greater attention among writing teachers and researchers. More to the point, the significance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment and its potential impact on the

writer's sense of self are central to the project of re-imagining the purposes of writing instruction in terms of well-being.

The Impact of the Experience of Writing on the Self

Let's return to our example of Sarah and her essay about her grandfather. The main purpose of the assignment was twofold: (1) to encourage students to reflect on their experiences with literacy in order to explore the complexities of literacy in their lives; and (2) to provide students with an opportunity to deepen their knowledge about writing and, ideally, strengthen their writing skills. Arguably, Sarah's grade for the assignment (an A) indicates that her essay fulfilled both purposes. In this sense, writing was employed as a tool for learning content and developing written communication skills, which tends to be how writing functions in mainstream education. We might simply leave the matter there.

But what might be lost if we do?

For one thing, focusing exclusively on those conventional goals of writing instruction could devalue any benefit that Sarah might realize from her experience of writing her essay in terms of her sense of herself as a granddaughter and a young woman still confronting the loss of a loved one. In other words, focusing exclusively on the nature and quality of her text as a response to the course assignment means that we neither acknowledge nor encourage the possibility that the experience of writing mattered to Sarah—that it was a powerful emotional experience in her ongoing effort to deal with a fundamental component of human life (i.e. death) that might have little to do with the purpose of the assignment or course. Ignoring that possibility might mean that Sarah herself dismisses that experience as perhaps just a difficult part of her effort to complete a school assignment. Ignoring her experience also means that we convey an implicit message that the experience of writing-in-the-moment is irrelevant. And whatever Sarah might have learned as a result of that experience—about herself, about her past, about life and death—also becomes irrelevant, or at least less important than the academic goals of the assignment. Moreover, if defined as irrelevant, this learning that Sarah might have enjoyed as a result of that experience is not shared, discussed, or examined as part of the work of the course, so it becomes invisible to others in the class. Finally, by ignoring Sarah's experience of writing her essay, we implicitly reject the possibility that her experience might enrich her life by contributing to her understanding of her relationship with her grandfather and, more generally, the complexities of living; in that regard, we also forfeit a compelling opportunity to support her well-being. Indeed, in the context of the conventional sense of the purposes of a writing assignment like the one Sarah completed, her very well-being is irrelevant.

If what matters to us as writing teachers and scholars is the development of certain kinds of (sanctioned) skills, the acquisition of rhetorical knowledge, and the transfer of those skills and knowledge to other courses in the curriculum and, eventually, the workplace, then perhaps we should ignore the potential impact of Sarah's experience on her well-being. But if education is about more than skills and knowledge and preparation for the workplace, if it is ultimately about helping students learn to live ethical and fulfilling lives and create more just and equitable communities, then an exclusive focus on the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge is insufficient. In our view, developing skill and acquiring knowledge without also strengthening well-being, as well as a sense of one's ethical responsibility for contributing to the well-being of others, reflects a bankrupt educational model, one in which the deposits of sanctioned knowledge—to invoke Freire's famous banking model of education—do little more than reify an unjust and often dangerous status quo and dehumanize students, preventing them not only from developing the critical consciousness that Freire described as essential for improving the world but also from accessing the potentially transformative capacity of writing to help them live more humanely, more mindfully, more fully, and more ethically (Freire).

A Pedagogy of Wellness and Well-Being

What does writing instruction look like when the experience of writing is emphasized and well-being becomes a central goal? Here, we discuss six basic principles for a pedagogy focused on well-being that simultaneously encompasses traditional goals of writing instruction.

Emphasize the Experience of Writing-in-the-Moment

In redefining the idea of “college readiness,” Khost et al. argue that “conventional secondary and postsecondary writing curricula should be balanced with cultivation of a rhetorical presence of mind, body, spirit, and environment” (21). In their view, conventional conceptions of college and career readiness undermine the potential of writing instruction to serve students' needs as human beings: “The act of composing loses its connection to the moment and instead yokes itself to retrieval of the past (learned rules and strategies) and anxieties about the future (grades, achievement of expectations)” (24). Instead, they propose the concept of rhetorical present moment, whereby “a writer [is] engaged through mind and body with an audience (including the attendant dynamics of intention and exchange, which some might call *spirit*) in which authentic exigence is realized (metacognition) in the here and now situation (environment)” (28). This idea of the rhetorical present moment is consistent with our argument for valuing the experience of writing in a broader effort to foster well-being. But we would go further and

propose that the purpose of the writing class should not be limited to rhetorical concerns, even if the conception of rhetoric assigns value to the present. As we have demonstrated, the experience of writing-in-the-moment has value separate from the successful achievement of a rhetorical goal. Writing instruction should embrace that value and place the experience of writing-in-the-moment at the center of a pedagogy whose ultimate value is well-being.

In our classes, therefore, we create regular opportunities for students to engage in low-stakes writing activities that invite inquiry into their experience of themselves in relation to the world around them. These opportunities consist mainly of informal, ungraded writing (see Yagelski, “Pedagogical Uses”). For example, we begin every class meeting with 5-10 minutes of mindful writing, during which students respond to a prompt (or not) simply to articulate and explore their thoughts, feelings, questions, concerns, or beliefs. The intent is to provide opportunities for students to inquire into their experiences in order to gain insight into who they are as writers—and as human beings.

Founded on Murray’s idea that writing “is the process of exploration of what we should know and what we feel about what we know through language” (15), these practices foster a greater critical awareness of the self in relation to the wider world (Mathieu; Yagelski, *Writing*). Writing becomes a tool for students to become agents in their own learning—and living. Openness to experience is critical for personal growth, which, in turn, contributes to well-being (Ryff and Singer 21). When the richness of students’ experiences as immigrants, as first-generation students, as multilingual learners—as human beings in all their complexity—becomes the ground for inquiry through writing practices that assign value to the experience of writing-in-the-moment, the outcomes can be genuinely transformative, not just in terms of academic success but—more importantly—in terms of students’ sense of self as beings in the world.

Invite Students to Use Writing to Explore and Document Their Feelings about Their Work

Like Sarah, all students experience a range of emotions through their coursework, and we believe it is important for students to check in with themselves as they write, to see how they are feeling, to examine how these emotions impact their writing process, and to determine if these emotions find their way into their formal written work. For example, in the “second education” assignment we described earlier, Dan’s students examined how such an education is bound up in our search for identity and pleasure, and he asked them to write about the emotions they experienced as they composed their drafts. Some students felt shy getting so personal; some expressed a lack of confidence in their work. But many students reported feeling joy and pride as they wrote, because they could claim to be experts on their topics, about which

they felt genuine passion. “This energy should translate into the work,” one student explained, “because it is our positive emotions regarding these topics that will show them to be a second education. We have to show in our writing the joy that they give us, or else our readers won’t see what we feel.” Dan and his students concluded this discussion by agreeing that a successful draft should include a sense of the emotional connection each student had with their second education.

Such exercises can illuminate the complexity—and power—of the experience of writing and help students become more mindful of themselves and their emotions as they write. These exercises can also foster in students an awareness of the many different aspects of their lives that might come into play as they write—whether they are producing formal academic essays or informal writing of the kind we describe above. Developing such awareness can contribute to well-being by enhancing self-efficacy and providing opportunities to explore important aspects of their identities that inform their academic work.

Provide Opportunities to Take and to Reflect on Risks in Writing

As a multifaceted state of becoming, well-being involves engaging the tension between challenges and available resources. We believe writing courses should encourage students to confront this tension mindfully. One way to do so is to ask students to identify risks they are willing to take in their writing. Dan regularly asks his students to explore one risk they took in completing an assigned writing task. This risk could be related to writing style, genre, process, or content. Dan discusses such risks with the students, who then freewrite about a specific risk taken. Sometimes the responses can be surprising. In the “second education” assignment, for example, students identified as risks both writing a full draft in one sitting and writing about oneself, both scary (being vulnerable) and heretofore forbidden (having been taught throughout their schooling to avoid using the first person in academic writing). Such responses reveal the students’ sense of restriction in their academic writing and expose the vulnerability they feel as writers. Deeming the rhetorical situation as limited/limiting, students sometimes demonstrate a certain wariness when Dan invites openness and experimentation in their writing. In other words, their well-being is at stake here because of their perceived vulnerability and lack of authority in their school-sponsored writing. Writing about such risk enables a more expansive airing of the students’ perspectives and positionality.

As Ryff and Singer explain, well-being includes “the idea of striving toward excellence based on one’s unique potential” (14). In this sense, well-being encompasses knowing oneself in the process of becoming, a conscious process of using “one’s talents and capacities” toward self-actualization (Ryff and Singer 18). Activities such as Dan’s reflective writing exercise on risk-taking illustrate

how writing-in-the-moment can help promote this process of self-actualization by placing emphasis on the experience of writing rather than on fulfilling a rhetorical exigency.

Acknowledge Well-Being as Unequally Distributed

April Baker-Bell reminds us that “people’s language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences. Indeed, the way a Black child’s language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world” (2). In other words, racial and linguistic discrimination and oppression go hand in hand. Writing instructors must acknowledge this reality and structure writing activities accordingly.

Anti-racist educators such as Baker-Bell, Gholdy Muhammad, Bettina A. Love, and Felicia Rose Chavez honor the humanity and genius of their students and provide a framework through which we might undo the emotional harm done to marginalized students who have been subjected to the privileging of white ways of knowing, speaking, and being. As Ryff and Singer note, “well-being, construed as growth and human fulfillment, is profoundly influenced by the surrounding contexts of people’s lives, and as such, . . . the opportunities for self-realization are not equally distributed” (14). This unequal distribution was evident during the pandemic, and we see it in our classrooms every day.

Promoting student well-being, then, aligns with ongoing work on anti-racism and linguistic justice. We believe that assigning value to the experience of writing as a vehicle for well-being—and for social and individual transformation—should be an essential component of an inclusive writing pedagogy that not only values equity but actively promotes it. Writing practices that invite exploration of one’s experience in the world can be explicitly turned to this purpose. For example, the mindful writing prompts we describe above can focus on students’ language experiences in ways that illuminate inequality and at the same time foster awareness and pride in their linguistic heritage.

Promote Well-Being as a Social Good

Well-being is often presented as an individual project of cultivating one’s capacity for living a meaningful life. Writing can be key to this development, so that, as Laura Rendón puts it, students “learn to write and express themselves [but also] . . . develop confidence and to find their self-worth and purpose in life” (94). But Rendón also acknowledges the abiding social value in education, the ways in which well-being is about establishing and maintaining relationships across people and communities: “Our education should assist us to develop not only our intellectual capacities, but our ability to be creative and reflective, as well as to work with and understand other people” (30). Through our education, we begin to build relationships across people

and communities, and to see interconnections among courses and disciplines (39). Thus, a writing pedagogy that embraces well-being as a goal is also a social project consistent with the vision of educators like Freire who see literacy instruction as inseparable from the goal of building more just and equitable societies. The writing practices we describe here enable students both to examine and to enact the inherently social nature of the seemingly individual project of cultivating self-awareness and seeking well-being.

Focus on Meaning Making

Well-being, like writing, is fundamentally about making meaning; it is about living meaningfully and purposefully. In this sense, teaching writing as a process of making meaning—rather than producing sanctioned texts or developing skills—can promote well-being.

Citing Robert Brooke, Molly Hurley Moran argues that “learning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve problems. The development of such a role, such a self-understanding, is more important than developing any set of procedural competencies” (qtd. in Moran 99). As Moran’s students engaged in writing for their own purposes, they developed a greater sense of ownership over their work (106). Emphasizing writing as a way of making meaning, Moran began to meet the conditions to promote well-being outlined by Ryff and Singer: High levels of purpose and growth within a given community keeps people healthy, even when confronted with challenges (Ryff and Singer 31). A strong focus on the making of meaning encourages students to actively engage and value a reflective stance, further conditions that support well-being, even as they deepen their rhetorical knowledge and hone their communicative skills (Ryff and Singer 22).

Writing and Living Well

In a powerful essay confronting the challenges of teaching, Paul Lynch calls for “shadow living,” that is, living in the shadow of the question, “What am I doing here?” (501). Lynch cites the need to live with uncertainty in a community, what he calls a network of obligations, and he endorses certain practices for shadow living: “Chief among these is a habit of written exercise that seeks neither to make arguments nor provide answers, but instead to occasion a kind of openness crucial for inhabiting a network of obligations” (501). Such occasions include those that cannot be readily rendered in language, experiences intended not to explain but in which we “dwell” (506). This is writing as a practice of living; without a rhetorical exigency, with a focus on the experience of writing-in-the-moment.

Conceived as a practice of living, writing becomes more than a set of skills to master, a competency to demonstrate. Instead, it is the making of meaning, a process of inquiry into the questions that matter in our daily lives. Writing enables a deeper engagement with these questions and thus provides the potential for a different way of being in the world. Through writing we can become “more receptive, available, attuned;” we write to “remain open, even vulnerable” (Lynch 513-514). This way of being in the world involves staying with questions rather than answering them, and creating and sustaining meaningful relationships based on shared work and purpose. It is interested in what is not always legible rather than forcing the uncertain into a false legibility.

This moment in which we are living calls for this kind of writing. And teaching.

To acknowledge the complex conditions in which our students write and live is to underscore the need to remain, all of us, curious and skeptical, open and discerning, humble and empathetic, and to use language to make meanings that ground us in our work, in our purposes and aspirations, in our connections to one another. In this sense, well-being involves figuring out how to live together mindfully in the face of ambiguity, obfuscation, uncertainty. Leslie Jamison writes, “I often think of the subject of an essay as something like a courtyard full of questions—questions about grief, or longing, or memory, or empathy. Writing means walking a furious labyrinthine path in order to peer at them from every possible direction.” To approach writing accordingly—valuing the moment-to-moment experience of writing within this labyrinth of questions—is to engage in a project of well-being. We see no project for teachers of writing that is more important or more pressing.

Notes

1. At the University at Albany (SUNY), where Bob teaches, approximately 40% of the student population is first-generation, and 43% are racial-ethnic minorities (<https://www.albany.edu/news-center/news/2022-ualbany-recognized-support-first-gen-students>; <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/suny-at-albany/student-life/diversity/>). At Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, where Dan teaches, the figures are 60% first-generation and 90% racial-ethnic minority (<https://guttman.cuny.edu/about/cce/data-reports/enrollment-reports/enrollment-report-among-all-students/>; <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/stella-and-charles-guttman-community-college/>). Both campuses have high percentages of low-income students. At UAlbany, 42% of undergraduates receive Pell Grants; at Guttman, 60% do.

2. Well-being has emerged in multiple academic disciplines, including psychology (Huppert, Baylis and Keverne), economics (Marks and Shah), public health (VanDerWeele), and literature (Pawelski and Moores). Scholars in composition studies have also addressed well-being (Collins; Moran). Broadly speaking, this scholar-

ship acknowledges composition as one key academic space that can assist students in the construction and maintenance of well-being.

3. Empirical studies of writing anxiety support this claim that the writer's sense of self as an emotional, psychological, and physical being is integral to an act of writing. See Daly and Wilson; Hjortshoj.

4. Studies of writing self-efficacy show a strong correlation between a writer's perceptions of competence and general self-worth and writing performance. See Klasen, Pajares. Research by Brand and Micciche demonstrates writing to be a complex, multi-dimensional, emotional experience for the writer.

5. On the multiple therapeutic and medical benefits of writing, see Pennebaker and Beall; Gortner, Rude, and Pennebaker; Milbury et al.; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser and Glaser.

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