Guest Editorial

What Is "Good" Writing Today? Writing Beyond the Art of Description

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In the typical English language classroom for quite a long time, so-called good writing consisted of composition by the student that was grammatically accurate, descriptively acute, and possessed of an economy of expression. Essays were headed by sentences that presaged their near neighbors and paragraphs built upon one another to some kind of summative descriptive conclusion. Done, done and done.

Missing in all of this was any idea that what the student had thence accomplished was important. It is the rare K-12 or even collegiate essay that "matters" (even to the student). Neither the student nor her teacher is invested in her essay, beyond its passage through the gauntlets of completeness, assigned length and grammatical clarity. The essay today is like a demonstration of compositional fitness by the student, saying only, "See, I am able to adequately describe something in prose."

In an important sense, then, it is not really writing as we would want writing to be conceived of, as it does not issue unbidden from the student's desire to express themselves. It is just an assessment, a quiz, a measurement demanded of the student. At best, it is a mockup of a model of something yet to come; like a car that an auto company promises will be available in a year or two. It is dismissed as soon as it is composed, and students often conclude that if it does not matter to their teacher or parents (beyond a grade) then why invest any of their persona in it?

The two academic papers that this research strand presents here seek to set this practice on its head. What if students wrote essays that were brave diatribes, even screeds against injustice or the discomfort of their present circumstances? What if the essays were revelatory of the student's personal experiences, even uncomfortably so? And what if they connected the

student's experience to larger issues of discrimination, or unfairness or marginalized peoples? What if we began with the proviso that if the central purpose of the composition had originated with the student and was keenly felt by them, then they would be much more inclined to want to polish it into a fine and persuasive composition?

In "Writing Bravely: Transformed Practice through Multimodal Composition in History and English Language Arts," Beth Walsh-Moorman and Molly Schneider use a case study to explore how a "cross-disciplinary digital inquiry and multi-modal composition" (p. 10) demonstrates the four elements arrived at in the deep study of the storied New London Group (1996), i.e. *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing*, and *transformed practice*. Since the gathering of the New London Group in 1996, educators have sought to explore the precepts laid down there and how these may have matured or become adapted to our current milieu of wikis, blogs, texting and other forms of compositional communication.

As Walsh-Moorman and Schneider (2021) point out, "bravery" is an important part of critical and good writing; however, today's interconnected reality means that brave writing is exposed earlier and more often, which can sometimes have consequences. Walsh-Moorman and her colleague use a framework of multi-modal composition, a form that goes beyond the mere "decoration" of text; it affords new ways for students to absorb the meaning of texts and transforms those meanings. In their view, multimodal composition (MMC) places demands on the writer not present with just textual composition, as through MMC, there are so many ways to present knowledge, both of the self, and of the self's lived experience. They state that doing this imposes on educators the responsibility of instilling the grammars in students of other semiotic forms, such as those from film, television, theater, and the short staccato bursts of meaning from texting.

At the same time, they assert (in my view, quite correctly) that the literacies associated with technology are not neutral and themselves influence meaning making. This point was perhaps first made by Willard van Orman Quine in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" as he argued (in part) that theory making depended upon measurements that themselves depended on a technology of observation (Quine, 1951). Walsh-Moorman and Schneider further observe that contemporary multimodality occurs in a current environment of false arguments and dubious facts. Therefore, the self-directed manner of students' inquiry before composition "builds authentic conscientization" (Walsh-Moorman, et al. 2021, p. 16).

Their case study involved the research by two high school students, code named Sarah and Hailey, who sought to examine the historical Japanese experience of the internment camps during World War II. They did this to fulfill curricular requirements in an English class and a history class. This led to many questions as to whether or how history meaning making impinged upon English meaning making, and vice versa. It is a great read, and a "must" for composition instructors.

In "Supporting Students in Writing for Critical Social Change in K-12 Schools," Nadia Behizadeh, Brooks Salter and Cheryll Thompson-Smith explore how educators might critically use pedagogy to urge their students to write for social change. Their cohort of interest is elementary and secondary-aged schoolchildren, but instead of studying them directly, they examine instead key literature on this point. The goal was to see if authors had observed that writing for impact was something that could be easily encouraged in students: "Two primary purposes of writing for impact in the literature were raising awareness and persuading others to take action." Their study was incentivized in part by the dicta of NCTE, the National Council of Teachers of English, which has stressed the importance of critical literacy and the involvement

of students together in the conversations about social justice. Students are quite aware of the disputes, challenges and endemic oppression that take place today. The goal then, would be to spur them to write about what they see as the challenges that all too soon will be their responsibility to address.

Behizadeh and her colleagues are self-admittedly influenced by the research of Paolo Freire (1970). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stressed the importance of critical textual production by students themselves. Freire scorned the so-called banking model of education, in which students are viewed as mental bank accounts into which deposits of knowledge are made by teachers. This is why English educators are called upon to help foster critical textual production by students themselves, whom Freire, along with Behizadeh and her colleagues, view as active learners. In the foreword to *Pedagogy*, Richard Shaull wrote:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull, in Freire, 1970, p. 15).

Methodologically, Behizadeh and her fellow researchers embark on something that is not quite a literature review and not quite an annotated bibliography; it is instead a kind of interrogation of the existing relevant literature through the lenses of awareness and action, in which the literature review itself forms the subject of the study. They identify works that fall into the following sub-categories under these two kinds of primary purpose. It was also important to them to assess what sort of effect writing for impact and effectiveness had on students; as they

explored the literature, they found "a variety of purposes associated with writing for impact: sharing experience, communicating ideas, effecting practical or critical social change, and sometimes a combination of these" (Behizadeh, et al., 2021, p.54).

These two works form bookends of a literature that is long overdue in being implemented. It is clear from both studies that when students care about what they write, and are asked to be the author not only of the composition but of its content, intent and audience, then the natural reaction will be for the student to also care about the form of the essay, both in its structure and its persuasiveness. Students also have something to say, as do all sentient beings, when given the chance to give expression to it. Instead of forcing the student into the straitjacket of a compelled assignment about a subject in which they have little interest, educators are urged to discover just what a student wishes to write about. From there, it is merely showing the student how best to express, in the words and structure of language, what they long to say.

When something belongs to us, the stakes are raised, and we take care that the values professed in an essay are expressed in the manner most like what we would ideally intend. Such essays will be memorably expressed, pointed in their expression and clear in their purpose. And isn't that the goal of all good writing?

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