

HOW TO DESIGN OUR TEACHING LIVES: BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITHIN AND BEYOND THE WRITING CLASSROOM THROUGH METHODOLOGICAL BELIEVING

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As you think with me about teaching lives, please complete a pre-reading activity. Find a slip of paper and do a bit of freewriting or simply organize your thoughts by responding in your mind to the following six prompts as you read them:

1. Recall a best classroom teaching moment.
2. Remember the time you were most surprised by a student; that is, you had an initial strong impression of that student and later viewed him or her very differently.
3. Describe your secret desire or dream for your teaching life.
4. Identify the moment in your teaching life when, if you were someone else, you would have praised you (think of something unseen and unsung in your teaching life that merited praise but no one particularly knew about).
5. List the places where your private and your teaching lives most harmoniously intersect.

6. Note some times when your writing life and your teaching life seem most integrated or nourishing to each other.

You may have noticed that I avoided asking for negative instances and examples, including the insurmountable obstacles and the weaknesses that we generally solicit with the strengths, due perhaps to some misguided sense of fair-play. Ten years ago, I would have insisted on using only such well-balanced questions. Today I no longer always will.

And that's not because I'm a Pollyanna type. Quite the reverse. Too often I whine, I balk, I tend to see the glass half full, the project impossible, the other person obdurate, and the long-term outlook too cloudy for comfort. Years in education have conspired with my natural bent toward cynicism.

Why then a renewed urge to accent the positive, to explore how teaching and life mutually support each other? It's not that I haven't believed such a proposition for twenty years; it's that so often I find doing so very difficult, at least on a daily basis, as an internalized practice of hope. It's hard persistently to practice what I preach, and I'm guessing it may sometimes be for you also. As I've had to learn to do in many corners of my personal life, I've had also to decide to do in my teaching life; that is, train myself for self-health by moving a crucial distance from the easy highs and lows of my teaching youth where I'd quickly get rebellious with or disdainful of the curriculum, the system, the department, myself, or the student. For how quickly one bad teaching moment, one task too many, one perceived error of judgment or timing, one more lack of support or opportunity could send me into a fog of self-doubt. Did teaching writing matter as much as I thought? Did working to improve my methods really matter? I'd hear others ask such questions; and then, as regularly as I stumbled, I'd ask the same myself.

Peter Elbow was the first to give me insight into this self-prophecy-creates-real-problems issue in his essay "Methodological Doubting and Believing." Elbow views methodological doubting

and believing as essential learning activities. He claims that we more often doubt than believe, needing only one disconfirmation to abandon an assertion. Proof of the nonexistence of a disconfirming instance, however, is very difficult (if not impossible) to provide. He claims that doubt too often caters to “our natural impulse to protect and retain the views we already hold” (263). Elbow calls for balance and integration, doubting and believing both being necessary to broaden our intellectual—and I’d argue emotional—teaching repertoire. And that, I’ve come to learn was what my anger and rebellion were tied to: a reluctance to change, to be flexible, to be forgiving, of myself and then of others.

In this way, Elbow reminds me how easily and how often I may use one negative to cancel out a week of positives. All it takes is that one instance. One problem administrator (fill in your own blank: student, class, lesson plan, funding shift) can shake our faith in ourselves and our initiatives. I love my teaching life (fill in the blank for yourself: students, job, subject): I can assert this in general, but each particular moment of dismay or disillusionment threatens to negate that assertion at a fundamentally problematic level. And a pile of such moments results in burn-out. If I rely on apostrophe and generality only, my faith cannot be asserted without more and stronger faith, something I often lack at the end of a long work day. Suddenly, what I stand for no longer seems true, or, if true, then not sustaining enough. Then I take the uncomfortable logician’s stand and extend my argument: worrying that it never will be true.

Because of this, Elbow urges us to believe harder than that, regularly and *methodologically* giving belief fair play, perhaps even more than fair play since it takes more instances of belief than of disbelief to assure us, because we construct our views in contemporary culture most regularly via negation.

And that’s really a subtext for my thinking here: to ask what happens when you tithe some serious methodological believing time to your teaching life. How might that change your everyday experience as a writing teacher? How might such a commitment

empower you? The word *empower* is not as corny as it sounds since we know as parents, teachers, writers, and citizens that no one can take away our power so surely as we can. In fact, we often give it away by the fistful. And here I'll offer a sneak preview: my primary suggestion for exercising intentional belief is to urge writing teachers to write. This writing is for self and then possibly for others. I believe that constructing a teaching life through our own introspective writing-about-writing and writing-about-teaching-writing may be the best believing technique we have at our disposal. In writing about our teaching lives, we figure out our classrooms, we speak to ourselves positively *and* analytically, both praising and problem solving. Then we have the resources to reach out to share with others because we are now re-composed. At the same time, teaching-life journeys reflect a lot of hard work, and we can do the base-line work of figuring-it-out-through-words in order to put those words back into circulation as better or more attentive and attuned practices.

Lately, the analogy for me is relaxation. Recently I've been counseled—not for the first time—to make time for relaxation breathing in my life (fill in the blank for yourself--options include exercise, children, writing, and so on). I know I should—but the first thing that springs to mind is all the many and real reasons why so often I can't.

In this most recent advice session, I admitted, "Yes, I will." That is, I responded by believing. Scheduling has worked for me in many areas. Scheduling a vacation almost works. Scheduling writing times works, or at least prioritizing helps the work along. The only time I could find in my schedule, I admitted to myself, would be at 6:30 a.m., the 30 minutes after my daughter has taken herself off in the dark to the high school bus and before my middle-school son gets up to chatter at me through his Chex. Now here's the drawback. That's my favorite time. I'm awake, have energy, get the paper, have coffee and orange juice and my own chatter-free cereal, prioritize my day's work, and feel . . . almost ready for the day. I indulge myself.

With a sigh, I decide to give up fifteen of those thirty to forty-five minutes. To be a good girl. To take care of my health, to try anew to find my center. “Yes, I’ve been promising for years. I’m going to try it. I’ll start this week,” I say. I’ll stop my morning whirlwind and lie down on the carpet and breathe for fifteen minutes. I visualize myself doing this. I am going to be a rock. I will take my medicine and feel heroic for such firmness. And certainly, there’s nothing more inflexible, martyred or penitent than a reforming cynic.

“However,” quietly mentions my advisor, “everything I’ve read suggests that you’ll really need twenty minutes. With twenty minutes you’ll really get maximum effectiveness from your efforts.”

My face falls. Twenty minutes! It seems like such a huge commitment. I panic as I try to open my mouth to promise. Then I realize this. To me, twenty minutes instead of fifteen symbolizes all the difference between lip-service and actually committing, between saying I should change and really changing. Yet twenty minutes a day of my life turns out to be a mere five days a year. Surely I’m worth it. And I’d argue, surely our teaching lives are worth at least the same investment in believing.

Let’s be honest. We could do wonders with just twenty minutes three times a week: to write a teaching journal entry, a teaching poem, a letter to ourselves or any listener that explores our feelings and findings about our educational system; to make entries in a teaching scrapbook; to write an unsent (or sent) letter to an administrator, student, newspaper, or family member who does not quite understand our commitment. One hour a week, year round. What starts as self-assignment becomes useful internalized practice, provides a space that gives back far more than we knew was poured into it. Therefore, I’m going to ask you to think about what already works for you and how you might find ways to do that more fully, more frequently, and more faithfully.

I truly believe we’re manifesting a field-wide impulse in this direction. I’d point for support to the rise in teacher-research and the positive effects of such work. The methodological practices of

observing one's teaching, writing down one's observations, meditating on those observations through text analysis, searching for theme and metaphor, and uncovering motivation and results of practices generally result in more reflective practices (as much as they result in completed coursework or degrees). I'd point to the fact that national writing project programs are still thriving when we might have predicted they would do their job and disband; instead we find that teachers are returning for more than one summer for the community and renewal such sites offer. I'd point to the fact that attendance at regional and national conferences remains strong: NCTE and CCCC conferences are keystones in the professional year and are now joined by TYCA regionals, winter and summer and special themed conferences such as one on "Narration as Knowledge" in Tucson and the annual ITW Conference. All show that our professional concerns are resulting in active community building. The "Narration as Knowledge" conference in particular pointed to a renewed interest in storytelling as more-than-lore (Steve North's term for teachers' traditional means of making knowledge); we are seeing more collections, more essayists, more interest in the way metaphor, narrative and story can usefully inform our curricular thinking. There is, too, a predictable backlash from more empirically trained researchers who are beginning to decry the proliferation of story. But the way I see it, when a minority technique elicits a cry of alarm from the traditional majority, it has truly arrived. Equally, the internet has offered us windows into other classrooms and opportunities for cross-classroom collaborations.

For instance, the reason I know my struggles with relaxation offer a useful analogy comes from an e-mail dialogue with a teaching friend, Deb, on her efforts to maintain her spirits as a teacher-writer. She says:

I find it is comforting to "hear" you say that sometimes writing is not easy for you because I would have tended to think that it is because you get so much of it done; that's why people like me assume it's easy for you. I love to write

also, but I find it's very difficult trying to write articles for particular audiences/journals/editors. I did just get a little article accepted for the *Wisconsin Journal of English*; they have a themed issue about censorship coming up, so I wrote about an incident that happened at a local school last spring. And that wasn't so hard, but then writing for that state journal is not nearly as frightening as the thought of something I put on paper being in CCC. I think sometimes I am afraid to try for fear it might actually get accepted...I guess that sounds stupid, but I suspect you'll understand what I mean. [quoted with permission]

And I do understand what Deb means, for learning to relax for me means I might . . . actually relax and change and learn something about myself and my overstressed life-style decisions. Deb goes on to respond to a story I told about a rhetoric and composition graduate student, Kim, who mentioned to me that in our English Department—which has a prominent creative writing degree program—she found it impossible to call herself a writer because that was an exclusive term, seemingly reserved for creative writers. Deb's E-mail continues:

I can relate to what Kim said about creative writers . . . because it all has to do with what we mean when we say "writer." He's a writer/she's a writer; I think most people in the general public think of a writer as someone who writes novels, poems and columns for newspapers/magazines, that kind of thing, mostly "creative" things and journalistic things. When I was a young girl, I always said when asked that I wanted to grow up and be a writer. I wanted to write poems until high school when I decided I wanted to be a journalist. I'm sure I never contemplated growing up and writing articles for teachers and scholars....certainly not research...although now that I think about it I did always love going to the library and finding out about the lives of writers, a kind of

research, stories of people's lives which is probably why I found I liked qualitative kinds of research, telling people's stories and trying to figure out what makes them what they are/who they are, etc. Most kids/students think of writing as work you do for school . . . and it used to be they often thought of it as punishment if they were asked to write sentences, when bad, or reports, etc. Anyway, I think much of that is changing because of comp/rhetoric--that is--what a writer is, or what it means to write--and even what it means "to read." Well, forgive my rambling and reflecting

...

Look not only at all of Deb's observations but at her ending apology: "forgive my rambling and reflecting." Forgive her taking twenty minutes that day to think about her teaching life? Yet how insightfully and usefully she does so.

There are many ways to bring writing into our teaching lives as a reflective pedagogical practice. Remember that my initial comment that generated Deb's response was the observation that although I love to write, I often don't find it easy to write. Conversely, there are no doubt many writing teachers who don't love to write but seek to turn duty—a sense that they should be practitioners of their subject—to productivity, if not to pleasure. I'm talking here about trying to combine avocation and vocation; what you must do and what you choose to do (that you still, perhaps, must do).

For me, methodological believing requires methodological writing about teaching. I teach best when I examine my work for myself and then share those examinations with others as a way to verify, qualify, or correct my own analysis. I teach best when I write and have audience; when I teach and have students; when I write with students; when my students have access to my writing, as I do to theirs.

I write what I assign my classes to make sure I'm being fair and useful to my students, and then I find I'm more engaged with what I teach. I become a co-conspirator. I study my classes to see

how they learn to write, and I improve my own writing *and* my teaching by that practice. When I sit down and say to my children, “Hush, I have to work,” I’m not complaining, for writing as work holds a positive value. To me it means “to write, to teach writing, to study my writing, my students’ writing, the act of writing, to communicate with like-minded teachers or interested students or editors of journals or judges of contests (however misguided when they don’t choose my manuscripts!).”

Writing as work means to be in action, to join the community, to unify vocation and avocation, to replace *or* with *and*, to . . . well, just *to work*. My writing friend Hans Ostrom calls it *plerk*—play/work. We plerk. We plerk hard. But before outlining ideas for plerk, I need to address the methodological doubter in us all. The attitudes and approaches I’m urging do not eliminate issues of authority, classroom overcrowding, professional discouragement, publication pressures, student engagement, difficulties in grading, teaching, writing, etc. But such approaches do seem to put these issues into perspective. Since I’m going to be put under extreme pressures anyway, how better to address them than with the support of a community, whether it is my freewriting group, my e-mail writing community, my family who loves my annual Christmas poem, or friends in conference corridors with whom I plan to continue to talk about teaching lives.

Working communities (communities that do work, communities that succeed) add to a teacher-who-writes’ life. They are essential and have always been parts of professional writers’ lives. Writers hang out at writers’ colonies, compose together, perform and support one another. Here are some of the communities I’ve experienced, heard about, fantasized about. I hope you’ll add to and annotate this list for yourself.

If you haven’t done so already, you might try to:

1. Organize a freewriting group.
2. Begin a writing-about-reading or a writing-about-teaching group—in person, on e-mail, by letter.
3. Convene a writing or teaching discussion group.
4. Write family journals.

5. Write (more) to celebrate—birthdays, holidays, rites of passage—going to college, getting a raise, lunchbox poems.
6. Start a writing club at a community college, church group, etc.
7. Begin a writing-about-video club.
8. Organize a local newspaper literary supplement.
9. Review books, plays, movies, art exhibits; interview artists.
10. Become a community columnist—especially about educational issues.
11. Organize/participate in a local reading series.
12. Consider open-mike occasions, at local readings, conferences.
13. Attend conferences and keep your own notes, for yourself, to share later with others.
14. Link teaching writing with other arts—art openings, concerts, “happenings,” bakesales, book signings.
15. Encourage writing that is multi-genric and uses multi-media.
16. Include writing in sites of reading—libraries, church and youth groups, classrooms across the curriculum.
17. Provide outside readers for colleagues’ classes. Connect classrooms; share student readers between classrooms.
18. Collaborate with other teachers to develop writing groups, writing prizes, writing publications if your school doesn’t yet have them.
19. Envision your writing center as writing club/coffee-house. What might/could change?
20. Schedule classes or clubs at times that allow and encourage community members to attend; offer ungraded classes (through art centers, etc.).
21. Create new classes or units—reading about writing, writing detective novels, lifewriting, writing against the grain, transgressive writing.

22. Investigate the world of Web pages, swap writing with colleagues' classes at other schools, with other computer-classroom based classes.
23. Find term-long writing partners, for you and/or your students.
24. Conduct classroom research.
25. Write with and for your classes.
26. Try round-robin snail-mail writing groups.
27. Explore e-mail draft sharing.
28. Share your writing on tape with family, friends, colleagues—make commuters' tapes that showcase your writing or your thoughts on teaching.
29. Investigate venues for formal and informal writing, teacher/writing student mentorships.
30. Schedule time for writing into your weekly calendar.
31. Write down thoughts right now.

As you think these ideas through, consider how you might spend your one hour a week. For that's the beauty of a teaching life: only you can build it, and you are the primary self-admirer of what you construct. If you like the path you've chosen, other admirers will follow. In fact, imagine me tomorrow morning taking my good medicine, relaxing for twenty minutes, and I'll imagine you working systematically in service of your own teaching life. May we all blossom under the influence of methodological believing.

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