

The Whole Student: Intersectionality and Well-Being
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Writing as a Resource for Student Well-Being

Introduction

This provocation draws from an ongoing project: a critical articulation of composition studies through the lens of well-being. That is, I want to talk about the writing classroom, and in particular, the first-year writing classroom, as a place to develop student well-being. I take well-being as a concept denoting the development of student capabilities to realize their potential and to lead constructive, productive, and meaningful lives. I frame composition studies as an academic field uniquely equipped to invest in the edification of student well-being.

Specifically, the writing classroom addresses how a deepened understanding of writing, of language, of rhetoric, is tied to the amelioration of student lives and of the world around them. As a composition teacher at a community college in New York City, I am drawn to the concept of well-being because it champions active engagement with ideas, events, and people to enrich day-to-day living. Well-being is also a generative concept: it creates opportunities for more engagement and more fulfillment.

Many excellent studies have related writing and trauma. Over time, I hope that we see the same range of works connecting writing and well-being.

I think about it in this regard: Author Maurice Sendak identified the following theme regarding the informing purposes of his work: “Children surviving childhood” (NY Times). Sendak called childhood his “obsessive theme and his life’s concern” (NY Times). The enduring and celebrated reputation of his work speaks to the power of these concerns. I hope to highlight similar reservations for students entering adulthood. Something akin to Sendak’s concerns can be articulated for adults surviving adulthood. True, the adult capacity for agency is greater than that of a child. But so, too, are the dangers and the damages.

When I look at the complicated lives of my students, I see that they are dealing with multiple problems and issues: financial problems, housing problems, relationship problems, work problems, and the struggles they may have making sense of their academic studies. These students attempt to create balance in their lives, juggling work schedules and family responsibilities, school projects and social engagements. I want these students to think of writing as a resource, as an analytic tool used to re-center themselves in their worlds. This vision is less a vision of writing as a form of therapy—which is how writing and well-being are often aligned—and instead a vision of writing as a form of inquiry, a way to create and sustain identity and community

But this very tool that I hold as valuable—writing—students often dismiss as ineffectual. Ineffectual because they don’t entertain the possibilities that writing can hold. And ineffectual because writing may have been used as a weapon against them, particularly in school. For many students, writing has been voided of any sense of self or sustenance and, by extension, well-being (Schroeder). Put most cynically, writing has

been stripped of any sense of purpose beyond writing the already written—a kind of trap students learn to complete with little thought, effort, or personal attachment (Sirc). Academic literacy lessons often result in student alienation (Schroeder). Writers are alienated from themselves, from their more informal and intimate forms of language, and from their own experiences (Schroeder 17). This state of affairs is in need of major overhaul, and an explicit focus on student well-being is one way out of this malaise.

To align writing and well-being requires a broad revision of the writing classroom, one that can help students to locate themselves in the material realities of their lives—i.e., their schedules; their living conditions; their attitudes toward writing and other scholastic work; and on (Mauk 373). Against this backdrop I seek to define the writing classroom as a location for well-being through the discussion of two particular elements: writing as a way of being and writing as a way of making meaning. Neither of these elements is radical in any shape or form. Arguably, they are accepted practice across multiple academic constituencies. What I wish to add to these conversations, then, is an explicit and informed focus on student well-being.

Writing and Being

To connect writing and well-being, writing must be connected to being. If writing is to enable *well-being*, writing needs to be grounded in *being*. Writing, in other words, must be seen as an ontological enterprise. Robert Yagleski is helpful here, as he endorses writing as an act of being (9). According to Yagelski, from this ontological perspective, the act of writing is as important, if not more important than, the text produced:

When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us. Therein lies the transformative power of writing, for when writing is practiced as an act of being, it opens up possibilities for individual and collective change that are undermined by conventional writing instruction, which is often characterized by an obsession with textual form and adherence to convention. (7-8)

Writing can be a possible conduit through which students feel productive and decidedly alive: “Understood ontologically,” Yagelski writes, “writing can become a vehicle to a deeper, more nuanced sense of ourselves as beings in the world” (15). Writing, Yagleski, argues, affords writers the opportunity to “better understand and negotiate the experience of living” (18). Said differently, writing fosters student well-being through the act of writing. Writing becomes a source of social capital and a vital dimension of the building of social connectivity. And this capacity for writing to increase our sense of self as beings in the world occurs both in the moment and accumulates over time, thereby becoming a resource for living and for well-being (Yagelski 16).

Consider, for example, what Peter Elbow describes as a laudable goal for students in his writing courses. Elbow hopes that his students endorse the following description of themselves: “I feel like I *am* a writer: I get deep satisfaction from discovering meaning from writing—figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words; I naturally turn to writing when I am perplexed—even when I am just sad or happy; I love to explore

and communicate with others through writing; writing is an important part of my life”” (Elbow 72).

Here, Elbow recites a wholesale endorsement of writing. Writing infuses this hypothetical student’s life with its possibilities: exploration, rumination, communication, signification, expression, meaning. In short, this student expresses a declared relationship between both writing and self (as in, “I am a writer”) and writing and well-being (as in “I get deep satisfaction from discovering meaning from writing”). Writing is perceived as a valued and valuable asset, a way to preserve and to expand her sense of self in the world. A resource used to enrich her personal life, to broaden the capacity for civic engagement, and to expand her initiative to lead an inventive life.

From this perspective, we teach writing to augment living, to see writing as one part of the tapestry of daily existence. Writing is one way to figure things out. Students use writing to understand the composition of self and world. Here, goals include helping students to write and to write often, and not to stop writing; to experience the writing process outside of the text produced; to believe in writing’s transformative power; to weave writing into one’s sense of self; and to use writing to sustain one’s well-being.

Writing as a Process of Making Meaning

To connect writing and well-being, writing must be seen as a process of making meaning. Claude Hurlbert, in his text *National Healing: Race, State, and the Teaching of Composition*, describes his academic work as follows: “My job as a compositionist is to encourage writers who are engaged in the human project of examining their lives. My goal is to help them use writing to explore the possibility of better lives and ways in a

troubled world” (Hurlbert 4). With this description Hurlbert connects the development of student writing abilities to a growing understanding of self and surrounding world by providing opportunities for students to see themselves as “makers of meaning and health” (Hurlbert 22).

I value this person-centered approach to composition because our students are living, and the conditions from which they compose are the very conditions in which they live. The conditions from which they compose are the very grounds from which they make meaning. This idea is a commonplace: The writer engages in the act of writing as a process of meaning making. Meaning comprises the ability to make connections and to compose order in our lives. With regard to writing, we work from our rhetorical situation, deliberating over purpose, and providing our audience with the ways in which we see and name the world (Berthoff). The making of meaning is key to connecting writing to well-being.

Maureen Gaffney, an Irish clinical psychologist and author of the book *Flourishing*, calling meaning a “virtuous cycle” in that it is both a “motivator” for and an “outcome” of the pursuit of well-being (Gaffney 295). Continuing this thought, Gaffney writes, “Making connections is what allows us to make the link between our actions and their consequences, and between past and present—allowing us to learn from experiences and plan for the future. Meaning is what binds events and time together, and what ultimately binds life into a coherent whole” (Gaffney 295).

With the proper focus on meaning-making, composition becomes a course about the making of meaning in one’s life, about making meaning that makes one whole,

grounded. Students write to construct meaning and to shape their lives. Students write to open themselves to the possibilities of meaning and well-being. This work requires the rumblings of purpose, engagement, and discernment. And it produces a sense of order and control. Agency, even.

Such a writing course is informed by the goals of developing a sense of self, interacting with others, and expanding the means of creative expression using conventional and nonconventional resources. Writing, so conceived, involves negotiating a complicated world wherein our textual encounters with others may modify, sometimes radically, our sense of self and our sense of the world. Linking writing and meaning raises the question of what it means to live well. Hurlbert agrees, naming composition a “life impulse,” one that “makes healthy forms of belonging possible” (Hurlbert 25) In this way, writing becomes the means through which to construct and maintain affirmative environments that impel students to engage, to experiment, and to invent (Davis and Shadle; Mack).

With this focus on the making of meaning, writing instruction encourages students to develop a personal stake in their academic writing projects; to ground academic work in their concerns and those concerns of their communities. The construction of knowledge is thereby connected to experiential learning and to learning outside of the classroom.

bell hooks endorses such an “engaged pedagogy,” one that possesses the following points of emphasis: the need to see students as “whole beings” with “complex lives and experiences;” the need to teach with and for excitement; the need to

acknowledge and value every student's presence; and the need for students to become active participants in learning (11-15). This position values a literacy education in meaning-making.

Conclusion

I will close with a brief discussion of two assignments I use to bring these concerns into concrete practice.

While Robert Yagelski argues that the process of writing is more important, with regard to writing and being, than any written product, students still need to produce something as writers. Here are two options that have worked well for me. Both options work off of student experience and knowledge.

The first assignment focuses on a concept *Op-Ed* writer David Brooks calls a "second education." In his piece, "The Other Education," Brooks distinguishes between a first and a second education. While a first education occurs formally, in a classroom, a second does not. A second education takes place outside the classroom, in the places, spaces, and activities we most value. This second education is an indirect and emotional education, one that affects our attitude toward life and our understanding of ourselves and what we hope to get, to make, to create, in our lifetime. Summing up this sort of education, Brooks writes, "It's generally a byproduct of the search for pleasure, and the learning is indirect and unconscious." Brooks suggests that our second education affords us "uplifting experiences," experiences that open the mind in the quest to learn more.

After we read and discuss Brooks' text, I ask students to identify a second education of their own. I ask them, "What activity or passion or hobby or vocational practice do you find meaningful enough to call your second education?" Once they have selected a topic, I ask students to tell a compelling story about it. I ask that they use this story to illustrate the powerful presence of this second education in their lives as well as its impact on them. Finally, I ask them to break from narrative and to explain what they derive from this second education. What have you learned?, I ask. How have you grown? How has this learning changed you, your attitude and perspective on the world, your ways of thinking or being?

The second assignment, much like the first, draws from student experience and knowledge, but this one involves a bit of outside research as well. This assignment is informed by an essay from *Harpers' Magazine* written by Scott Korb. In this essay, Korb writes about his faith in a Christian God, and how this faith has changed over time—specifically from when he was around ten years old and his father died suddenly in a car accident up until he is around 30 years old when his step-father dies after a long illness. Korb identifies this faith as "an inheritance," as something bequeathed to him by his family, particularly his fathers, and something he has had to struggle with, take up, and make his own. This inheritance is an indelible part of his identity, and it is something he can trace back to someone outside of himself.

I ask students to identify an inheritance of their own. For this project, we come to see that an inheritance is a character trait, value, belief, practice, or behavior that informs our sense of who we are and one that has been derived/received from someone or somewhere or something outside of ourselves. In their essay, I ask students to describe

their inheritance, its multiple elements and dimensions. They tell stories about personal experiences and observations that offer insight into this inheritance, how it works and its significance to them. I also ask them to research their topics, to use popular and academic sources to find other stories about their inheritance. This research complements and complicates the personal and narrative-based understanding of this inheritance.

Both of these assignments offer students the chance to explore themselves as social beings and to work at their well-being. Being well, both individually and collectively, takes explicit effort. Being well is not our default position. Well-being must be nurtured, like any other skill or resource we seek to make privy to our students. Writing facilitates this nurturing process. Occasions for writing can reinforce a positive bent in our lives. With an eye toward well-being, learning to write means learning to write with purpose and meaning. By extension, learning to write is also about increasing the capacity for curiosity, resilience, agency, and hope.

This essay is a simple invitation to teachers to explore the enabling conditions in which our students may grow and flourish. Thank you.

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