

Alternative Writing Worlds: The Possibilities of Personal Writing for Adolescent Writers

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Through school-sponsored writing that is personal, student writers learn to locate themselves with/in subjects while considering characteristics of good writing and realizing the power of the act of writing.

I have shared many examples of my writing with the young people that I teach and mentor. Over the past decade as an educator, my writing examples have provided me with a way to communicate to my students that I am a lot like they are and that our lives provide real reasons to write. I have also shared various drafts of articles that I write for publication. Most recently, I used my own writing practice to illustrate an alternative writing world for my students. An alternative writing world is one where students experience and learn about writing and other possibilities for their writing beyond essays and written responses that have become normalized teaching and learning practices in many of their high school classes. In this world, writing, even for academic purposes, can be personal, creative, and powerful.

Whereas my stories of adolescence serve as a way to connect my experiences with those of my students, my journal articles story my experiences as an intellectual. When discussing my own academic writing, I reveal the ways that the work that I do as a scholar and teacher is, in fact, both personal and academic. In other words, I see all of my writing as a way to connect what I learn from the world empirically with how I am in the world through experience, memory, and reflection. I also invite students to see how all writing is a way to document their lived experiences, make sense of those experiences, and share their views with the world. This view of writing has created an alternative writing world where writers do not simply write about varying subjects, disconnected from the personal. Instead, student writers learn to locate themselves with/in subjects

while considering characteristics of good writing and realizing the power of the act of writing.

Often, teachers of writing spend their time teaching students to distance themselves from their subjects. For example, teachers encourage objectivity and discourage using *I* in formal writing assignments. However, writing that is personal invites students to explore and compose what is possible and to make connections between a subject and the self. Even in writing that is viewed as academic, students can add their voices and experiences to discourses that show up in their academic learning.

In this article, I focus on students' exploration of the personal—the intersection of what students learn about the world and who they are in this moment—through writing. I illustrate how inviting students to write their worlds provides many possibilities not only to center the lived experiences of students but also to reshape their relationship to writing while writing about what matters to them in the here and now.

Teachers as Writers

According to Grainger (2005), the unsettling tension between public and private writing creates difficulties for teachers to engage in more expressive writing over

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functional writing (i.e., email, notes, lesson plans). In her study with teachers and student teachers, Grainger found that teachers find it difficult to share personal aspects of their writing and found it “risky to share their writing selves and identity” (p. 78). She also found that teachers and students need real reasons to write at their own level and to reflect on the process. Without these opportunities, students may not have authentic models of writing processes in which they witness not only the complexities of writing but also its personal nature. Conversely, teachers who see themselves as writers invite their students to witness writing as a problem-solving activity in which writers create, organize, and sequence their perspectives based on larger issues that affect their being and becoming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; DeFauw & Smith, 2016).

In addition to the lack of problem-solving opportunities, teachers of writing may replicate and elevate format writing (e.g., the five-paragraph essay) that justifies dominant discourses around language and what counts as academic writing. According to Brannon et al. (2008), “teaching writing (rather than teaching formats) takes an understanding of the research and scholarship in composition, takes understanding of oneself as a writer, and takes an in-depth understanding of how writers truly develop *as writers*” (p. 16). Writing pedagogies that aim to teach writing in ways that deemphasize format and elevate student voice go beyond the basics and invite students to develop their thinking and examine their lived experiences to interrupt the reproduction of power dynamics. Viewed in this way, writing acts as part of a process of empowerment and liberation for all students (Brannon et al., 2008; Johnson, 2017).

Through the teaching of writing, classrooms are potential sites to address personal power, welcome student ideas, and cultivate a culture of writing for many purposes (Benko, 2012). Creating the type of writing opportunities in which students engage in the complex and personal processes of writing calls for assignments that do not simply merge out-of-school and in-school writing (e.g., tweeting about themes in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne) but provide students with more opportunities to grapple with the issues of their worlds and write for many purposes.

Researchers have documented how writing affects the lives of youths when students are empowered to use their own voices, examine their lives, and participate in writing that is restorative, healing, courageous, and communal (Daniel & Eley, 2018; Ife, 2012; Winn, 2013; Winn & Johnson, 2011). Such writing has the potential not only to empower students to name their experiences but also to participate in the type of writing that they

might do in postsecondary and career/entrepreneurial environments, as well as in their personal lives beyond school (e.g., social media posts, op-eds, proposals, journal articles).

Writing in High School

Contemporary discourses on writing have focused on the differences between academic and personal writing. In many instances, academic writing, or writing that demonstrates what students know and learn in school settings, is characterized as paradigmatic, whereas personal writing privileges experience (Mlynarczyk, 2006). Academic writing instruction focuses on genre distinctions and improving writing as a skill to succeed in college or the workplace (Beers & Nagy, 2011). Unfortunately, according to Yagelski (2009), “school-sponsored writing is about separating self from experience by changing an experience into a stylized textual artifact” (p. 19). In addition, the type of writing done in high school often requires that students remove, deny, and ignore important aspects of their writing identities. Specifically, many English classrooms are microcosms of schooling that may perpetuate hegemonic, heteronormative, patriarchal, and standard literacy discourses, as curriculum, practice, and policy may center literature, practices, skills, and ways of being in school aligned with normalized white, middle class views of what it means to be intellectual in the name of closing the achievement gaps (Johnson, 2017).

Teachers of writing have the opportunity to include critical writing pedagogies that center the lived experiences of students, and incorporate writing methods that reject normalized notions of intellectualism while promoting academic success for all students. Additionally, teachers of writing have the opportunity to teach the kind of writing that matters to students in the here and now. According to Bartolomé (1994), “unless educational methods are situated in the students’ cultural experiences, students will continue to show difficulty in mastering content area that is not only alien to their reality, but is often antagonizing toward their culture and lived experiences” (p. 191). As a result, students develop negative relationships with what they understand as academic writing even though many students write (and write well) in nonacademic spaces (Johnson, 2017; Kinloch, 2011).

Including the type of writing instruction that prepares young people to write well now and beyond high school requires that teachers of writing reimagine school-sponsored, or academic, writing as writing that can be personal. As we begin to recognize the

importance of including diverse voices and diverse ways of being intellectual, students must be invited to amalgamate the personal and the academic. In other words, what students know and understand about the(ir) world must be included in how we construct knowledge and come to understand the world writ large. As a result, student writing becomes legitimate text in and beyond the English classroom for understanding the(ir) world.

Reimagining Writing Dichotomies: A Pedagogical Framework for Teaching Writing

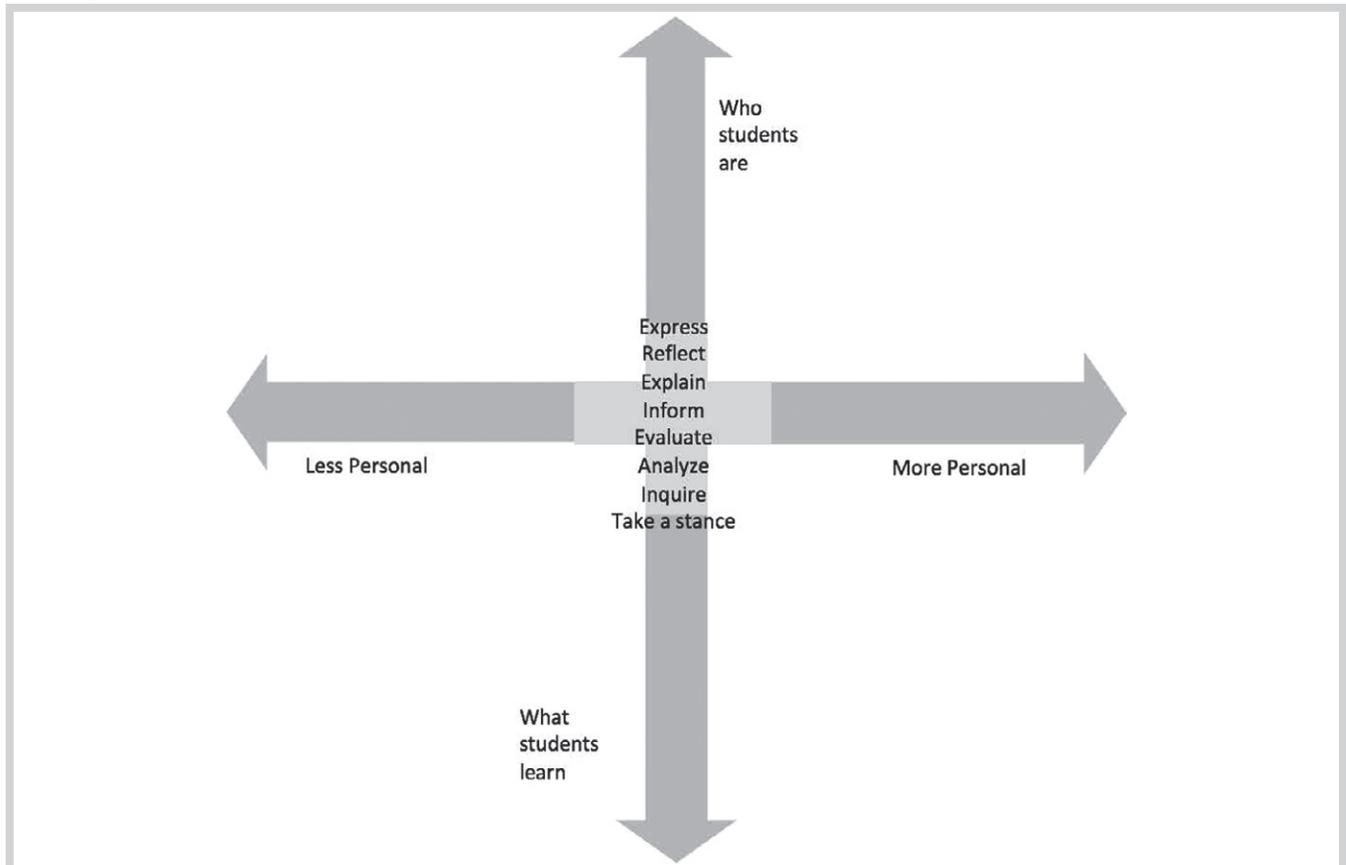
Teaching writing in a way that suggests that writing can be either personal or academic limits the possibilities for the type of writing that students practice in school. In addition, dichotomies and purposes used to discuss writing instruction and participation have created either-or dynamics in which writing pedagogies are forced into one category or the other. For example, teachers may teach argumentative writing as having a more academic voice, whereas poetry might be more

personal. However, thinking about who students are, what they are learning about themselves and the world, and how they demonstrate this learning in writing can be understood as a continuum (see Figure 1). In other words, writing for different purposes and about varying topics can be more or less personal and invites students to learn about themselves in relation to the world and vice versa.

Teaching writing that centers the experiences of students invites the combining of the personal and the academic. Moreover, a fluid view of writing purposes creates opportunities to invite authentic writing that matters to students' present lives (Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015). When students are invited to write about their lived experiences, teachers of writing create in-school opportunities for young writers to use the passion that many have for the type of writing that typically happens out of school. According to Brannon et al. (2008),

the diversity and the differences of children's experiences are honored and drawn on in the classroom. There is no insistence that every child's writing looks exactly the same or

Figure 1
Writing Continuum



is structured in the same way. The multiplicity of voices, experiences, and stories make *[sic]* these writing classrooms rich and exciting for learning. (p. 18)

A more fluid view of writing instruction and participation creates opportunities for writers to integrate aspects of their personal experiences into the content and skills that they learn in schools. Students use writing to insert their voices into larger discourses around what it means to be intellectual. Additionally, students participate in writing that not only prepares them for their future writing selves but allows them to develop as writers writing in the present.

Teacher Writer and Professor in Residence: A Note on Positionality

For the past four years, I have been Professor in Residence at West High School (all names are pseudonyms). As a part of a larger research project and because I wanted to situate the teaching, research, and service with/in a school community, I approached the principal with a plan. As a part of that plan, I have conducted research, taught university and high school classes, and conducted professional development workshops with teachers. My presence in the school steadily increased as I took on more responsibility as a member of the school community. Participant observation and ethnography have been key to my understandings of literacy learning, teacher practice, and the school's culture.

Since 2012, I have observed and taught lessons in language and literature classrooms, provided professional development to faculty, founded and sponsored the school's writing club, and acted as a volunteer coach for the school's flag line. This past year, I was asked to teach a writing class during the regular school day because of previous work I had done with students in the writing club. Each of my roles at West has allowed me to share and learn about literacy teaching and learning.

As a consistent presence at the school, I have been able to share stories and experiences with the students. While growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1990s, I attended schools that looked and felt a lot like West. My experiences while growing up and going to school on Atlanta's Westside have served as inspiration for countless sad, motivational, and funny stories, as well as a range of real-life examples using metaphor, imagery, and hyperbole. My experiences have also informed my research, teaching, and service to the literacy teaching field, including the writing that I was able to do alongside the remarkable group of students in my fourth-period writing class.

School Context and the Fourth-Period Class and Participants

West High School is a public school located on the west side of a Southern U.S. college town. At the time of the study, it served 752 students, approximately 95% of whom identified as African American, 4% as white, and less than 1% as Hispanic, Latinx, or multiracial. Sixty-three percent of the student body qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. West is the only high school that offers an International Baccalaureate program in the school system. The school has 41 full-time faculty members and houses numerous programs focused on student achievement and social development. West also partners with nearby colleges to offer students dual enrollment and early college entrance.

Thirty-one students in grades 9–11 enrolled in my creative writing class. The course was listed as an English elective and had not been offered in the previous five years. Only two students had actually chosen the course as an elective. The other 29 students were enrolled in the class by the school's registrar because they had space in their schedules for an English elective.

The students represented a wide range of reading and writing abilities. For example, Nagasi, an African American male in 10th grade, described his writing as "OK" and his skill level was developing. He struggled with forming complete sentences and did not particularly enjoy writing. On the other end of the spectrum, Fari, a biracial female in ninth grade, described her writing as "unique." She identified as a writer and was one of the students who chose the creative writing class as an elective. Fari wrote several pages per day. She wrote independently outside of school and in class about more than the daily prompts. Fari would respond to the daily writing prompt and then use the remaining time to draft stories and draw in her journal. She often shared her writing with me. I offer these two examples to illustrate the range of skill and motivation of the students in the course. However, what made all of the students' writing comparable was that each of their experiences served as potential space to inform and inspire writing.

Instructional and Methodological Choices for Teaching Writing at West

The class met for 85 minutes during the final period of each day. The first 20 minutes of class were for daily journal writing. During this time, students talked with table/classmates and listened to music through earphones. The atmosphere of the class was laid-back because there were few traditional classroom rules. For

example, permission was not required for actions that were forbidden in most of the other classes. I also encouraged students to discuss and work collaboratively on most assignments.

During the remaining 65 minutes, I provided direct instruction and modeled writing, and together we read, discussed, and analyzed various texts for content, style, and form. The focus of the course was twofold. First, I wanted to engage a community of adolescent writers in the type of writing that would matter to them right now. Second, I wanted to expose students to text that was organized, interesting, and written for many purposes and by diverse authors, as well as writing that was in progress, with the hope that students would develop positive relationships to writing.

In this article, I focus on personal narratives written by students in this class. Sharing my own adolescent stories and inviting students to story their own experiences were a way to expose them to an alternative writing world. I wanted my students to understand that they could write about more than school lunches and dress codes. I made sure to include choice in daily writing activities and use prompts that did not fabricate importance. None of my students had read anything personal about any of their teachers and were often discouraged to write about personal aspects of their own identity (Johnson, 2017).

To engage in the type of writing in which they could begin to imagine writing as a way to explore and share aspects of their lives, students were invited to explore the personal through the personal narratives of journals and other writing assignments. As a whole class, we defined and discussed personal and cultural identities. Students explored their own personal and cultural experiences by using a graphic organizer and responding to journal prompts, and I drafted and shared versions of my own writing as models. Throughout the writing process, I conducted individual writing conferences, during which I took extensive notes about content and other traits of writing that came up.

Data Analysis

I analyzed students' writing and notes from individual writing conferences, field notes from ethnographic inquiry, and my observations in other English classes. I used open coding for each data source and then sorted the codes into categories. Some examples of start codes grounded in my theoretical frame are identity, self-learning, content/world learning, personal, and purpose. After an initial pass through the data using these codes, I created interpretive codes based on emergent themes from the data. Next, I sorted data according to

themes. I wrote memos to capture emergent patterns and differences in how themes appeared across participants. Common threads became a third set of codes that highlighted initial findings.

The final pattern codes allowed me to understand how participants used writing to describe and interrogate particular identities and how participants wrote for extended purposes. In this section, I share findings that illustrate how these writers reimagined writing as personal. In the next section, I discuss the possibilities for writing classrooms when writing pedagogies are used to encourage students to write their worlds into classroom spaces.

"I Can Write About That?": Writing Historically Marginalized Identities

Many of my students' writing experiences in English classrooms had been short-answer and strictly formatted essay writing. In addition, students would often say that they did not know what to write. However, after daily writing practice and my own ideation modeling, students located experiences in their own lives to story, which provided a range of topics. Most significantly, students were surprised to find out that they could write about topics usually unwelcome in their English classes, use nonnormative language, and think broadly about purposes for writing. For students who identified and presented themselves in nonnormative ways, these practices seemed particularly useful and liberating.

During a writing conference with Aida, an African American 11th-grade female who identified as bisexual, she expressed that she was having difficulty with finding something to write about. I told her that she could relate any of her experiences that she felt would make a good story. She expressed that she was unsure about writing about a recent heartbreak. I told her that love and love lost make for great stories. I encouraged her to begin writing to see what ended up on the page. Checking in with me about whether her same-sex relationship was appropriate content for the assignment, Aida asked, "It's about liking a girl. I can write about that?" I assured her that it was. In her essay "The First Time I Liked a G," she recounted the time when she "felt like my whole world was about to just fall apart and my life was changing in a matter of seconds":

I started to act out it class such as if people was to ask me what's going on with me and her I would be like, "LEAVE ME TF ALONE!" Or I would say, "WHY YOU IN MY PERSONAL LIFE? STFU JUST DON'T SAY NOTHING TO ME!" And also I started to shut people out of my life. I wasn't texting people back and when people tried to call and check on me I

wouldn't respond. It got so bad I started to have outburst in class. Such as if I thought about her, I would just cry and sit there in class and not say a word. She was the first girl I ever had feelings for and honestly she will be the last.

Aida shared how she was affected by her relationship with Mack, her first same-sex love. Through writing, Aida was able to not only explore a topic that was important to her but also make sense of how her experience affected her relationship with others and how she behaved in school. She concluded, "I wish could go back and to fix my mistakes. Because in reality, our relationship meant nothing. Lesson learned." Aida's personal narrative became a part of the discourse around what it means to question and explore one's sexuality as an adolescent.

In an alternative writing world, experience is centered for all students. Writers can compose their experiences through multiple identities, especially marginalized ones, where experiences are connected to their development as writers and intellectuals. In other words, students compose a multitude of lines about what matters to them. As a result, students practice forming ideas around varying subjects. In this class, Aida and the other students could exercise individual and collective freedom to add their voices to larger discourses around what it means to be an adolescent writing in the here and now (Johnson, 2017).

"I Don't Want the Other Students to Read What I Wrote": The Possibility of Private Writing

To support students' writing identities and development, I focused writing instruction and practice on expanded views of the purposes for writing. In other words, purposes for writing were not always those typically practiced in school. As a class, we discussed the possibilities of writing and created lists that included many of the traditional purposes (e.g., persuade, entertain, inform). However, during our discussion, students generated more purposes to be added to the list, such as writing to undo pain, reflect, think, and celebrate others.

Many of the journal-writing prompts invited students to write about people, places, and times that had made an impact on their lives. Kadar, an 11th grader, wrote about his father, who had been in jail since Kadar was a baby. While writing, Kadar had an emotional response. He wrote in his journal, "They [my family] lied to me about my dad. If he had not wrote me, I would have never known that he was in there [jail] for murder....I am glad that he is able to be in my life." After I walked

over to see if Kadar was OK, he explained that he needed to "just get that out." In his writing and in talking about it, he expanded his purpose for writing to include undoing pain by getting out the emotions associated with his incarcerated father and his family keeping information from him.

For Nagasi, writing was a way to share his story of learning to walk with cerebral palsy. He let me know that he would solicit help from his mother and that he really wanted to write the story to honor her. He informed me that he would be writing "something private," and "I don't want the other students to read what I wrote, but you can read it." His narrative begins,

I couldn't walk until I was five. If it wasn't for my mom, I don't think I would be able to walk at all. She always used to stand me up and try to help me walk. She used to let me hold a broom to stand up and when I fell, she used to tell me to get back up and try again.

Traditionally, Nagasi's purpose for writing could be described as explanatory. However, for Nagasi, his writing was a way to celebrate his mother. Although he struggled with novice conventions of writing, he was able to focus on a purpose that invited him to extend his writing skill to honor his mother. In addition, he was able to choose to share his writing only with me and his mom. Nagasi's writing became more about the writing itself, privately "confronting life in all its wonderful and terrible pain and joy" (Yagelski, 2009, p. 19). Both Nagasi and Kadar expanded their purposes for writing beyond writing for teachers and/or other readers. Although I encouraged these two students to share their writing with other students in the writing community, I gave all of them the freedom to choose the reasons for their writing that went beyond academic purposes. In this alternative writing world, Kadar's and Nagasi's writing became a way to honor their parents and deal with difficult experiences.

Alternative Writing Worlds in the High School Classroom: A Discussion

Teachers who seek to teach writing in ways that matter to young people in the here and now and prepare them for writing beyond the classroom must find ways to inspire writing that show students the myriad possibilities of the act of writing and the texts that they create. In addition, teachers need to teach writing in a way that invites students to make the academic moves of writing (e.g., explain, inform, evaluate, argue) in ways

that connect to the skills and content that they learn in school. Too often, teachers of writing focus on irrelevant or distance content and on writing for limited purposes (Winn & Johnson, 2011). In my writing class, students were able to use writing that was personal to figure out their own purposes for writing that extended what they thought was possible for writing in high school.

In a classroom that welcomed alternative writing worlds—ones that invited students to write about their lived experiences in connection with their broader purposes for writing—we located the type of writing that was possible. Students were able to share aspects of their identities that were either marginalized or not commonly used as context for academic spaces. Students like Aida were able to share parts of their identities that had not been shared in school writing before. Nagasi and Kadar were able to use specific writing assignments for purposes that had not shown up in any of their other academic writing assignments: to honor and to undo pain. These experiences with writing can serve as a way to think about how teachers might teach writing in ways that invite students to reveal aspects of their identities and share their experiences within the context of learning. Although students experienced this type of writing in a creative writing class, it speaks to the potential of what is possible in all of our classes, where students might situate aspects of who they are with what they learn about math, history, science, English, and the world.

Teachers of writing are in need of theoretical and pedagogical models in which writing practices are enacted to undo silencing of students that happens in high school classrooms. For students who have been historically marginalized and for those who have been unable to locate aspects of their lived experiences within the content or skills that we teach, writing is a way for students to make those connections. In other words, writing that is personal invites students to include what they think, feel, and experience in relation to their learning and doing in school, including writing. Writing can serve as a way to center the lived experiences of youths, invite their stories as significant text to be analyzed and celebrated, improve students' relationships with writing, and help students become better writers.

Implications for Writing Teacher Practice

Students can recognize their own capacity to become writers when they understand the personal nature of writing. Based on the types of writing opportunities provided to students in schools, students are required

to write about a fixed set of experiences in even fewer formats. Indeed, the writing classroom has claimed a part in limiting the possibilities of what students are able to do while writing and with the texts that they create.

Teachers of writing are met with the challenge to locate experiences within writing instruction that compel students to make meaning of their worlds and create writing worlds where they add their voices to what they learn and do in school. Through writing, students can share aspects of their identities, explore different purposes for writing, and create texts that are relevant to their lived experiences. Providing writing instruction that will lead to creating critical and competent writers requires educators to reimagine writing and writing instruction in ways that are powerful and transformative. In other words, teachers of writing have the opportunity to provide student writers with the type of instruction that focuses on the power of writing (the act of writing and the texts that result from writing with power) instead of writing that fits into one or a few fixed categories.

More progressive writing pedagogies expect students to write more freely and openly about their experiences in the world (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003). Having students engage in writing that can change their relationship to writing requires a collective reimagining of the types of texts that we invite students to compose in any classroom. Focusing on the power of the act of writing and the potential of narrative requires educators

TAKE ACTION!

1. Encourage students to write every day, even if only a couple lines. Talk back to their writing by posing questions and making connections to broader issues.
2. Invite students to write and read about multiple aspects of their identities, and help them compose text in which they examine these identities more closely.
3. Be open to students using / in their writing to connect what they think, feel, and experience to what they learn in school.
4. Encourage students to write for a variety of purposes and connect the moves that they make in academic writing to their writing about people, places, events, and ideas that interest them.
5. Create open-ended, relevant prompts so students can write about what matters in their lives in the here and now.

to understand how writing might (re)shape the human experience. The students in my creative writing class came to recognize the possibilities that personal writing could have in their lives in the present and beyond the classroom. When teachers of writing invite students to write for reasons that connect to their lives in the here and now, they compose what is possible.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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