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## The Value of Aesthetic Teacher Learning: Drawing a Parallel between the Teaching and Writing Process

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## **The Value of Aesthetic Teacher Learning: Drawing a Parallel Between the Teaching and Writing Process**

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*Abstract: Although teacher learning has often been overlooked in discussions surrounding classroom practice, it is believed that learning cultivates the resilience and vitality needed for teachers to thrive. Teachers have often been required to demonstrate a high level of skill and professionalism as they orchestrate tasks that maximise student engagement. Their work has consequently been compared to that of artists, who display their skills of craftsmanship as they construct meaningful learning activities, such as a keen sense of discernment, creativity and presence. The current article illustrates how learning to write reflectively can help teachers acquire the aesthetic skills needed to craft meaningful learning encounters. Reflective writing has been considered as one key method for facilitating teacher learning as it enables practitioners to critically reflect on and improve their practices. This article, however, focuses on how learning to write can enhance a teacher's aesthetic awareness, as practitioners learn to imbue their words with presence and to depict their encounters creatively. It further illustrates how these same aesthetic skills can be used in the classroom to craft rich teaching and learning encounters and to ultimately enhance teacher vitality and resilience.*

### **Teacher Learning for Resilience and Vocational Vitality**

Teacher learning has frequently been forgotten in the quest to improve professional practice due to the assumption that teachers should primarily 'teach' rather than 'learn' (Putnam & Borko, 2000). But teachers who are life-long learners are believed to enrich their classroom practices as they experience firsthand what they hope to instil in others. The opportunities to undergo the trials and joys inherent in the learning process are shown to motivate teachers to initiate similarly challenging and meaningful experiences for others (Parr, 2009; Hargreaves, 1998). Practitioners who continue to learn may form stronger emotional connections with their students, as they engage in the same struggles to acquire understanding (Shelley, 2009; Hargreaves, 1998). Brookfield (1995, p. 62) equally highlights how transformative teachers exert themselves beyond their comfort zone to acquire new knowledge, stating that, "the best teachers are probably those who have achieved their skill mastery, knowledge and intellectual fluidity only after periods of struggle and anxiety," as they can become more flexible, engaged and empathetic as they attempt to meet deadlines and engage meaningfully in their work. The personal investment that underlies life-long teacher learning is consequently believed to inspire teacher engagement and effective practice, as teachers acquire an 'insider perspective' into the joys and tribulations of navigating the unknown (Parr, 2009).

More importantly, teacher learning is considered to be a key factor for developing resilience as learning requires an ability to embrace openness as well as the strength to persevere. Much has been written on the topic of teacher resilience and its role in equipping practitioners with the self-confidence to overcome difficulties (Bandura 1997; Yost, 2006; Bobeck, 2002; Bason & Frase, 2004). Teachers who learn are shown to acquire greater resilience as they recognize the growth and richness from overcoming their challenges. Resilience and confidence are particularly vital teacher traits due to the highly complex and relational nature of their work (Hargreaves, 1998). Resilient teachers are shown to be flexible in adapting to multifaceted and unpredictable nature of classroom interactions. Teacher resilience is also shown to determine the level of expectations set for their own practice (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Benard, 2003; Yost, 2006). Practitioners who believe that they can achieve successful results are shown to set higher expectations for their students' learning; furthermore, they may attain greater professional satisfaction as these expectations are fulfilled. A teacher's self-efficacy and confidence may accordingly increase when they learn alongside their students, which may in turn generate greater teacher positivity and overall improved classroom dynamics.

Such teacher positivity has been referred to as 'vocational vitality' as it springs from a practitioner's core sense of self to inspire and energise others, thus enabling teachers to inspire others by modelling presence or deep engagement (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006; Meijer, Korthagen & Vasalos, 2009; Hargreaves, 1998). Vocational vitality signifies an emotional and intellectual engagement with one's practice that creates mutually beneficial relationships between teachers and students (Meijer, Korthagen & Vasalos, 2009). It implies that teachers who learn experience self-satisfaction and motivation, which further inspires them to create similar opportunities for their students. It assumes that a teacher's self-efficacy primarily develops through mastery experiences, as practitioners who perceive their performance to be a failure may set less challenging goals for themselves and their students. Teachers who lack self-confidence may also seek security often through abstract theoretical instruction rather than by modelling the messy and often uncertain paths taken in the learning process (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007). Practitioners who master their goals through learning, however, may experience greater vocational vitality, which may increase their confidence to seek greater challenges (Bandura, 1997; Benard, 2003; Yost, 2006). Teacher self-efficacy and professional vitality can be regarded as a key determinant for student success, as teachers who experience a sense of inadequacy and a low morale will produce less challenging learning activities that lead to negative learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006).

Despite the negative consequences of low teacher self-efficacy, little effort has been made to develop a teacher's vocational vitality or inner resilience (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Considering the generally low priority given to a teacher's personhood, teachers themselves may find it difficult to articulate how their personhood affects their teaching as they perceive it to be crucial but an intangible part of their practice (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007). Other teachers may be reluctant to acknowledge potential gaps in understanding that the need to learn may signify for the fear of appearing unprofessional and incompetent (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). The pressure teachers feel to be custodians of knowledge may aggravate this fear of vulnerability, and as a result, they may avoid learning so as not to seem incompetent. Practitioners may additionally forget the value of their own learning as they are too consumed by their teaching responsibilities; they may view learning as being self-indulgent in light of their students' learning needs (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007; Bobeck, 2002). Finally, despite the fact that their own teaching is heavily influenced by their experiences as students, they may simply be unaware of how they can impact the learning experiences of others (Brookfield, 1995).

## Teacher as an Artist: the Teaching and Writing Processes

In light of these factors, the current article poses the question of how learning can help teachers develop resilience and vocational vitality. It suggests that one practical means for life-long teacher learning can be found in reflective writing. Although there are many different modes for teacher learning, writing has been considered as being particularly accessible as teachers can undertake it almost anywhere and anytime, with little more than a pen and paper at hand. As mentioned above, writing has been conceived as an enjoyable but rigorous means of helping teachers to explore their own unique settings (Burton, Quirke, Reichmann & Peyton, 2009). But rather than merely focusing on how teachers can write to reflect on their context, this article explores how teachers can learn to become better writers and ultimately better teachers through the skills that they acquire from writing.

There has been much literature on how reflective writing enables teacher learning. Theorists have illustrated how reflective writing can help individuals make greater sense of their lives by allowing them to gather their experiences into larger and more meaningful units (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002; Bruner, 1990). Bruner ascribes an even greater importance to the writing process, stating that human beings have an innate readiness as, ". . . (it is) the art hidden in the human soul . . ." (1990, p. 15). Bruner suggests that life becomes artistic through these attempts to create a meaningful and convincing life story, and that as craftsmen or artists, teachers can derive a similar sense of continuity and aestheticism as they package up their past experience in a temporary form. Through reading and re-reading these recorded moments and by contextualizing isolated moments in a bigger and more meaningful picture, teachers are believed to achieve greater harmony in their practice (Ellis & Bochner, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). As a self-reflective space, writing is also shown to provide a safe environment for teachers to confront their fears and weaknesses and celebrate their strengths (Parr, 2009). It has subsequently been referred to as a "personal, creative, public and ethical act," for both teachers and students alike, as it facilitates the critical, flexible and creative thinking needed for positive practice (Shelley, 2007; Parr, 2009).

Since the focus of teacher writing has largely been on its reflective component, there has been less attention placed on its craftsmanship, or the value of writing aesthetically, "as a performative act," through which teachers can acquire greater subtlety and skill in self-expression (Parr, 2009, p. 38). This is surprising considering the frequent references to teachers as artists who display a keen sense of aesthetic awareness on a daily basis. The current article seeks to explore this gap by depicting teacher writing not only as a reflective act, but as creative and aesthetic means of self-expression, all of which are vital qualities for teacher practice. It portrays teachers as artists who embody harmony, holism, and beauty, as they craft an aesthetic learning experience in the classroom, and asserts that teachers are in fact using these same craftsmanship skills as they make sense of their experiences through writing (Eisner, 2002; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Ewing & Manual, 2005). For example, teachers may shape the learning experience using skills such as ". . . sensibility, imagination, technique, and the ability to make judgments about the feel and significance of the particular" as they seek to depict their experiences (Eisner, 2002, p.382). By accessing 'carnal knowledge' or their 'inner' artist as writers, teachers may also achieve subtlety in "matters of timing, manner and tone," and attain greater skilfulness and harmony in their teaching and writing practice (Eisner, 2002, p. 382). This article proposes that teacher learning via writing is one way that carnal knowing or the 'inner artist' can surface, by enabling teachers to access their stream of consciousness (Meijer, Korthagen & Vasalos, 2009).

William Strunk and E.B White have illustrated how writing can be conceived as art, describing how writers need the creative discernment to attain the subtle balance between words and silence needed to 'speak' directly to readers (Webb, 1994, p. 297). These authors

describe the beauty of writing that is both effortless and enjoyable to read and "efficient and aesthetically satisfying," as it is less taxing on a reader's patience and energy. Likewise, teachers may also contemplate which phrases may best depict their complex encounters, and they may even be encouraged to take risks, to be creative and to follow their intuitions as they choose certain words over others. As they develop skills in writing about their encounters, they may learn to become highly receptive to their environment as both observers and participants. These keen skills of observation are believed to be exemplified by expert teachers who possess, "... a complex amalgam of seeing, hearing, observing, taking notice, paying close attention, understanding, while at the same time comprehending what action is required in the situation and ensuring that it is authentic and compassionate" (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010, p. 61). Rodgers and Raider-Roth equally acknowledge how writing enables individuals to attain a sense of presence or a keen alertness to one's environment, which they describe as, "... a state of wide-awakeness ... a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements" (2006, p. 268).

Writers may respond more meaningfully to their encounters by being able to observe and to recognise the artistry involved in crafting learning encounters. However, the alternative can also be argued, where the lack of artistic vision in teachers leads to unimaginative, boring and unchallenging teaching and learning experiences. The same has been said of writing, where a limited artistic vision and the lack of insightfulness may lead to words that are dull and lifeless. Ellis and Bochner relate their disappointment at reading such lifeless writing, and at the realization of how so few students could convey anything deeply because of their, "... [Inability] to move around in the experience and [to] see it as it might appear to others" (2002, p.752). They compare such text to vivid and powerful writing that allows readers to feel like they are reliving a part of their own memories. In the same way, teachers who can skilfully recreate their lived encounters through their writing may be able to simulate similarly vivid and engaging conditions for authentic learning to occur. They may be able to use their creativity and empathy to perceive the learning encounter from their students' view, and further engage their students deeply from this point of reference. This article illustrates such a need to create opportunities for teachers to 'move around in an experience' through providing creative avenues for self-expression such as writing. It draws upon the written reflections of my teaching experiences to relay how writing may help teachers discern all the rich possibilities for learning.

The current article has been framed as a thought piece. It is conceptual in nature, and attempts to articulate the importance of teacher learning through the writing process. These ideas have emerged from the reflective journal I kept of my early career experiences. This article describes two key points in this comparison between the writing and teaching process that is adopted from Burton, Quirke, Reichmann and Peyton's paradoxical phrase, "the agony and ecstasy" of writing (2009, p.35). These points include the 'agony' or the struggle posed by creating meaning from the open and often silent spaces where meaning lies, and the joys or the 'ecstasy' that ensues as meaning unfolds from the silence. The latter, in particular, focuses on the playful and spontaneous way meaning emerges, and the joy and richness felt at the growing presence of the teacher practitioner and writer. These themes were drawn from the reflective journal I had kept informally over the first five years teaching academic literacy in higher education. The journal entries include descriptions of critical encounters with colleagues and students as well as reflections on the teaching, learning and writing process. Although the initial purpose of these journals was to capture and reflect on my teaching, I soon found myself more motivated to write out of the joy of writing itself. I was fascinated at the endless possibilities presented for written expression and the innumerable ways in which words could capture the raw energy of lived encounters. This made me aware of how the

writing and the teaching process shared this potential for richness, and of how learning to 'write' vividly could translate into learning to 'teach' with equal imagination and depth. The discussion surrounding these themes is grounded in interdisciplinary literature that features topics relevant to teacher education, philosophy and the psychology of teaching and learning. The implications of teacher learning through reflective writing will be addressed more broadly at the end of the article.

### **The Agony of Creating: Anxiety of the Unknown**

The paradox of the agony and ecstasy of writing was evident as I read my reflective journal and the literature surrounding teacher writing (Burton, Quirke, Reichmann & Peyton, 2009). Despite the obvious benefits of writing, I often found it impossible to start the process due to the abundance of possibilities; this left me uncertain about what to write about and doubtful that I was even capable of capturing my experiences. The openness of writing has been reiterated by Webb, who states, ". . . words on a page are never finished. Each can be changed and rearranged and can set off a chain reaction of confusion and clarified meaning" (1994, p. 161). Often I had only a vague sensation of something that had been puzzling me, but had no clear direction to follow. Despite recognising the benefits of writing, I felt ill equipped to write about my intangible, fleeting and elusive teaching encounters. Rodgers and Raider-Roth express this view though referring to the ideas of Dewey (1934), who wrote how artists are called to transform the "faintest hints of life" into perceived but unarticulated wholes that are "expansions of ourselves" (2006, p. 268). This felt true for my own attempts at capturing and portraying the lived encounters that constructed my teaching identity. Due to these struggles to create meaning from the intangible, writing has often been conceived as a hard, emotional, aesthetic labour.

The anxiety of creating meaning from the empty spaces of a blank page is also manifested in the classroom, where the learning environment presents countless different possibilities for rich learning experiences. Unfortunately, the discomfort caused by openness may cause both teachers and writers to shy away from potentially powerful teaching and learning encounters. The openness of the teaching and writing process, however, is also perceived to be its biggest strength due to the possibilities for new discoveries, "Making something right is immensely satisfying, for writers begin to learn what they are writing about by writing. Language leads them to meaning, and there is the joy of discovery, of understanding, of making meaning clear. . ." (Webb, 1994, p. 167). Parr describes this value of wrestling with the meaning making process, "In earlier iterations of this text, as I grappled with the particular language and form that might adequately express my sense of the professional moment. . . . Even now, as I frame the writing for publication as a public text within this journal article, I continue to derive value from this process of grappling" (2009, p. 45). The beauty of letting the mystery unfold is similarly expressed by Einstein, who compared the inherent purity and beauty of Mozart's work to Beethoven's, which he felt to be more 'contrived.' He explains how the former 'created' his music, whilst the latter 'found' it, stating, ". . . it had always existed as a part of the inner beauty of the Universe, waiting to be revealed" (Webb, 1994, p. 16). In fact, as teaching and writing are both fundamentally driven by the act of creating meaning, both processes are believed to inspire traits that are highly valued in both teachers and writers, such as a sense of openness, vulnerability, persistence and courage.

### **The Ecstasy of Creating: Playfulness and spontaneity**

As a teacher writer, I was able to recognise two positive outcomes from persevering through the difficulties of writing. The first that became apparent was the joy I felt over the spontaneity and playfulness within writing. As writers, teachers may develop such playfulness and spontaneity in crafting meaning, as they practice using words spontaneously to express flashes of insight, beauty and diversity, which Murry illustrates by stating, “Words have double meanings, even triple and quadruple meaning. Each word has its own potential for connotation and denotation. And when writers rub one word against the other, they are often rewarded with a sudden insight, an unexpected clarification” (Webb 1994, p. 167). Murry describes the joy of creating beauty through words, commenting, “Making something right is immensely satisfying, for writers begin to learn what they are writing about. Language leads them to meaning, and there is the joy of discovery, of understanding, of making meaning clear. . .” (Webb, 1994, p. 167). By glimpsing how language allows them to artistically carve their understanding, teachers may be more attuned to the subtlety required to facilitate the learning process. As a writer, I also found that the more I wrote, the more I was able to “trust that the right words would materialise onto the page,” instead of over-thinking the process (Aug 2007). In due time, I felt that this openness was able to carry over into my teaching, which led me to describe in one journal entry, “My lessons are beginning to feel lighter, I can recognise and respond instinctively to the patterns I see in my students’ learning, like the way I sense how words should fall together on a page. In my teaching I can sense a similar possibility for creativity that allows for the unexpected each day” (Dec 2007).

Through their struggles to express themselves as writers, teachers can recognise firsthand the freedom afforded through openness, such as the joys of playfully crafting experience and of being ‘present’ to their encounters. By embodying faith and trust in the unfolding moment, they may be able to demonstrate a similar patience to overcome the difficulties in their teaching. I felt such patience to be invaluable, as I would often experience intense periods of exhaustion and stagnation in my writing, “The trail of words grow like a small child, sometimes in great spurts, sometimes painfully slow, with no clear line to follow. . . . If only I could realize the outcome now” (September 2007). But in waiting for my writing to unfold, I came to understand how the act of writing, like teaching, would follow its own natural course, which I described as, “The buds appearing on the tree outside came up one night while it was still cold, and blossomed late in the morning, so when walking to work one day I saw branches filled with thin shell-like cherry blossom petals” (August 2006). Similar to the patience involved in crafting their writing, teachers may be able to acquire aesthetism and understanding in their teaching by displaying the faith to follow their inner artist, and to listen carefully to their learners so as to engage them. They may be able to trust that their students are learning at their own pace and in their own unique ways, so as to withhold from forcing the learning process upon them.

Overall, a teacher’s playful crafting of experience can manifest in greater fluidity between themselves and their students, as they become less self-absorbed and more in tune with their surroundings (Bason & Frase, 2004). The lightness of such practice is akin to the analogy provided by Chang Tzu, a Chinese philosopher who describes how people cannot get angry at a boat blocking their path if there is no one steering it (Palmer, 1989). Chang Tzu explains the lightness of practice that is not constrained by the anxious need for control. Being less burdened by self-interest and the desire to ‘achieve’ results, it is believed that teachers can then wholeheartedly focus on crafting an aesthetic learning experience that enables students to engage on a similar level.

## **The Joys of Presence and Relationship**

Writing has equally taught me the importance of being ‘present,’ such as the way in which a vivid artwork is often imbued with the creator’s energy and spirit. Both as a writer and a reader, I have come to see how an author’s presence lends authenticity to individuals to help them to form genuine connections with others. Webb (1994, p.16) presents, stating that personhood, or ‘voice’ lies at the heart of any authentic text, as writing is “. . . an expression of the writer's authority and concern. . . done for human beings by human beings. . . [being] strictly a human enterprise.” Teachers who write may find that their writing flows freely when they speak their own words, and that it may sound lifeless and hollow when they do not. Likewise, the hollowness of words without the author’s presence may be visible in the actions of teachers who simply go through the motions of teaching with little conviction. I was able to recognise how much my writing could convey the vitality of my personhood through the disappointing experiences of creating ‘knowledge-based’ reflections that failed to reach me in subsequent re-readings. This disappointment made me aware of how writing was like forming a sense of one’s self, in which “. . .my mind could pick up on both the words the writer spoke and left out to form the growing impression of an individual” (November 2006). Since ‘presence’ is believed to underlie authentic classroom encounters, it is equally important that teachers stay in contact to their own self to form a deep connection with their students. Rodgers and Raider- Roth illustrate this point by referring to Dewey’s description of presence as a sense of aliveness or “an active and alert commerce with the world” and by depicting presence as the very definition of an aesthetic experience (2006, p. 268).

## **Discussion**

This article introduces the importance of learning through writing, not only as a way of sustaining teachers through the challenges of their profession, but through providing them with a means to thrive (Loughran, 1997). Empowering teachers with the vitality of creative life-long learners will give teachers firsthand experience into what it means to forge classroom environments where students can take risks, embrace challenges and engage in creative and insightful thinking (Eisner, 2002; Parr, 2007). Aside from deeper understanding, life-long teacher learning is also shown to increase teacher motivation, a sense of fairness and open-mindedness, in addition to promoting mutual vitality and relationship by connecting individuals under a common goal of learning as a process rather than as a means to an end (Eisner, 2002). The current article suggests that growth in these areas not only equates to resilient and motivated teachers, but teachers who can continue to inspire meaningful learning experiences in others.

This article introduces writing as a means for teacher learning, but rather than focusing on its reflective aspects, it elaborates on the crafting process to highlight the aestheticism that is inherent to both the writing and teaching process. The central themes that emerge from this parallel include the paradox between the agony and the joys presented by the endless possibilities for generating meaning. These themes reflect the complexity and artistry involved in both mediums, and pinpoint how developing skill in one area can enhance growth in the other. It asserts that skills of aestheticism, such as an appreciation for creativity and harmony, which are fundamental for effective classroom practice, can simultaneously increase as teachers learn to express their ‘inner artist’ through creative forms of self-expression. It is hoped that teachers will be able to cultivate a strong sense of pride and appreciation of their profession by acquiring the skills of crafting meaningful experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.



Similar parallels have been drawn between teaching and other forms of creative expression such as dance, music, literature and fine arts, to advocate the need to value the aesthetic nature of teacher learning and practice (Ewing, 2010). These parallels highlight how such learning can insert a creative energy into a teacher's practice that can sustain them through teaching's challenges. In light of its importance, teachers must be encouraged to take time for themselves outside of their role as educators to experience what it means to learn. Efforts to promote lifelong teacher learning are being progressively embedded into the formative stages of a teacher's professional development. An increasing number of teacher education programs aim to cultivate teacher learning through focusing on aesthetic practice. These programs implement creative and authentic learning through arts-based activities, such as music, drama and fine arts, to cater to different learning styles and to model teaching that fosters creative thinking (Eisner, 1997). Such programs carry the belief that teacher education students can learn academic content, whilst also acquiring the social and attitudinal skill-set required for successful classroom practice. However, this focus on a teacher's aesthetic skill-set continues to be devalued by many policy makers and teachers, who see it as playing a lesser part of classroom practice. Not only is it classified as a lower priority than traditional academic curricula, but teachers themselves may lack the confidence to relay such non-prescriptive forms of teaching in a culture where standardised testing often determines their measure of competence (Ewing, 2010).

A closer look at teaching, however, reveals its fundamental artistry, as practitioners not only need to interpret the curriculum, but they may need to respond on cue to their students' learning (Prendergast, 2008). On one hand, they can be seen as improvisers, who are required to respond creatively to their environment and to use their sensibility and imagination to help students relate their learning to their own lives (Sawyer, 2004). On the other hand, they have been conceived as magicians, as with a "metaphorical touch of a finger" they are to provide students with what they needed at the right time, being "present to, able to apprehend and, make sense of and respond skilfully to," the unique strengths and needs of learners (Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006, p. 268). Learners may sense the teacher's magic through feeling like they have been recognised and deeply understood, ". . .not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually" (2006, p. 268). And lastly, teachers have been considered to take on the metaphorical role of midwives, where they assist students to give birth to their own ideas in making their own tacit knowledge explicit (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 275). To help cultivate such multiple capabilities, teachers need to make learning a life-long endeavour, and as an aesthetic practice, writing can be perceived as a key way of developing these skills inherent to crafting meaningful learning encounters. These positive developments may ultimately enhance a teacher's vocational vitality, as teachers are able to envision a classroom with limitless possibilities for learning. With a strong belief in their capacity to teach, practitioners may craft learning experiences that display the power of the literary classics, which continue to transform the lives of readers due to their truth and beauty.

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