

Pedagogical uses of writing to support well-being: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Robert P. Yagelski
University at Albany, SUNY (USA); ryagelski@albany.edu

Abstract

Writing, as a technology for language, is an essential skill for learning at all levels of education. But research also reveals that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can have a significant impact on the writer's sense of self and well-being. Especially in view of the dramatic upheavals in schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators should examine the uses of writing as a means to foster well-being in students. Ungraded informal writing can support student learning at the same time that it can contribute to their well-being.

Keywords: *writing, language, pedagogy, well-being*

Introduction

In the United States, and in many other nations as well, fostering well-being is typically not an explicit goal of school-sponsored language instruction in general or, in particular, of instruction in written language. In nations where English is not the native language, the goals of English language learning generally focus on practical, economic, and cultural considerations and are informed by the widespread use of English as a “global” language (Aljohani 2016: 442). UNESCO (2019) promotes “multilingual education as a means to improve learning outcomes and give life to cultural diversity”; emphasizes “the importance of language of instruction for a quality and equitable education,” which places value on academic success and inclusiveness (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2021); and advocates the use of language instruction to support cultural awareness and diversity and to preserve indigenous languages and cultures (Robinson and Hogan-Brun 2013).

In the U.S., instruction in reading and writing English is generally understood to be essential for learning in general and for effective functioning in society, especially the workplace. In other words, the main purposes of English language instruction are to facilitate learning in other academic subjects and, ultimately, prepare students for employment. Similarly, in postsecondary education in the U.S., required introductory writing classes have long been seen as service courses whose primary purpose is to prepare students for success in the general academic curriculum and in their major programs of study. According to *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011: 2), “The ability to write well is basic to student success in college and beyond”; moreover, “teaching writing and learning to write are central to education and to the development of a literate citizenry.” Although well-being has become an important consideration among some educators in recent years (Harward 2016, Henning et al. 2019, Putwain 2019), it has not been widely emphasized as an explicit and central goal of schooling or language instruction.

However, the terrible disruptions to education that have been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 have made it clear that well-being must be a primary consideration when it comes to formal schooling. The impact of the pandemic on students’ academic achievement, mental health, financial security, and physical health has been severe and alarming (Ihm et al. 2021, Son et al. 2020). Available evidence indicates that the pandemic’s toll on students’ overall well-being has adversely affected their learning and educational outcomes in general (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021, Salmi 2020). In other words, the pandemic has dramatically illuminated what many educators already knew: that well-being and academic success go hand-in-hand.

In the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry at the State University of New York at Albany (USA), my colleagues and I have gained considerable insight during the pandemic into the importance of well-being in our efforts to teach writing effectively to undergraduate students. In March 2020, our

campus was closed because of the rapid spread of the coronavirus in New York, and our 14,000 undergraduate students were suddenly required to leave campus and continue their education remotely, using online technologies. Like students throughout the world, our students suffered significant emotional, financial, and physical hardships as a result of the pandemic, which adversely affected their overall academic achievement. In this context, our efforts to promote our students' learning increasingly focused on supporting their well-being.

In light of these circumstances and a growing body of research that highlights the importance of well-being in academic achievement (Collins 2018, Harvard 2016, Henning et al. 2019, Putwain 2019), I propose that school-sponsored writing instruction can and should be as much about fostering well-being as it is about developing communicative and literate competence. These goals are not mutually exclusive. Academic skill need not be sacrificed for well-being. In fact, there is evidence that fostering well-being can enhance academic achievement and, specifically, the development of writing competence (Adler 2016, Bücken et al. 2018, Gräbel 2017, Yu et al. 2018). The focus of this paper is on how educators can do both: support students' well-being and at the same time help students develop competence in written language.

To advance the proposition that writing instruction should focus on well-being, I will argue that the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment—that is, the writer's experience during an act of writing—has a significant and potentially transformative impact on the writer's sense of self and well-being. To support that claim, I will review relevant research on writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, and writing therapy, which collectively illuminates the importance of the writer's experience at the moment of composing a text; this research also illuminates the potential benefits of writing without a rhetorical exigency—that is, writing in which the goal is *not* to produce a text to be shared. Identifying the implications of this research is essential to understanding why the *experience* of an act of writing—as distinct from the *text* that is produced as a result of that act—matters. It is this experience that is the key to fostering well-being through writing. On the basis of this analysis, I will describe several pedagogical strategies that can help foster student well-being at the same time that they support the development of writing competence.

Understanding the experience of writing

Writing is a technology for language (Ong 1982) that is typically understood as both a communicative act (Nystrand 1989) and a sociocognitive process (Flower 1994). In other words, writing as it is taught and practiced in mainstream schooling in the U.S. and elsewhere is understood primarily in cognitive, social, and linguistic terms. But it can also be understood in ontological terms. That is, because “language is implicated in our very sense of ourselves as beings in the world,” writing, as a technology for language, can be understood as an “act of being . . . [with] great power to shape our very experience of ourselves and the world around us” (Yagelski 2011: 144). This conception of writing illuminates the significance of the *experience* of an act of writing-in-the-moment and its capacity to shape the writer's sense of self in relation to the wider world. The potential impact of an act of writing on the writer's sense of self thus lies in the experience of writing-in-the-moment rather than in the text that is produced as a result of that act of writing.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, it is important to distinguish between writing as a process of producing a text and the experience of writing-in-the-moment (Yagelski 2009: 9). The focus of most conventional writing instruction is on the text. In other words, what matters about an act of writing in school is the nature and quality of the text that is produced as a result of that act. But as I will show in this paper, there is compelling empirical evidence that the *experience* of producing that text also matters. The findings of studies in three distinct but related areas of research provide insight into the importance of this experience of writing-in-the-moment: writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, and therapeutic uses of writing. Here I review the main findings from these bodies of research and examine the implications of these findings for understanding the impact of the experience of writing on the writer's sense of self and well-being.

First, studies of writing anxiety, or writing apprehension, suggest that there is an important connection between a writer's perceptions of competence and the writer's self-esteem. In thirteen

separate studies of writing apprehension, Daly and Wilson (1983: 333) found, “There is a statistically meaningful and inverse association between writing apprehension and the way people feel about themselves.” In other words, people with lower self-esteem tend to have higher levels of anxiety about their writing. These findings were consistent across different groups of participants: college students, teachers, and government office workers. According to Daly and Wilson (1983: 329) the inverse relationship between writing apprehension and self-esteem has to do with the connection between writing and the writer’s sense of self, which can affect—and, in turn, be affected by—a specific writing performance: “Self-esteem may be conceived to be a function of the social responses of others to the individual’s presentation of self. The act of writing with its highly intentional nature and required effort is sometimes directly, and almost always indirectly, an exposure of self to others. In most cases, writing is accompanied by either actual or implied evaluations from others. This exposure and evaluation may be reflected, over time, in inferences by the writer of self-worth.” In a later study, Daly (1985) concludes, “How one writes—indeed, whether one writes—is dependent on more than just skill or competence. The individual must also want to write or, at the very least, must also find some value in the activity. An individual’s attitude about writing is just as basic to successful writing as are his or her writing skills.” More recent studies of writing apprehension reinforce these findings. For example, in a study of the “binge writing” habits of scholars, Hjortshoj (2001: 119) notes that writers “link the activity of writing with strong physical and even biochemical sensations rooted habitually in past experiences.”

What is noteworthy about these findings is the apparently significant relationships among the writer’s engagement in an act of writing, the writer’s emotional state, and the writer’s sense of self-worth or self-esteem. These studies provide evidence that the experience of writing-in-the-moment encompasses affective dimensions, including emotions associated with specific memories of past experiences, that might play a significant role in an act of writing.

The second body of research that helps illuminate the importance of the experience of writing is research on writing self-efficacy. A great deal of research in education has shown that self-efficacy is correlated with academic performance (Bandura 1997, Chemers et al. 2001, Pajares and Miller 1994, Zajacova et al. 2005). That correlation is especially strong when it comes to writing (Klassen 2002, Pajares 2003). In a review of sixteen studies of writing self-efficacy among adolescent students, Klassen (2002: 173) notes, “Self-perceptions of the capability to perform specific tasks strongly influence one’s engagement in and successful completion of a task. This is no truer than in the domain of written expression.” On the basis of this review, Klassen (2002: 185) concludes, “Of the motivational variables assessed [in these studies], perceived self-efficacy was usually found to be the strongest or among the strongest predictors of writing competence.” In reviewing research on self-efficacy and writing, Pajares (2007: 239) drew similar conclusions: “Research findings have consistently shown that writing self-efficacy beliefs and writing performances are related.” In an extensive review of research that includes studies of college and adult writers, Pajares (2003: 145) concludes, “In general, results reveal that writing self-efficacy makes an independent contribution to the prediction of writing outcomes and plays the mediational role that social cognitive theorists hypothesize. This is the case even when powerful covariates such as writing aptitude or previous writing performance are included in statistical models.” Significantly, Pajares (2003: 140) points specifically to the relationship between writing self-efficacy and the student’s broader sense of self-worth: “Confident students are . . . likely to feel less apprehensive and have stronger feelings of self-worth about their writing.” In other words, students’ perceptions of their competence as writers are connected to their overall sense of self-worth.

Studies of writing apprehension and writing self-efficacy provide strong evidence that writers’ perceptions of their own competence and general self-worth can influence their writing performances. We might reasonably hypothesize from these findings that a one’s feelings about and perceptions of one’s own competence as a writer and as a person might also play a significant role in one’s experience of writing-in-the-moment, which in turn might affect that person’s sense of self and well-being. In other words, these studies suggest broadly that a writer’s sense of self is integral to the experience of writing.

This claim is reinforced by the large body of research on the therapeutic uses of writing, which provides intriguing insight into the potentially powerful impact of the experience of writing without a rhetorical exigency—that is, writing without the goal of producing a text to be shared. In the 1980s, psychologist James Pennebaker and his team investigated the effects of writing about traumatic experiences and concluded that writing about such experiences was associated with “long-term decreases in health problems” (Pennebaker and Beall 1986: 280). These researchers added that in investigating the effects of writing about trauma, “we seem to have provided some subjects with a new strategy for coping with both traumatic and significant daily events. . . . [Some subjects] had begun writing about their experiences on their own after having participated in the experiment” (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986: 280). One participant in the original study later told the researchers, “It helped to write things out when I was tense, so now when I’m worried I sit and write it out . . . later I feel better” (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986: 279). In other words, the experience of writing contributed to the participants’ sense of well-being. Summing up this research on what is now termed “expressive writing,” Pennebaker and Evans (2014: 1) state, “Writing is a potentially effective method to deal with traumas or other emotional upheavals. . . . to bring about healing [and] . . . can positively affect one’s sleep habits, work efficiency, and connections to others.” Subsequently, numerous studies have reinforced Pennebaker and Beall’s (1986) original conclusions about the therapeutic impact of expressive writing in a wide range of contexts. For example, studies have found that expressive writing reduced depression in college students (Gortner, Rude, and Pennebaker, 2006), contributed to improved grade point averages among college students (Lumley and Provenzano, 2003), improved symptoms in patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Sloan and Marx 2004), and had a variety of medical and physiological benefits (Booth, Petrie, and Pennebaker 1997, Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, R. 1988, Petrie et al. 1995).

What is especially significant about these studies of “expressive writing” is that the writing that was done in these in various therapeutic settings did *not* involve the production of a text to be read by others. The participants in these studies were writing only for themselves and without regard to the nature or quality of the texts they were producing; as writers, they were essentially freed from rhetorical considerations. The texts they produced did not really matter. What mattered was the *experience* they had in writing those texts.

Recent neuroscience research seems to underscore the significance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. Erhard et al. (2014) used sophisticated imagining equipment to map in real time the brain activity of writers engaged in various writing tasks. Their findings indicate that writing activates numerous areas of the brain associated with language, speech production, and motor control. Most intriguing is the finding that one of the tasks given to participants, “brainstorming” ideas for a story, activated an area of the brain known to be associated with “the integration of interoceptive information and emotional experience” (Erhard et al. 2014: 22). Interoception is a sensory process involving numerous neural pathways related to one’s bodily state and includes physiological sensations, such as hunger, as well as emotional states, such as anger or sadness. The researchers also noted that expert writers in their study seemed to experience a kind of “flow” while composing, “executing many decisions, strategies, relevant and well-learned skills (e.g., writing performance, language skills, sentence construction), and attaining domain-specific goals (e.g., characteristics of literary genres, engaging the readers’ interest) in an automatic, unconscious and intuitive way” (p. 21). Previous research on this phenomenon (Dietrich 2004: 746) suggests that “a necessary prerequisite to the experience of flow is a state of transient hypofrontality that enables the temporary suppression of the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the explicit system.” Such a conclusion suggests that experienced writers temporarily ignore rhetorical considerations. It would seem, then, that removing the rhetorical exigency from an act of writing, even if only temporarily, might enable a writer to experience writing-in-the-moment without the anxiety that Daly (1985) described and perhaps engages the writer’s consciousness in a deeper, more profound way.

These bodies of research provide compelling evidence that an act of writing can have a powerful impact on the writer’s emotional, psychological, and even physical well-being. They suggest that the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment matters when it comes to how student writers perceive and

feel about themselves and their state of being. However, school-sponsored writing instruction is concerned primarily with the development of communicative competence, which tends to be defined in terms of the quality of the text produced. In other words, in conventional schooling, students are taught to produce certain kinds of texts; value is placed on the nature and quality of those texts. The *experience* of writing is essentially ignored. But as noted earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reminded us that we should *not* ignore that experience.

Teaching college writing during a pandemic

Time and again during the pandemic, the students enrolled in first-year writing courses at the State University of New York at Albany revealed that writing helped them cope with the fears and anxieties they were experiencing. These pandemic-related fears and anxieties extended beyond the typical challenges facing first-year college students in the U.S., such as financial pressures (Britt et al. 2017), inadequate preparedness for college-level academic work (ACT 2017), and social adjustment problems (Bowman 2010). In addition, the undergraduate student population at the State University of New York at Albany includes significant percentages of students with characteristics that place them at greater risk of academic failure. For example, more than 40% of our undergraduate students come from households whose annual income is below the national medium, nearly a third are first-generation college students, and approximately 42% are under-represented minorities. All these characteristics have been shown to be risk factors for academic failure (DeAngelo et al. 2011). In many cases, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges.

In March of 2020, with approximately eight weeks remaining in the spring semester, all students at the State University of New York at Albany were required to leave the campus in accordance with the state's COVID-19 safety protocols. As a result, all classes were moved from the classroom to online for the remainder of the semester. Many students returned home to circumstances that made online learning difficult, if not impossible: lack of access to wi-fi, lack of appropriate technology for online learning (such as laptop computers), lack of private space for studying and attending classes online, increased anxiety about school. In addition, many students faced serious family crises, such as severe illness and sometimes death because of COVID-19, loss of employment, and even homelessness. For all undergraduates, most of whom had little or no prior experience with online instruction, these developments were difficult, but the challenges were especially daunting for first-year students, who were still adjusting to college academic work and social life. It is fair to say that for most of our students, the last few weeks of spring semester in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened, were perhaps the most difficult and stressful weeks of their young lives.

Faculty in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry at the State University of New York at Albany worked hard to support students as they confronted these unprecedented challenges. For example, faculty relaxed deadlines and revised the requirements in their writing courses to give students more time and flexibility to complete the required work; they adjusted their online presence (via Zoom and similar platforms) to accommodate students' schedules; and they provided personal mentoring and advice for individual students who faced serious psychological, financial, or health problems. Many faculty also made use of various writing activities to help students express their concerns, explore their anxieties, and share their feelings. In employing these activities, these faculty found that low-stakes, informal writing helped students make sense of their experiences and contributed to their sense of well-being, even as these activities gave students additional opportunities to strengthen their written language skills.

Under the circumstances, this function of writing—to support students' well-being—was arguably even more important than the specific academic and language skills that the students were expected to develop in their first-year writing classes. Our experiences in the spring of 2020 and during the following academic year (September 2020 through May 2021) suggest that conventional writing instruction can and should be configured to emphasize students' well-being as much as it emphasizes the development of writing competence. In other words, fostering well-being should be a primary goal of writing instruction.

Although this paper is not directly concerned with defining and analyzing well-being as a construct, it is necessary to note that well-being is a complex and multifaceted concept (NIRSA 2020), which has varied definitions within different academic disciplines, including public health (Marks and Shah 2004), anthropology (Mathews and Izquierdo 2010), economics (Graham 2011, OECD 2013) and psychology (Dodge et al. 2012). As Collins (2018: 4) points out, well-being encompasses mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions; it “is not a straightforward goal” but rather “a by-product of the pursuit of purpose and striving toward a meaningful life.” Collins (2018: 6) asserts that “well-being is about helping students to grow in their ability to lead socially meaningful and productive lives”; in particular, he argues that writing can be a “resource for well-being,” an analytical tool that students can use “to ground themselves in their worlds and an inventive strategy capable of reconfiguring their worlds.” In this formulation, writing becomes a form of inquiry used “to create and sustain identity and community through purpose and meaning” (Collins 2018: 6). Collins (2018: 6) advocates teaching writing as a way to help students “increas[e] the capacity for key elements of well-being, including curiosity, creativity, resilience, agency, and hope.” In this regard, Collins (2018) provides a rationale for identifying well-being as a central goal of writing instruction.

Our experience in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry at the State University of New York at Albany reinforces Collins’s (2018) view of writing as a resource for well-being. As noted earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic had a variety of negative impacts on our students during the spring semester of 2020. These impacts continued into the fall semester 2020 (September through December), when more than 70% of our courses were taught online and the university implemented various safety measures, including closing many campus facilities and reducing the number of students living in campus dormitories. These measures meant that many students took most or all of their courses online, even if they were living on campus, which potentially increased their sense of isolation and anxiety. Results from a survey of undergraduate and graduate students conducted by the campus health services near the end of fall semester revealed that 48% of students reported feeling anxious “occasionally” or “most of the time” because of the pandemic; in addition, 42.3% reported feeling lonely occasionally or most of the time, 33.9% reported having trouble sleeping occasionally or most of the time, and 32.3% reported feeling depressed occasionally or most of the time (Center for Behavioral Health and Applied Research 2020: 11). Meanwhile, students were also confronting the effects of the pandemic in their lives outside of school. As of December 2020, 18.3% of students surveyed reported that a family member had contracted COVID-19, and 4.7% reported that a family member had died from the disease (Center for Behavioral Health and Applied Research 2020: 7). Responses to open-ended questions in the survey indicated that students perceived *family concerns* to be the greatest stressor in their lives as a result of the pandemic (Center for Behavioral Health and Applied Research 2020: 12).

These problems were clearly evident among the first-year students who were enrolled in the required first-year courses taught in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry. The transition from secondary school to college is often difficult for first-year students, but the circumstances created by the pandemic meant that many of the informal and formal support systems that help these students succeed in making this transition were either unavailable or inconvenient. For example, students studying remotely from their homes did not have access to the informal mentoring by more experienced students with whom they might otherwise be living in their dormitories; similarly, faculty teaching remotely were not available in their offices for informal consultations with students who might be having difficulties in their classes or in adjusting to the social life of the university, which was itself adversely affected by the pandemic. Not surprisingly, data from fall semester 2020 indicate that high percentages of students enrolled in the required first-year writing course did not succeed in the course. 13.7% of the 994 students enrolled in the course did not earn a passing grade and thus did not fulfill the curriculum requirement; an additional 4.3% withdrew from the course, also without fulfilling the requirement. In other words, nearly one in five students enrolled in the course were unsuccessful in fall semester 2020. These figures represent the highest percentages in eight years of collecting such data in our program; previously, the percentage of students who failed

to earn a passing grade never exceeded 10.0%, and the percentage of students who withdrew from the course exceeded 4.0% only once.

Faculty in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry reported that this high rate of failure in the required writing course could be blamed on factors related specifically to the pandemic. In an end-of-semester survey, which was completed by 18 of the 22 full-time faculty, the respondents reported that the main factor in their students' failure to earn a passing grade in the course was "mental health difficulties." One respondent commented, "I was struck by how many of my students who struggled to succeed were dealing with compounded issues—COVID, technology problems, family, work, etc." These survey results point to the link between student well-being and academic achievement. For the faculty in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry, these developments reinforced the view that teaching writing effectively involves much more than helping students develop skill with the written language. Indeed, the experience of teaching during the pandemic provides compelling evidence that writing instruction should emphasize the use of writing as what Collins (2018) terms "a resource for well-being."

Strategies for teaching writing for well-being and competence

What would that look like in pedagogical terms? The remainder of this paper is devoted to a description of two strategies designed explicitly to foster well-being and at the same time support the development of language fluency and writing competence. These strategies rely on the use of ungraded, informal writing to engage students in in-depth inquiry into their own experiences, ideas, feelings, and questions—inquiry that is consistent with Collins's (2018: 6) definition of writing as a form of inquiry "to create and sustain identity and community through purpose and meaning." These strategies were developed for college writing courses, but they could be adapted to any kind of course or subject matter. They rest on the principle that students can benefit from engaging in substantive writing activities about meaningful subjects *if they are temporarily relieved of the burden of earning a grade for their writing or having their writing evaluated for quality*. As Daly and Wilson (1983: 329) note, writing is "an exposure of self to others" that in most cases "is accompanied by either actual or implied evaluations from others." Temporarily removing evaluation from the process reduces the anxiety associated with this self-exposure and enables students to focus on exploring their ideas and feelings without worrying about language conventions, clarity of prose, or correctness. At the same time, freed from these worries about the quality of their prose, students can gain experience in using writing to explore complex and charged subject matter; as a result, they can develop greater fluency in the written expression of complicated ideas. Most important, this kind of ungraded writing can allow students to express their concerns, examine their emotions, and claim a sense of agency in the face of trying circumstances, such as what our students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both strategies described here address these goals.

The first strategy is **impromptu, informal written responses** to specific questions, problems, or ideas that emerge in class. These written responses are intended to be exploratory and flexible; students respond to a prompt provided by the teacher, but they are also encouraged to write about related subjects and follow their own thinking where it leads them. For example, imagine an intense class discussion of a controversial topic such as freedom of speech, during which students exchange strong and sometimes opposing opinions. At a certain point in the discussion, the instructor might pause and ask the students to collect their thoughts in writing. The instructor might provide a specific question for students to respond to (for example, What ethical responsibilities does freedom of speech place on us?) or ask them to articulate their points of view about a particular issue or question that came up in the discussion; the instructor might also invite students simply to write about their feelings at that moment in the discussion or about their own experiences related to the subject. At that point, the students write silently for several minutes, focusing attention on whatever it is they are writing. They might write in a notebook, on a laptop or phone, or in any online interface, such as GoogleDocs or Blackboard. The writing they do for this exercise is not collected or graded, and it might not even be shared. The instructor might invite volunteers to read or talk about what they have just written, or the discussion might simply continue without the students necessarily

sharing what they wrote. Either way, the exercise enables students to focus attention on their ideas, opinions, questions, or feelings at that moment; moreover, through this informal writing the students can explore those ideas, opinions, questions, or feelings in depth without worrying about making mistakes in their prose or being evaluated on the basis of the quality of that prose. Freed from rhetorical exigency, they are able to become absorbed in the act of writing itself. Afterwards, they can reflect on what they have written to identify any insights they might have gained or to pose further questions about the subject of the discussion—or about themselves. Such reflection, which might be guided by the instructor, can lead to a stronger sense of agency and even self-esteem, because it can validate the students' thoughts and feelings without fear of criticism or evaluation. It is also a form of intellectual inquiry into the subject matter itself. In this way, this strategy not only provides an opportunity for students to strengthen their sense of self-efficacy as writers and learners, but also gives them practice in writing about complicated subjects in order to gain a greater understanding of those subjects.

The second strategy is called **reflective or mindful writing**. In this activity, students are invited to reflect, in writing, on their own experiences, examine their thoughts about an important question or idea, or explore feelings they might be having—about themselves, their academic work, happenings in the world around them, or anything else that is significant in their lives. For example, in my courses, I begin each class meeting with 5 or 6 minutes of this kind of reflective writing, and I often end class meetings the same way. Usually, I give the students a prompt to respond to (for example, What is the main challenge you are facing right now as a college student? Or, How is the pandemic affecting your studies?), but I also invite them to write about anything that is on their minds. The students do this writing silently in a digital interface (Blackboard), which enables me to verify that they have done the writing. But the writing itself is not graded, nor is it shared with anyone else. The students know that their writing for this activity is private, but they can share it with their classmates if they wish. The purpose of this reflective writing is to enable students to focus attention on important ideas or feelings and explore those ideas or feelings and what they might mean—without worrying about a grade and without worrying about the quality of the prose they are writing. Like impromptu response writing, reflective writing can contribute to students' sense of agency and thus strengthen their self-efficacy. But it can also lead to important insights about themselves and their lives.

For example, one student in my course, Camille, struggled to adjust to the rigors of college-level writing. Although she was a diligent student, she was also a first-generation college student from a low-income family whose single mother worked several jobs to support Camille and her two younger sisters. Throughout the semester that she was enrolled in my class, Camille wrestled with guilt about her mother and doubt about her ability to succeed in college. She often wrote about these feelings for the mindful writing exercises. Early in the semester, for example, she wrote, "I never saw myself as being a college dropout. [But] right now, I see myself doing less than I expected myself to and that really upsets me because I am really trying to be the best and do the very best, but I've learned that in college that could only get you so far." These doubts continued for much of the semester, and Camille used the mindful writing exercises to try to make sense of her feelings. As she wrote about her concerns, she began to develop a more nuanced understanding of her situation and a greater appreciation for her mother and for herself. Late in the semester, for example, she reflected on one of the formal essays she had written for the course, which was about the challenges facing students from single-parent households: "The essay I wrote for this class has a lot of meaning to me. I am trying my best to convey the feelings I've had towards my experience with my mom, but do words even exist to describe such a thing? When I am writing, I feel like I am not doing enough, or not giving the experience enough credit for the effect it has had on my life. Not only has this experience changed me as a person, but it changed how I saw the things around me as well." This excerpt illustrates the genuine, in-depth inquiry into her own experiences that Camille was engaged in through her writing. And at the end of the semester she wrote, "I think that the most valuable thing I learned in this course is to believe in myself." That belief in herself included a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges she faced in her young life and her own resiliency in trying to

overcome those challenges. In this sense, in addition to developing greater competence as a writer, she also gained genuine insight into herself as a human being.

Faculty in the writing program at the State University of New York at Albany have found that students appreciate these strategies as a way to make sense of the challenges that they are facing as students and as human beings at a moment of significant transition in their lives; moreover, these strategies have three main benefits with respect to the development of writing competence:

- 1) They promote fluency in writing through regular and sustained practice.
- 2) They reduce anxiety about writing by temporarily removing evaluation from the process, which can help them develop greater writing self-efficacy.
- 3) They help students gain insight into the uses of writing to support in-depth inquiry into important and meaningful subjects.

In this regard, incorporating ungraded informal writing into a course does not compromise the effort to achieve the conventional learning goals related to developing competence on written language. Quite the contrary: reducing students' anxiety and giving them experiences with writing that they themselves value can lead to enhanced skill development, as the research cited earlier suggests.

Most important, embracing well-being as an explicit goal of school-based writing instruction humanizes the classroom and helps make schooling more directly relevant to the complex challenges of living, whether in the context of an unprecedented crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic or less dramatic but nevertheless significant routine social, emotional, or financial challenges. I was reminded of this need to humanize education by a comment from a student that one of my colleagues shared with me at the end of the semester in May of 2020. When the pandemic forced the closing of our campus and required us to suddenly move all our classes online, this student, who was from Malaysia, was required to quarantine alone in the U.S. for several weeks, unable to be with his family or his classmates or friends. For an ungraded exercise in his writing course, the student wrote about being confined to his apartment and watching beautiful pink flowers outside his window as they budded, bloomed, and withered during the spring season, which he saw as a sign of the life he experienced while being in quarantine alone in America and taking all of his classes online. His writing class, he said, was the only synchronous class he had during the pandemic-induced shutdown, and it served as a reminder of the human connection he needed. He called it "a sign of life." When my colleague shared this anecdote with me, she did so to highlight how important our teaching had become to our students, who were facing such difficult challenges as human beings during a historic global health crisis. And that importance went far beyond our efforts to help our students become more effective writers. It was really about helping them meet the challenges of living in a complicated and sometimes dangerous world.

Language is central to how we make sense of and navigate the world. Writing, as a technology for language, has a unique capacity to affect our sense of self and well-being. Educators should take advantage of that capacity of writing.

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