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Stories of Women Who Don't Write

Abstract

This paper is a response to the writing of women preservice elementary teachers who were asked by the author to complete journal entries examining their own experience of language development and writing. The stories that emerged in the journals were alarming in terms of the consistency and clarity with which they reported on their disability with language, their disempowerment, and the history of events which led to these conditions. This paper provides an overview of their stories interwoven with discussion of current understandings about the development of language, thinking, and writing. It closes with some questions about the politics of literacy, whether writing is particularly a "women's problem", and the implications of the likelihood that many women teachers may be women "who don't write".

Résumé

Cet article porte sur la langue écrite de professeurs femmes du primaire en stage de formation à qui l'auteur a demandé de décrire leur propre expérience en matière d'acquisition du langage et de rédaction. Le constat qui en ressort est alarmant sous l'angle de l'uniformité et de la clarté avec laquelle ces femmes font état de leur incompétence langagière, de leur paralysie et des circonstances qui ont abouti à cet état de fait. Cet article donne une vue d'ensemble de leur histoire entremêlée d'une analyse des connaissances actuelles sur l'acquisition du langage, de la pensée et de l'écriture. L'article se termine par certaines questions sur la politique d'alphabétisme, et l'auteur se demande si l'écriture est un problème féminin et si au nombre des répercussions de ce phénomène, les femmes enseignantes sont peut-être des femmes qui ne savent pas écrire.

This paper raises questions about the relationship between women and writing. The women of interest are not those who voluntarily take up the pen as poets, story writers, philosophers, autobiographers, diarists, or seasoned journal writers. Instead the questions are asked about women "who don't write". The work did not begin with this end point in mind. Rather it began with an invitation to 50 women preservice elementary teachers to undertake reflective journal writing to examine their experience of language as students and now as preservice teachers. In their journal entries, all of these women claimed to be people who don't like writing, avoid it whenever possible, and would never trust it for anything important or difficult. For many, this unsatisfying relationship with language extended to speaking as well. These people reported having a history of avoiding both "discussion" courses and "essay" courses. For most students, the classroom is the first primary public space for speaking and writing. In as much as speaking and writing are important skills for participation in public life generally, these women's journals reported an unsatisfactory preparation for public life.

Major themes in the journals included: (1) the ways in which writing can provide a space for thinking and also make arduous demands on thinking; and (2) the role of group dialogue in providing oral practice in both self-expression and considering an issue from a variety of perspectives, that is, the kind of thinking required in reflective writing. These women recognized (or had come to recognize) that by never having used writing for self-expression or self-understanding they had in fact missed the opportunity for thinking itself — and through not thinking, had missed the opportunity for actively creating the self. Some confessed that they now lacked the skills to discern or articulate what they thought about anything personal and important. I am not suggesting here that the self cannot be experienced or created through means other than language. I am simply noting their acknowledgement of the particular contribution of language to thinking and self-creation.

A number of emotions were commonly expressed in the women's journals. Fear was a dominant theme — fear of being wrong, not pleasing the teacher, getting a low mark, being criticized, or being misunderstood. Many statements of anger, disappointment, and regret were expressed about lost opportunities for creativity and learning. The jargon and passive voice they had used to get by as successful students were pervasively recognized as a cover-up for never really having understood what they were talking/writing about and what the textbook authors meant. Frustration was the emotion attached to their current reality of not being able to masterfully bring language and thinking to bear on important questions and issues of real personal concern.

In this paper, to consider these women's relationship with writing, I provide an overview of what they described their current experience to be and what they reported as the histories which led to their current situation.

In providing these overviews, I relate their experiences to existing views or understandings about writing and its development. In concluding, I ask questions about the politics of literacy, whether writing is a "women's problem", and the implications of the likelihood that many teachers or prospective teachers have such histories.

Context of the Study

In 1990 I taught in a one-year, after-degree, elementary teacher education program in Toronto. Two of my classes were full-year educational psychology courses. In the fall we worked with material on Piaget, classroom management, and instructional strategies. In February through April, we worked with cognitivism, behaviourism, humanism, and information processing. In January we had one class on "hidden curriculum" and two classes on critical pedagogy. For the first of the critical pedagogy sessions, a group of five or six students in each section of the course studied a book chapter about alienation and illiteracy by Finlay and Faith (1987) and developed a two-hour class presentation.

All students in the classes were asked to write journal entries in response to the "alienation and illiteracy" class presentation. Journal writing was required for the three January classes but otherwise was not an ongoing component of the course. Some of the students were enrolled in other courses which did use journal writing throughout the year. In preparation for journal writing I gave the class an oral *precis* of Holly's (1984) work on keeping a personal-professional journal. The students' ages ranged from early 20s to early 30s. The two classes included 50 women and 11 men. The men's journals will be discussed in the section which asks whether writing is a "women's problem".

I had asked the students to submit a minimum of one and a half typewritten pages for the assignment. Almost all submissions were five to seven pages in length. In spite of their complaints and claims about being nonwriters, they were adept autobiographers in writing. They tended to begin by writing about their current situation and then moved backwards and forwards in time with ease. Typically, journal entries began with a statement about their current feelings about writing and speaking and proceeded with anecdotes to illustrate this current experience. Then they traced their significant memories of classroom writing and speaking beginning as early as grade two and continuing to the present time. Their memories were usually accompanied by analysis or interpretation as well as expressions of aspiration for their own future teaching practice. Many writers included memories from recent practicum classes and gave analyses of observed language events. Upon first reading of the journal entries I was struck by what an igniting topic language was for them and how consistent the themes and experiences were across journals. It was then that I decided to request student permissions to study the journal entries systematically.

Discomfort with Writing

No one expressed any comfort with or love of writing. Many were explicit about its difficulty or futility and the way in which writing in fact kills one's voice. The following journal excerpt is an example of the way in which this dissatisfaction was expressed.

I personally find it much easier to express myself orally because I can use my body and use expression in my voice to get my point across. The audience with whom you are speaking is familiar in that you can see for yourself if they are understanding what you are expressing. Written communication seems so final and harsh in my opinion. No matter how many flowery or expressive words you use, the tone is still flat.

This complaint is reminiscent of Gadamer's recognition that "[a] text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. Writing is the abstract ideality of language" (1989, p. 392). So, do some women fail to understand the unique function of written text, or do they simply find that it fails to satisfy a primary orientation to retain the life expression of themselves and others? When I think of life expression and speaking I think of embodiment, volatility, and intersubjectivity. Not only do bodily expressions such as voice and movement convey much of the meaning, but the very content of what one thinks, feels, and is trying to say represents one moment in life and can change dramatically from moment to moment in the face of ongoing events, interaction with conversation partners or audiences, or new memories or thoughts which surface. In fact, to be speaking with others at all can seem to be a reassurance that one is part of the ongoing flow of life. What is present in the preference for speaking is at least a valuing of intersubjectivity. What is absent in this preference is perhaps the will to hand down disembodied ideas. Yet, without mastery of the craft of writing, a preference for writing is not a possible choice.

Many of the women wrote about the difficulty of getting a text to say "what you want it to". The following journal excerpt vividly highlights the way in which written text, full of ambiguity and multiple meanings, takes on a life of its own.

I have always had problems writing about my personal feelings. I know what I am feeling but it seems that I can never get it on paper. The words that express my feelings don't seem to exist or perhaps I don't know how to manipulate language in order to express my feelings. When I do finally find the right words and I start writing them down on paper,

the words seem to take over and lead me in directions that I don't want to go. They get me off topic or they start expressing things that I don't really feel. They take on a life of their own and manipulate me, the person that should be in control of what I'm feeling and writing. An example of this is when I was writing a note for my manager at work trying to tell her that besides working Fridays and Saturdays like I regularly do, I could also work during the week. I had to rewrite the note several times because each time I reread it, it was ambiguous and unclear. I finally ended up calling her on the phone and telling her.

This journal passage and many others like it attested to the greater helplessness of writing as compared to speech. As Plato once remarked, no one can come to the rescue of the written word if it falls victim to misunderstanding. Yet the activity of writing itself can be a means for the writer to think and to achieve understanding. This is not to say that speaking does not also provide opportunities for thinking and achieving understanding. It certainly can. However, writing provides a different kind of powerful and poetic space. During writing, the flow from the other is blocked so that one can take up the question of the other reflectively. There is time and space for deliberativeness — a chance to weigh, consider, and interrogate many of one's competing and conflicting ideas and experiences related to a question or issue. The record of one's thinking provided by the writing both prompts and provides an opportunity to evaluate the comprehensiveness, coherence, and persuasiveness of one's argument or interpretation. This process of reflective writing, of arriving at some point of closure about what one really thinks and believes about a question, requires considerable intensity and energy. Many of the women journal writers commented on how arduous they find the reflective writing process to be and how absent it has been in their own school experience. At the very least, women commenting on this theme wrote that it was easier to complete assignments for which one simply summarized material from books than those which required the expression of one's own views or ideas. A few wrote in more detail about why it was difficult to write one's own ideas. The following journal excerpt is an example of one of the more explicit statements.

This year, I find that even though I am spending a lot of time writing in journals, I don't think that I always succeed in expressing my personal thoughts in writing. Why? Because these are my private thoughts, my feelings, emotions, etc., and therefore require a lot of soul-searching, which requires a lot of time to think critically and I am not used to doing that. What I have been trained to do is to research a topic in various books and write down information that I have gath-

ered from these books. Here, there is no need to think critically, or to express my thoughts about the concepts. All I have to do is read and write.

This section has related the various dissatisfactions these women expressed with writing: that it is "lifeless", or that it takes on an unmanageable life of its own, and that they lack experience and skill for the reflection and critical thinking needed for self-expressive writing. The next section discusses the role of dialogue in developing the abilities for reflection and critical thinking and relates how such opportunities were absent in the histories of these women.

Dialogue, Reflection, and Self-Expression

Gordon Wells (1986, p. 65), in *The Meaning Makers*, has outlined how reflection is learned initially through conversation or dialogue with another more knowledgeable person. If experiences of this kind are numerous and positive, children come to be able to manage both roles for themselves, framing questions and interrogating their own experience in the search for an answer. In other words, the dialogue begins to be carried on internally and language becomes a tool for thinking. Many of the women's journal entries expressed a recognition of the role of dialogue in classrooms as a support to the development of critical thinking or reflection. The following excerpt is an example of their comments on this theme.

As future teachers, we must emphasize oral communication in our classroom. Every student has a particular view of a certain topic. What we must do is increase the dialogue in the classroom so that each child can express his/her own thoughts. In this way, each child will be able to look more reflectively at his/her own thoughts and the thoughts of others. This will further enable them to think more critically than before.

I can understand self-expression to be the product of reflection. I can also understand from these women's journal writings that they did not experience effective invitations or safe places for self-expression in their school experience. The following excerpts were typical statements on this theme.

Thinking back upon my own experiences at school there always seemed to be a right and wrong way of doing things. For those of us who learned quickly to give our teachers what they wanted to hear we did okay. We were the passive listeners and in the process those like myself either lost the ability or never learned to think critically to our fullest ability. To

this day I sometimes sit in class and try to figure out what the teacher would like to hear. It is almost fear of giving a wrong answer that keeps students from answering or participating in class discussions.

In my definition of what language is I wrote that language is a tool to help people communicate. But after thinking about it I believe that it's more than just a tool to communicate, it should be a tool to help you communicate your true feelings about something, not to write what you think someone else wants you to write. . . . So many times in university, and even before that, we are trained into thinking that we will write the way our teachers want us to. Sometimes I am afraid to write how I really feel because my teacher will either mark it wrong or give me a low mark. . . . And I do believe that if I were to write down how I really feel or what I'm really thinking it would be very therapeutic for me.

For so very long in school I have sat as a passive learner taking everything that I hear and see at face value. I never thought it was my place to question those in authority. I truly believe that I have been socialized. Do not question elders. I myself first remember questioning a professor in my fourth year of university. I personally feel that this was too late, better late than never.

In a number of journal entries, links were made between the classroom, the family, and society — all places where children and young people are told what is right, what is true, and what to think. Some of the women wrote that the obedience and restraint of self-expression required by their teachers was the same as that required by their parents. David Smith (1987) and Ashis Nandy (1987) have both observed that we, as adults, generally have a fear of children as new, original, and other, and have a compulsion to impose upon them our interpretations as a way of confirming the validity of these views. This predisposition to tell rather than to listen or be curious makes genuine conversation or dialogue with young people unlikely. H-G Gadamer (1989, p. 383) has described how in genuine conversation, the partners are less the leaders than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation as it takes its own twists and reaches its own conclusions. Gordon Wells (1986, p. 65) has recommended that parents treat their children as equal partners in conversation, following their lead and negotiating meaning and purposes, not only to help their children talk but to enable them to discover how to learn *through* talk. David Smith (1987) has argued that one can only find one's voice in an environment where speech is well understood as having a listening aspect.

Most teachers, feeling the pressure to know curriculum or learning outcomes in advance in their classes, have probably not even tried to live the role of good conversation partners with their students. Vivian Gussin Paley (1986) has written about the difficulty of truly listening to what children are actually saying when we are mentally rehearsing what we would like them to be saying. While teachers feel pressure to be guardians of "correct" curricular knowledge, they experience even more pressure to be role models and moral guides. Yet it is most frequently a moral issue — what's right or wrong, fair or not fair, a better way to live a life — that is most likely to serve as an igniting dialogue topic for children and young people. When such topics surface, teachers can see their first responsibility to be that of modelling "correct" attitudes and values rather than recognizing and valuing the opportunity for facilitating genuine dialogue. Yet it is in the context of authentic dialogue about real and comprehensible issues that young people can orally learn the practice of viewing a question from a number of perspectives and learning to think more critically. This is the process that we hope for in individual deliberation which can support reflective writing. Yet without the model and experience of group dialogue, it can be difficult for students to know what is desired or meant by critical reflection or to have confidence in the rhythms or dynamics of the process.

The Labour of Learning the Craft of Writing

Using writing to say or share what is meant is not an easy task. Gadamer (p. 393) has written about the higher demands of style required in writing in order for the reader to be stimulated and held in productive thought. Wells (1986) has described the hard work required of the child to first learn how to cast a story in written form. Great energy and toil is required to learn the "art" of it. He emphasizes the importance of the child's "ownership" of the story if such energy and struggle is to be forthcoming. One of the women journal writers witnessed the consequences of the absence of such ownership in a grade three practicum classroom. This is her description of the event.

A personal experience I had with students using jargon was in my practicum placement, a grade three class. The students, as a class, read a story from an anthology. The teacher led some discussion afterwards and directed some questions to the students. This was to serve the purpose of ensuring that everyone understood the story. Afterwards the students were to write a summary of the story in their own words. They were allowed to use the text to refer back to. They worked quietly and diligently; the exercise seemed to be going well. It wasn't until I started reading what they were writing, however, that I discovered that it wasn't going well at all. The students were

not summarizing — they were simply extracting phrases and expressions straight from the text. They were of course careful to choose segments from the beginning, middle, and end of the story, but they were by no means attempting to express the ideas in their own words. Curious, I spoke to one student about the story. I asked her to re-tell the story to me out loud. That she could do. When I asked her why she had copied the sentences right out of the book, she said that it was different than saying it out loud.

Clearly, the very young child recognizes that writing isn't just speech written down. It is different. And it is demanding to learn.

While the women journal writers did not recall opportunities for self-expression in class dialogue, they did recall explicit invitations for it in written form. However, even when the teachers of these women may have thought they were trying to offer a safe place for self-expression in writing, they subverted the opportunity to another way. They assigned topics which were not meaningful to the students and which therefore had no chance of igniting reflection or the desire for self-expression. The women journal writers gave life history examples ranging from grade two through grade twelve experiences of being told to write for themselves and to write what they really wanted to say, but on a particular assigned topic in which they had no interest and about which there was nothing they wanted to say. Really, they said, throughout school they were writing for other people and not themselves.

It has to be acknowledged that uncovering generative themes or igniting topics for dialogue or writing is not a straightforward affair. The students themselves usually cannot name what it is that is really on their minds (Finlay & Faith, 1987). The preoccupations and concerns of students often surface in a sideways, surprising fashion in unexpected or open-ended contexts. The teacher must be oriented to the students as a researcher, being curious, and paying attention deeply in order to notice, remember, and take seriously any clues to students' preoccupations. The teacher may also need to offer open-ended, self-expressive assignments which provide a space for students' real concerns or preoccupations to surface (Ellis, 1992). Paulo Freire and many others have suggested that teachers need to research their students.

While teachers may feel that this research work is extraneous, one has only to consider these women's journals to ask what has been the cost to them of the absence of authentic writing. Some lost or failed to develop the inclination to think their own thoughts or to expect themselves to have their own opinion on anything. Most came to rely on using jargon and

mimicking the passive voice found in school text books as their only form of writing. Many came to consciously hate writing and to avoid courses that require essay writing. Some even avoided seminar courses where they would have to express their thoughts in group discussion. Each year it became more difficult to, for the first time, risk criticism of one's authentic speaking or writing. With each year many also became more aware of how unskilled or inept they were in self-expression either orally or in writing. These women are now voting, working citizens of the country and their education has left them disempowered² rather than able to use language critically and creatively to improve the various institutions they inhabit.

The Politics of Literacy

In this paper I view literacy as the ability to use language for self-expression, critical thinking, illumination, and understanding of self and others. Winterowd (1989) has noted that defining literacy is almost always a consequential political act as the working definition largely determines educational priorities and the allocation of resources. This holds true not only at the national and school district levels, but in individual classrooms. The teacher's beliefs about what is worth learning/developing and how this can be done largely dictate how classroom resources (time, materials, activities) will be allocated.

Teachers and teacher educators should consider whether students will simply learn to copy and memorize the teacher's notes from the overhead transparency or whether they will be afforded the time, space, materials, and safety to struggle to find the words to express what they do and do not understand or value about a topic. Will grade three students with apparently precocious textual abilities take home "plagiarized" summaries of stories they've read or will they learn to write by writing their own stories or ideas about their own interests or concerns? Will students experience a conversational community where they learn to think, speak, and write their own thoughts while reflecting on the expressed thoughts of others, or will there continue to be grade four students who say that they don't know what they are supposed to write for the question that asks, "Which story did you like best and why?" Will teacher educators start to worry less about whether student teachers know how to use questions that promote "higher level thinking" in group discussions and begin to worry more about whether they know how to uncover, recognize, and value igniting topics for students' dialogue and writing.

Using classroom resources to support literacy as it has been discussed in this paper requires clarity, conviction, and commitment on the part of the teacher. Better language development and better academic learning can be the short-term result although the pace may appear slower.

Teachers also require their own support and safe place to give priority to literacy of this kind. In the long-term, all students can have a better opportunity to develop their critical and creative capabilities and to have language be a more effective medium for their participation in public life.

Is Writing a "Women's Problem"?

I am not comfortable about reporting on the journal writing of the men in the two classes I taught because there were so few of them and I did not have background information about any individual students. For example, I did not know which students were or were not enrolled in other courses which required journal writing all year long. However, at the urging of early readers of this manuscript I do offer my report, but without any speculation or generalization beyond these particular male students.

There were eleven men in the two classes that completed the journal writing activity. Only one or two of them wrote in much the same way as the women did; that is, in a self-searching, self-disclosing way which drew upon their personal situations with writing and explored previous life experiences or practicum classroom events. The other men wrote in a more formal, "objective", distanced way about "the topic" and did not put themselves into the writing or so much as comment upon their personal experience of writing or language. Therefore it is unclear whether they feel that they have a problem with writing or have been disadvantaged in language development in any way.

If I ask whether writing is a problem in particular for women I cannot develop an answer on the basis of knowing how their relationship with writing is similar to or different from that of men. Yet whether men do or do not learn to write and speak any better than women do, a large body of research indicates that men are more empowered by their classroom, family, and societal experiences in a variety of ways, while by contrast, schools and society generally discourage achievement and ambition in girls (AAUW, 1991; AAUW, 1992; Clarricoates, 1978; Davies, 1989; Thompson, 1983; Spender, 1989; Walkerdine, 1984). While reiterating these and many other gender-related researches is beyond the scope of this paper, a few findings are highlighted here to underscore the multifacetedness of the empowering/disempowering conditions for males and females. In schools, male students learn to trust their own judgment and to think well of themselves as having skills and talents even if they are not highly capable academically. Their egos are better protected even though rebukes may appear harsh. The space for their self-expression and interests is more generously afforded. In the face of a curriculum about men's accomplishments, they have every reason to believe that they too will be creative. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to learn silence, passivity, and self-doubt. They are less likely to

practise and develop the skills of self-assertion in the public space of the classroom. They are less likely to see themselves as having ability and creativity. In society in general, the social codes permit females less than equal talk time when in conversation with males, and written works receive lower evaluations if readers believe the author is female. Given the many disempowerments in place for women and the empowerments more generally available to men, I would argue that disability with language is a weightier handicap for women. Capability with writing and speaking can be understood as basic necessities for women's participation in public life given the challenges they experience simply because they are women.

Implications of Women Teachers "Who Don't Write"

Overall, the women journal writers were hopeful for the future of children now in school. They saw whole language, invented writing, dialogue, journal writing, activity-based learning, and children selecting their own topics for writing and their own questions for research as promising supports for the development of children's language and thinking as tools for self-expression, self-understanding, and understanding of others. Some were even hopeful for themselves as they reported that their journal writing experiences of recent years were starting to get results. They only wished that they could have begun the experience earlier.

This journal writing assignment itself, however, had a great focussing power in their awareness. For these women, the journal writings became sources of knowledge and critical understanding of the forces which had shaped their own language development. They became theorists of their own lives by interrogating and analyzing their own experiences. By returning to their own stories of language development they also experienced the emotional impact of those stories. Without one's own stories to give life back to abstract ideas about language development, these ideas can simply remain part of the litany of prescriptions which bombard students in teacher education programs. These women's journal writings contained many expressions of personal commitment and clarity about supporting their own students' language development. The journal writing activity itself may have been an important context for the development of those convictions and visions.

It is not clear whether preservice teachers without this kind of constructivist opportunity will have such clarity and commitment about giving priority to activities and ways of being which can give genuine support to children's literacy. Without coherence in one's theorizing and strong convictions, it is too easy in the complexity of the classroom for the left hand to undermine what the right hand is doing even when one is dutifully attempting to employ current language development principles

and practices. Further, if a teacher has not personally experienced satisfaction with the craft of writing for illumination and self-expression, how likely is it that she or he will believe in it, want it for children, and understand how to support its development? It certainly makes sense that so many language arts or writing courses for teachers focus on contributing to the participants' own experience of writing.

If women "who don't write" and who perhaps don't speak articulately or confidently in public spaces either are disempowered, will they be able or likely to empower the children in their classrooms? This is particularly a question for women who may not have named, considered, or come to understand their current circumstances with public writing and speaking. Unless such people are actively working to enhance their capability with language, can they value and understand the process well enough to fully support it in students? Even if the desire for personal growth with language is there, do most women have enough time alone for the solo activity of reflective writing? These questions about the relationship between women teachers and writing are important ones when considering how best to direct resources intended to facilitate literacy for students in schools.

NOTES

1. Finlay and Faith (1987) use the term "igniting" in concert with Freire's notion of generative themes. An "igniting" topic, as the word suggests, is one which gets people fired up. That is, people care about the topic and there is much that they wish to say about it. Other descriptors such as meaningful, relevant, provocative, stimulating, or interesting do not carry these two senses in the same manner.
2. C. M. Shrewsbury (1987) in "What is feminist pedagogy?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3 & 4), pp. 6-14, defines power as energy, capacity, potential, or creative energy and suggests that to be empowered is to recognize our abilities to act to create a more humane social order.

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