

“The Biggest Surprise Was the Feeling of Empowerment”: Teachers Sharing Stories for Advocacy and Transformation

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On the Reading Standards of Learning test, the state tells Autumn that she is a 399. She attempts the test five times—maybe six—I stop keeping track. She consistently scores in the 375–399 range. We analyze all of the tests. We practice deep breathing. We do everything I can think of to do. She never complains. She hugs me and thanks me for my time. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes I do. (Lazear, 2015)

In June of 2014, Susan Lazear, a reading specialist, was frustrated to tears by the Virginia Standards of Learning Test. One of her high school students, a sweet girl with a big heart and dreams of being a nurse, was denied a diploma by the state of Virginia because she hadn't scored the requisite 400 on the state's annual reading assessment. In response to Autumn's continued struggles with the test, Susan wrote emails to the Virginia Department of Education to express concerns about the assessment and composed letters to her district central office to appeal on Autumn's behalf. The outcome of her actions was discouraging: Autumn—despite her best efforts—continued to fail the exam and faced an uncertain academic future. Susan channeled her frustration in a submission to the blog, *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care*, which was later posted under the title, “What the Data Won't Show” (2015). Susan knew others would relate to this story, and she shared it with the blog in an effort to reach a larger audience who could empathize and strategize in the face of continued disappointment.

Why Write?

At first, Susan was hesitant to write. She feared that she would be seen as a teacher who was against accountability or as a troublemaker in her county. She was too busy, felt she should stay out of politics, and thought no one would care what one teacher thought. At her core, Susan felt powerless. In an email, she

explains the range of emotions that contributed to her hesitation: she was “overwhelmed and frustrated and constantly striving and anxious and heartbroken” (personal communication, February 3, 2016). But Susan also wanted people to understand what high-stakes standardized tests are doing to kids, and she knew that teachers had to tell their stories to prompt others to listen. Writing about her experience working with Autumn seemed necessary, and the effect of sharing it in a public outlet was profound. Specifically, Susan notes that the process was cathartic and transformative. Readers of her blog post commented with validation and support, echoing similar frustrations with testing and thanking Susan and Autumn for their story.

For Lazear, and for many educators, blogs provide a public platform for classroom teachers, university professors, and parents to discuss issues that affect our students. As an example, *Writers Who Care* (Hochstetler, Letcher, Turner, Zuidema, Buescher, Jeffers, & Warrington, n.d.), the outlet for Lazear's story, has become a space to disseminate knowledge, experience, and narratives. With the increasing prevalence of educational policies seemingly aimed at stifling the concerns of educators and ignoring their effects on schools and on students like Autumn, public platforms like blogging are more important than ever. *Writers Who Care* offers one such platform, as do other blogs focused on literacy instruction and advocacy, such as *Ethical ELA* (Donovan, n.d.) and *Two Writing Teachers* (Shubitz, Hubbard, Murphy, Frazier, & Sokolowski, n.d.). In this article, we argue for writing in public spaces as a form of advocacy and professional empowerment and encourage our colleagues to compose and publish in blogs and similar outlets so that middle level educators and students can be heard. We can take our stories about teaching and learning to larger audiences and share with those who care about literacy in middle level classrooms—there is power in our collective voices (Zemelman & Ross, 2015). The voices of classroom stakeholders are often lost in state- and national-level

conversations about education. Online advocacy, such as that offered by blogs, can help teachers speak louder in these public conversations.

Advocacy Matters

Peter Smagorinsky (2013) describes the way that policies in education are affected by popular media. He notes, “In Congress, when educational issues are in play, the sources for ideas are credited to articles and editorials in the popular press” (Smagorinsky, 2013, n.p.). If educational policies are shaped by popular media, teachers—who know best how those policies affect students—should share their stories in that public forum. Public access to educational research and classroom practices is important for helping to influence educational policy and for opening classroom walls to build understanding about the realities of teaching and learning today.

While we emphasize the importance of writing to affect policy, we understand the many demands on classroom teachers. In *Teachers Organizing for Change: Making Literacy Learning Everybody’s Business*, Cathy Fleischer (2000) recognizes how difficult it can be for teachers to be politically active. While Fleischer encourages teachers to reach out to parents and to the community, she also realizes that teachers don’t suddenly “redefine themselves as political creatures,” especially since their main priority must be teaching their students. She notes that teaching itself, “takes an inordinate amount of time and leaves [teachers] with little energy to become the next Norma Rae or Ralph Nader” (p. 28). As we each contribute our individual voices, we become a community collectively advocating for change. Participating in a community of teacher-writers who

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advocate for authentic literacy instruction can serve as a form of collegial support. Whitney, Hicks, Zuidema, Fredricksen, & Yagelski (2014) view the work of teacher-writers as “transformative, reaffirm[ing] teaching as professional practice, and position[ing] teacher-writers as agents who can resist troubling current educational reform efforts” (p. 177). Teachers can encourage one another to write or write collaboratively to provide support for advocacy work.

In addition to writing for our larger community of literacy educators and policymakers, we also write for ourselves. For Lazear, writing about Autumn was “a tremendous experience. . . . I felt validated both as a teacher and a writer by the outpouring of support I received after its publication. I know it meant a great deal to Autumn as well. She felt loved and supported at a very difficult time.” Lazear continues, “In the end, I think the biggest surprise was the feeling of empowerment I felt by speaking out. It was really cathartic for me, and I think it has helped me feel more positive about my teaching” (personal communication, February 3, 2016).

Crafting Teaching Stories

How do we, like Susan Lazear, write in public spaces toward the shared goals of circulating stories from our teaching and affecting change? Successful teacher narratives in the form of blog posts are united by several common threads: a captivating narrative, well-articulated purpose, clear audience, and accessible research. These elements, when combined in quick and relatable composition with links to relevant outside sources, are more likely to be shared widely, thus expanding their impact.

CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink

The article encourages teachers to share their stories. All of us have had a teacher who has made a profound difference in our lives—someone who changed our lives, made us think more deeply, set our feet on the right path. Perhaps it was a teacher we met in a classroom, but it could just have easily been a coach, a youth group leader, a family or community elder, or religious leader. In this project from ReadWriteThink.org, students write a tribute to such a teacher, someone who has taught them an important lesson that they still remember. The personal essays that students write for this lesson are then published in a class collection. Because writing about someone who has been a significant influence is a typical topic for college application essays, the lesson’s extensions include resources for writing more traditional, formal papers.

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<http://bit.ly/1NPOWvY>

Below are specific rhetorical strategies common in successful blog posts, with prompting questions and an illustrative example, to serve as models for the kinds of public writing we're advocating for. While these posts are from *Writers Who Care*, the strategies apply to any advocacy effort.

Story

What are you passionate about? What do you leave school still wondering, worrying, or feeling excited about? As teachers we witness compelling, vivid, and evocative stories daily; how can you bring those stories out and share them with a wider audience?

In Rebekah Shoaf's (2016) post, "Why I Wouldn't Teach *Huck Finn* Anymore: Course Design as a Sociopolitical Act," Shoaf describes an epiphany she had about the role of a specific text in her course. She explains, "That realization began to unravel the way I thought about my course as a whole, from the texts we read to what my students wrote and for whom" (Shoaf, 2016, n.p.). Her emotional post prompts readers to consider, among other issues, how impactful cultural events and teacher knowledge of students can inform text selection.

Purpose

What do you want to accomplish by sharing your story? Are you writing to pull at the hearts of your readers? To gain the support of others/power in numbers in aims of achieving a desired goal? To share something that works for you and may for others, too?

In Deb Kelt and Amber Warrington's (2015) post, "Counterstories from the Writing Classroom," the authors aim to counter negative media representations of teaching and "urge writing teachers to consider and embrace counterstories of their work—to find hope and possibility in the nuanced work we do with both student writers and colleagues in public schools" (n.p.). They give examples of how they and other colleagues have brought change to their classrooms and offered authentic writing experiences for their students.

Audience

What issues do teachers at your school and parents in your neighborhood care about and discuss? What do you think they should know about, yet don't?

In Gholdy Muhammad's (2015) post, "Black Girls' Lives Matter—In Writing, Too," Muhammad demonstrates how writing classrooms can support and deepen the national conversations about race, by providing students, in this case specifically black female students, opportunities to explore their own identities through their writing. She explains, "Our goal is not just to help students be better writers, but for them to also have the confidence to use writing as a personal and sociopolitical tool" (n.p.).

Research

How can you link your story to current research, in ways that make research accessible to an audience not versed in educational jargon? Consider using direct links to sources and organizations, rather than citations.

In Matthew Kilian McCurrie's (2015) post, "When Shift Happens: Teaching Adaptive, Reflective, and Confident Writers," McCurrie illustrates how he uses elements of classical rhetoric in his writing courses to help prepare his students for writing tasks and genres that are rapidly changing as a result of changing technologies. His moves to revise his writing courses have been motivated in part by the research generated and presented by the field of writing studies, research that he urged other teachers to consider as they plan what their students should be asked to do.

Raising Our Voices

If, as Yettick (2015) proposes, there is "a more universal need for the accessible communication of research" (p. 182), then educators, and other stakeholders in public education, need to use their voices to share their expertise and experiences to help the public better understand the conditions middle level teachers and students work under and the conditions they deserve.

Susan Lazear shares a growing sense of helplessness felt by educators across the country when faced by the onslaught of standardized testing. Her story of Autumn is heartfelt, heartbreaking, and perhaps most importantly, it was heard. Readers responded, and Lazear's story was shared with more than 6,000 people through blogging and social media. Her post was powerful not just because of the eloquence of her writing or her focus on advocacy; readers were touched by Autumn's story because every teacher has a student like her.

Raise your voices: speak back to policy, highlight your struggles as moments of reflection, and share your compelling teacher stories in a public forum.

Raise your voices: speak back to policy, highlight your struggles as moments of reflection, and share your compelling teacher stories in a public forum. Become a writer who advocates for students and the profession, and finds validation and empowerment in the process.

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