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## Writing as (Self) Service and Witness: Exploring the Experience of a Teacher Educator Writing Group


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## **Writing as (Self) Service and Witness: Exploring the Experience of a Teacher Educator Writing Group**

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During our (three teacher educators) work as editors with *Writers Who Care*, an online peer reviewed blog focused on teaching and learning to write, we met monthly to publish blogs focused on the importance of writing for connection, building communities of writers, and inviting authors to serve as writing mentors. In an August meeting, Sarah posed the question, “We spend a lot of time lifting up the writing of our students. What are we doing to take care of our writing selves?” At that point, we decided to foster our own writing by meeting in an informal writing group. We needed time to process dramatic shifts we were feeling personally and professionally for ourselves and with others. As a result, we decided to meet monthly to chat, write, share, and discuss. No one brought a work in progress, but they could. No one had to pre-read or prepare a critique. We alternated facilitators. One hour. Once a month. Together. For us.

During our first official writing group, we took time to write about our own writing and the writing instruction we facilitated with students. After that writing time, we each summarized and shared excerpts of what we wrote. Amy stated:

Academic writing is the main kind of writing that I do now. It helps me with my teaching practice. Creative writing would help me process more, but I don’t have time. I suppose there are seasons for our life for different kinds of writing.

Similarly, Sarah shared, “Teachers are not asking their students about their writing identities. Students are typically drawn to Fanfiction. What happens when writing feels like it is in the margins? Maybe it is okay to let them live in the margins?” Due to current events (e.g., murder of George Floyd and Pandemic), Eileen shared the following:

Some of my classes lend themselves to topics of social justice more than others. Have I invited these topics into my classrooms? What we read in

class lends itself to our writing. It feels more natural to write through ideas related to social justice.

As seen from this first meeting, we valued the time to write to help us process the needs of our students and selves, and to talk about writing and writing instruction with others. As researchers of writing education, we became interested in learning more about what a writing group that centers the needs of self might do for English Language Arts (ELA) teacher educators. With that in mind, we recorded our discussions, engaging in a collaborative autoethnography (Goldman, 1993; Ngunjiri et al., 2010), or CAE, about this writing experience. CAE is an investigation of self “through a constant mirroring” to understand the “situated, socially constructed nature of the self, and by extension, the other” (Foley, 2002, p. 473). The decision to create a research project out of this writing group gave us permission to not feel guilty about spending time writing in ways that served us, rather than serving our students or institution directly. The blending of purposes served us well because it taught us about the importance of writing as self-service, which offered the unexpected relational opportunity of witnessing one another in the act of writing, as we describe in this article. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore how three university faculty members made sense of themselves and the world around them through a writing group focused on writing as self-service and witness.

To begin, we dive deeper into our first meeting via Zoom to gain an understanding of how our group worked and to learn more about us as writers and teacher educators. For the first half of the writing group, we used this reflective writing prompt to get us started: How are we using writing as a way of making sense of our practice? Halfway through the year, we decided that we wanted more freedom to write about a topic of our choice, in a genre of our choice. For half the meeting, we wrote. At this time, we turned our cameras off and muted our microphones. During the other half, we read what we wrote (or not), talked about the content of the writing, and discussed our writing process. And we responded to one another, mirroring what we heard, sharing what we observed. We each took turns facilitating the meeting.

### **Study Participants**

Amy, a white, cis-gender, female, is a full professor at a southeastern university and a former high school English teacher. She joined *Writers Who Care* to support teachers in publishing about their expertise in teaching writing. In an early meeting, Amy summarized how she used the writing time:

I just ended with, *I don't write creatively much anymore*, and I have tried to so many times, but ever since I had children—you have all these balls in the air, and you have to give up one in order for another one to happen. And

right now, I just can't give up anything. I have a friend who tells me: "Amy, there are seasons. Your life has seasons. One day that season will come..." I do wish I had more time because I used to do it a lot. That creative outlet helps me process in ways that academic writing doesn't.

Sarah, a white, cis-gender, female, was fairly new to national service work in her second year with *Writers Who Care*. She is a former junior high teacher and assistant professor in her second year at a south Midwestern university. After listening to Amy talk about finding time to write, she said:

Amy, when you talked about seasons for writing, this struck me because... I keep wanting to get up at 5 or 6 a.m. and only write creatively. I have a second book in me, a story noodling since I wrote my first one and feel like I have to get up earlier to do it because it never happens once the workday begins. I don't want to wait for the season. I want to make my own seasons.

Eileen, a white, cis-gender, female, had been with *Writers Who Care* the longest, since 2015. She began our writing group as an assistant professor serving a rural community in a state and geographic landscape different from past places where she had lived and worked, the focus of much of her writing in this group. She would become associate professor and department chair of a different south Midwestern university during our writing group. Eileen shifted our discussion to our writing group protocols:

Eileen: Part of the reason we wanted to have this time to write is to say, we just need to show up here and we can write rather than adding one more thing to do before, so I like prioritizing more time to write and for discussion.

Amy: It will be nice to have discussions about our writing.

Sarah: Amy, were you saying we could discuss not just what we wrote, but how it felt to write?

Here, we explicitly stated that we wanted time to write, time to discuss our writing, and time to talk about how it felt to write. We were all negotiating our time and purpose for writing, and scholarship was ever-present. Sarah was working towards reappointment. Eileen was working toward tenure. Amy, well established in her career, was considering the influence and trajectory of her scholarship and service. However, we all felt the desire to write in ways that served us, alongside each other. We wondered why it originally felt selfish, even wrong when we were, in fact, writing teacher educators and perhaps ought to have been considering facets of our writerly selves beyond or with scholarly production. How do we support teachers

of writers when we are not actively exploring various dimensions of what and how we come to writing?

### **Writing Group Context**

*Writers Who Care* is an online peer reviewed blog organized and maintained by members of the Commission on Writing Teacher Education, a working group of the English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE). Although our experiences vary due to geography and rank, we face common challenges pertaining to writing professionally, while keenly aware of the hypocrisy in not living ideals we dream for classroom writing teachers (e.g., writing in multiple ways, allowing for creativity). Our goal in coming together to write each month for an hour felt radical. The context of COVID-19 and online teaching prompted us to imagine a research project to fill the need for scholarship while investigating tensions stirred by personal and professional concerns somewhat unique for higher education writing teacher educators. Engaging in the act of writing alongside one another was not to derive generalizable insights. Instead, we wanted time to think about writing together.

With that in mind, we engaged in CAE to explore the following: In what ways did this writing group help us (three teacher educators) make sense of ourselves and the world around us? This exploration grounds the affective nature of our experiences as writing teacher educators and academics with personal experiences in the act of writing.

To illustrate what we learned, we present three collages (Elbow, 1999)—one for each of us—to make visible scenes that contributed to our personal and collective experiences. Collage writing is a collection of various pieces of discourse (dialogue, reflective writing, and fiction) that does not explicitly connect fragmented pieces. We include a brief analysis of each, interpreting how we have come to understand the significance of the writing and group discussion processes. We conclude with a discussion of common themes and implications for organizing and understanding writing group practices.

### **Writing Group Scholarship**

Much scholarship has focused on teacher-writing groups, highlighting how those communities provide a sense of motivation, accountability, audience, and support for writing projects (Dawson, 2016; Hicks et al., 2013). Teacher-writers often form groups on their own or in connection with a National Writing Project site, university, or school/district. These writing groups often meet virtually or in person to share drafts and support one another in their writing goals (Hicks et al., 2013; Hicks et al., 2016; Smith & Wrigley, 2012; 2015).

Sometimes these writing groups are focused on improving professional practice. Research has shown that when teachers engage in reflective writing

practices, they are better able to use their own writing experiences to inform pedagogy, respond to students' individual needs, empathize with students, and provide classroom models (Dahl, 1992; Dawson et al., 2013; Murray, 1985). Writing also helps teachers inquire into and share teaching practices with other professionals (Hicks et al., 2013; Whitney et al., 2012), such as enacting anti-racist curriculum and critical pedagogy during challenging contexts (Vega et al., 2023). Improving professional practice also means writing in ways that heal within "an ever-changing landscape of schooling in a digital age, especially as teachers are processing a time of social and political unrest" (Crandall & Early, 2023, p. 5).

Other times, these writing communities support the varied purposes that teachers have for writing, such as making sense of personal and professional experiences, having fun, interacting with others, exploring ideas, creating, and/or healing trauma (Dawson et al., 2013). Such context provides rich opportunities for teacher-writers to explore and invent writing practices and overcome restraints. For many, writing groups become a caring space that allows members to engage in writing and discussion about writing during difficult times (Owen & Whitney, 2022).

### **Writing as Self-Service**

Writing, then, does not always have to be in service of the profession or students (Dawson et al., 2013). Instead, it can be a "breathing space" for teachers to be and become themselves in new and unrestricted ways (Fallon & Whitney, 2016; Dawson et al., 2013), which we call *writing as self-service* in this article. In addition, members can experience how personal and professional writing acts open opportunities for teacher writers to explore experiences in a variety of ways that ultimately add to learning and writing (Whitney, 2009). Overall, such groups follow Yagelski's (2011) call to engage in the act of writing together, which we call *writing as witness*.

The metaphor of witness is described in the literature in relation to trauma, specifically the seminal work of *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992). They explore the critical work of witnessing testimonies of trauma, particularly Holocaust literature grounded in three stances of witness: 1) testimony is a written record of an experience; 2) the reader has some emotional distance from the testimony being offered; and 3) that the listening of another's lived experiences ask the reader serve as witness. A reader's witnessing may involve an empathic emotional response that acknowledges the importance of the story or expression shared. Dutro (2008) adapted this witnessing stance to consider stories from classrooms as forms of testimony and witness. She calls this "pedagogical testimony" and "witnessing," theorizing it as a circle rather than exchange of testimony and witness; the reader or listener of the testimony witnesses and then

responds with their own testimony, to then be witnessed, inviting another testimony and so on (Dutro, 2011). Scholarship on trauma-informed teaching practices in higher education propose principles of practice that “recognize students have trauma histories” (Carello & Butler, 2014, p. 1) and suggest educators consult with colleagues as a means of “checking emotional involvement” (Carello & Butler, 2015, p. 271). Educators can benefit from writing and witnessing in their peer group as a way of processing their personal experiences and experiences navigating students’ trauma histories. The writing group offers space to practice witnessing responses to potentially inform engagements with students. As listeners/readers, members of the educator writing group bear witness to the acts and reflections of another writer. Through dialogue, members can validate, connect, and bring in other perspectives, which promote support and care.

Writing groups in higher education typically focus on providing faculty, usually junior faculty, with a supportive environment to share their work and to help one another create publishable manuscripts (Friend & Gonzales, 2009; Page et al., 2012). Specifically, these groups provide accountability, structure, collaboration, motivation, and an increase in scholarly productivity (Page et al., 2012). In addition, these groups can provide a sense of worth and belonging and enhance professional and personal connections in a constantly changing academic environment (Carr et al., 2020).

Less research, however, has examined writing groups for university faculty that focus less on publication and more on writing as an act. This research explores how three university faculty members made sense of themselves and the world around them through a writing group focused on writing as self-service and witness.

### **Our Process**

Collaborative autoethnography allows scholars to explore subjectivity in a collective setting by providing “a scholarly space to hold up mirrors to each other in communal self-interrogation” (Chang et al., 2016, p. 26). Grounded in storytelling, our personal writing provided a means to understand and represent our experiences while also drawing on collaborative inquiry and discussion in our monthly meetings to add further perspectives and meaning-making to the process. CAE allowed us to utilize writing to nurture oneself, or the “auto,” while also recognizing how we were shaped by past and current experiences. Inspired by the work of other collaborative autoethnographers (e.g., Cruz et al., 2020), our collective stories provided allyship with other writing teacher educators and allowed us to position writing as an act rather than a product.

Our process during each writing group meeting included reading aloud our writing and discussing that writing, including how we felt as a writer. During these discussions, we revisited past texts, past experiences, and current events. We emphasized the emotional and connecting nature of content and discussed ways of



being and thinking in the act of writing. We recorded those discussions and took listening notes. As mentioned, the first half of our group meetings focused on a reflective writing prompt but shifted to writing in whatever way served us over the last half of the meetings as our personal preferences surfaced (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Writing Group Routines*

	<b>September - December 2020</b>	<b>January - May 2021</b>
<b>Writing prompts</b>	In what ways are we, teacher educators, using writing as a way of making sense of our practice?	How will writing serve you today?
<b>Meeting sequence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chit chat</li> <li>• Writing, 10 minutes</li> <li>• Share individual writing while peers note-take in the listening document</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chit chat</li> <li>• Writing, 20 minutes</li> <li>• Share individual writing while peers note-take in the listening document</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Artifacts</b>	Four writing entries from each other (one per month)	Four writing entries from each other (one per month)
	Four recorded sessions of group discussion (one per month)	Four recorded sessions of group discussion (one per month)
	Listening document with notes from every session	Listening document with notes from every session

For analysis, we initially explored how this year-long writing group shaped our identity work as educators and writers. By *year-long*, we mean a U.S. academic year that typically begins in August and is divided into two semesters. We found common themes across our sessions through individual and collaborative open and focused coding which informed our analysis. Open coding involved coding texts in an unrestricted fashion. Focused coding allowed us to progressively reduce the number of codes through the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As we came together as a group, we refined this process and identified four ways that we engaged in writing identity work: (a) negotiating writing-world



tensions, (b) repositioning writers to witness, (c) coming out of crisis mode and (d) naming how/that writing serves us.

We found, along with advice from colleagues, that our analysis method and findings failed to adequately represent collaborative, affective, joyful experiences (and tensions) we surfaced when writing together. Data were telling us how we, as teacher educators, made sense of ourselves and the world in a writing group focused on self-service and witness. As a result, we engaged in another iteration of analysis that included examining and re-examining the data, or artifacts, to create our individual collages, which we present next. We then drew on our charted themes to consider how these collaged scenes held up in our second analytic phase. During that analysis, two overlapping themes emerged, which we describe in our discussion.

### **Our Collage of Writing Sessions with Analysis**

Elbow (1999), defines collages as “single texts that consist of multiple and somewhat disconnected fragments” (p. 8). The process, sometimes described as an “art of assemblage,” (Root, 2001, p. 24) includes gathering artifacts, sorting through “best bits,” and freely cutting but not rewriting toward an “intuitive and associative” order (p. 8). He writes:

A TV documentary on cancer. It’s really a collage. It opens with shots of a funeral—people standing around the side of a grave: a close-up of a widow, and then over to the coffin being lowered. Cut to a sequence of cells under a high powered microscope—time-lapse so that we see the cells multiplying and going crazy. It’s all a hodge-podge--completely “disorganized”—no connectives. But it works. (p. 8)

We borrowed from this idea to write our findings because we wanted to show the readers how we experienced our writing group meetings. A traditional academic findings section with brief excerpts, we believed, took away from the intimacy and vulnerability that made these meetings significant. Instead, we put together different segments of the meetings into a whole to illustrate what the meeting represented to us and how they helped us to make sense of our writing lives. Each collage is followed with analysis related to a specific theme. As a reader, we hope you will read the collages and imagine yourself as one of us. Similar to what Elbow (1999) stated, imagine the collages like documentary illustrating significant aspects of the writing group experience. After the collage, readers see how we then made sense of those collages systematically and analytically.

Below, italicized portions are synchronous, private writing that each member crafted during the first 10 to 20 minutes of a meeting. Our group protocol left it to the writer to write on paper or in a digital notebook and to share out the writing verbatim or in summary (We did not record these parts of the meeting). The

indented text below italicized writing represents excerpts from recorded discussions that followed the read/share out among members; each member pulled sections of the discussion that supported evolving, personal inquiry into writing as a teacher educator. Following each individual collage, we demonstrate an important feature of CAE: the mirroring and interpretation of how, together, we uncover what is happening in the collage (i.e., analysis).

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**Amy: A Full Professor Exploring the Past to Make Sense of the Present**  
**September 10, 2020, Amy**

*Most of my writing is academic. Right now, I am working on edits for a paper with two other colleagues. We wrote a paper about critical talk moves in critical conversations in ELA classrooms. This work has helped me make sense of how to enact critical work in my own teaching practices - through dialogue.*

*I want/need more time to just reflect on my own practice. And to write creatively... But my life is so full right now...I feel like I'm missing out—want more time to record things, articulate what is happening, share it with my family, etc.*

Amy: Just recently I was reminded why I decided to do this piece because it is helping me make sense out of how those things play out in my own practice but also at a bigger systemic level and what can we as educators do. And one of those things is to write to illuminate these kinds of issues across time and raise questions. I have a friend who tells me, “Amy, there are seasons in your life and one day there will be a season for that [personal writing].” I do wish that I had more time to do that. I used to do it a lot and I think that that creative outlet helps me process in ways that academic writing doesn't.

**October 8, 2020, Amy**

*Right now I am teaching a teacher research class. In this class, they write a proposal for a teacher research project and then they do that research next semester and write a final paper with findings and implications. For me, a lot of this class is focused on teaching teachers how to write academically... I love teaching this class because the research can be an empowering experience and so can the writing. In fact, many of these projects have been used to make changes in departments.*

**December 10, 2020, Amy**

*I did have a good conversation at an NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] commission meeting about the online dialogues that we do. Here, students read a similar article and write about it on our website. Students across*

*the country then read each other's reflections and comment on them. That way they are engaged in an online conversation. I think that this has been a really interesting way for students to write about these hard topics and be in conversation with others who might have different experiences than their own.*

Sarah: What have you noticed emerging from that? Do they feel confessional in nature? Was it academic in nature, because you know they know that there is an audience?

Amy: I would say that people tell stories that are related to the particular question at hand, especially those that have a story to tell in relation to the readings... It is interactive; it's a way to communicate with each other and have a conversation and construct knowledge together about this huge social issue that is going on in our world.

### **February 2, 2021, Amy**

*I've been doing this neighborhood assignment with my students... over the past five years it has morphed into me thinking about where I grew up and how my whiteness shaped, well everything. I grew up in a racist and violent neighborhood in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the deep south. All of the violence in the neighborhood was committed by white people who lived in the area or surrounding areas. However, the white people were afraid of going into nearby neighborhoods where predominantly Black people lived. My goal with the writing is to illustrate the micro and macro issues going on that we still experience today.*

### **April 21, 2021, Amy**

*"Hey mom, we're bored. What should we do?" Veronica yelled into the back door that was wide open, letting out the cold air. It was the second month of summer with no school to keep us occupied. She brushed her blond bangs out of her eyes and looked towards the door for an answer.*

*"Don't know. I'm cooking dinner. Want to help?" Mom had her apron tied around her waist. Her short, brown hair was wet at the tips from sweat.*

*"Huh? Can't hear you," Veronica winked, and we laughed. Cooking definitely wasn't the answer to our boredom.*

*Dad took a drag from his cigarette and said, "Why don't we go for a walk around the neighborhood before dinner."*

*Dad just got back from being away for the weekend at some kind of civil war reenactment conference. Mom was much more relaxed since he returned. Last night she made a pallet on the floor of my sister's room, and we all slept together. Her arms wrapped tightly around our waists. She claimed she didn't sleep well when Dad was gone.*

*We knew that she was afraid of The Highland Rapist. We were too. Too many times we had found a trash can, turned upside down underneath my window. A perfect makeshift stool for a peeping Tom. We knew that the rapist would enter houses late at night while everyone was asleep. He was often armed and wore a ski mask. Women would wake to a stranger in their beds who threatened their lives. Many times, their kids were sleeping in the other rooms. After the cops caught him, and after 12 reported rapes, we learned that he was a young, white male who used a flashlight and screwdriver to break into the old homes. He was convicted and sentenced to life.*

Amy: I've continued working on the same thing... I just want it to end because I'm kind of tired of working on it... I think one of the reasons I was resisting it was because the piece is about my whiteness and growing up in a racist, violent neighborhood and what that means for me as a person and thinking critically about it. And recently I have been working on an academic article that also talks about my whiteness... It's been a lot of learning. I was thinking about how there is a lot of anti-racist work that focuses on white people's experiences and less on the experiences of people of color. And here I am also writing a personal piece about my experience as a white person, and I wondered if the world was too saturated with these stories. I asked myself: when do you know if your story is important to tell or harmful to tell? ... And it goes back to just this idea of what is the purpose of this writing? Is anybody else going to see it or is it just for me to make sense of my own experience? And it made me think that all kinds of writing are hard and they can all be a lot to work through.

In these narratives and discussions Amy foregrounds two main points about how this writing process helped her make sense of herself and the world around her. First, she consistently discussed the importance of writing in multiple ways and finding time and space for that as an academic. For example, her reflective writing and discussions illustrated how academic writing provided learning opportunities for her, specifically about critical conversations and equity practices in education. She also saw writing as a way of illuminating these issues to other educators. In addition, Amy discussed how she attempted to open opportunities for her graduate students to write in scholarly ways through a teacher research paper. She believed that this was empowering work and that it helped educators, including herself, make needed changes to their practice. She also discussed how she worked with a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) commission to facilitate and engage in a bi-annual online dialogue about specific social justice topics. She made the point that she and students benefited from engaging in a written dialogue because they were able to construct knowledge together about an important social issue, such as trauma, and to hear different people's perspectives and experiences.

Thus, over four meetings, Amy talked about the importance of writing scholarly articles, teacher research articles, and written dialogues to make sense of education and our place in it.

With that said, she also expressed a desire to write more creatively and reflectively to make sense of her personal life as well. Her writing and the discussion foregrounded how this writing helped her make sense of past and personal experiences, which she found worthwhile and also difficult. Ultimately, she returned to a piece that highlighted the memory of her father within the context of a tumultuous neighborhood. She looked at this opportunity as a way to make sense of the racism and violence that occurred in this neighborhood and how it shaped her understanding of her own race and whiteness in general. However, after grappling with an academic piece about how her whiteness shaped how she facilitated critical conversations in a teacher inquiry group, specifically her silence, she questioned the purpose in writing the creative non-fiction piece. She understood that it was helping her make sense of her own experiences but questioned the need for it to be shared with a wider audience. Overall, she made the point that personal writing can be a challenging and emotional experience, can overlap with academic writing, and can simply be for the purpose of learning more about past and current experiences.

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**Eileen: Associate Professor Sorting Through Place  
September 10, 2020, Eileen**

*If I had to think through my varying courses, I think I am integrating social issues best in my YA [Young Adult] lit course, where ideas are presented in texts and then a major tenet of the course is personally connecting with the ideas. Why is this? Do I need novels with controversial issues to be present in order to feel more comfortable bringing them up with students? Or is it just that the content is actually there on its own so it is more natural as far as the course goals?*

**October 8, 2020, Eileen**

*Giving our students time and space to think through the events in the world is needed, but also seems to be in opposition to how writing gets positioned, even in teacher prep programs. There is such a focus on key assessments and demonstrating competency that the act of processing gets lost. Writing in pursuit of reflection still seems easier to integrate in an ELA methods type course where narrative and creative writing have more of a role. Lately I have not even given myself a space to use writing for processing. Talking about ideas related to social justice and the presidential election has seemed more doable than writing about them.*

**December 10, 2020, Eileen**

*I wish, as a teacher educator, I had more breaks to reflect on my practice through writing. As is, breaks seem to be the main time that I achieve this work. Which I guess also makes sense: I need a break from the daily grind and teaching strains (which this semester were many) to really reflect. One more note: these writing times this semester have forced me to take a break and reflect, which has also been restorative and needed.*

**February 4, 2021, Eileen**

*In my region, students are usually very open to talking about injustices related to poverty and dialect: two ways in which many of my students are marginalized. As a teacher educator, I often use these topics for gateways into more difficult conversations. The first text that we read in my YA Literature class is intentional—The Benefits of Being an Octopus—because it directly addresses the daily struggles of living in poverty and also addresses outsiders' misconceptions about people in poverty. My students have stories to share of their own, or at least of friends and people close to them. The novel allows them to connect and explore ideas around injustice.*

*But conversations around race and sexual orientation in particular can be met with more resistance. Though I have many students who are open to and interested in having these conversations, most would claim that their families are not interested.*

**April 8, 2021, Eileen**

*I read Hood Feminism recently by Mikki Kendal. It just came out last year and she said something at one point that kind of hit me...and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it but she said it's one thing to say that you care about important causes like racial injustice and things like that and you're an ally, but if you aren't willing to confront your close-minded or even openly racist aunt at a family gathering, then maybe you just don't care enough. And I heard that and was like [makes visual of sword in chest]...*

Amy: I like what you said about the process, how a lot of writing is reading or listening to other things and how you process that and then when you're able to sit down and have the time you, you know, you bring whatever is on your mind to the table and it certainly influences how you're writing and making sense of it.

Eileen: Yeah, you know, had I written the whole draft a month ago, I wouldn't have those sort of fresh new ways of thinking about things in my mind.



Amy: I know it kind of makes you think “when do these things end?” Ha, you know, I guess a piece of writing could never end.

Sarah: Eileen, how does your body feel after having done that?

Eileen: It feels good!

Sarah: Just checking in after—

Eileen: Yeah, like I said I knew the document that I was going to be writing in today, but I had absolutely no idea about where I was going to be going with it. But it kind of allowed me to get some of my thoughts things that I’ve been...you know you read something, hear something and you keep thinking about that and you’ve got it in the back of your mind and so I was able to kind of synthesize those, if you will, or get them on paper some things I’ve been thinking about and so that felt good.

These excerpts highlight the progression of processing of Eileen’s teaching and connections to her context, which was made evident in the group discussion and Eileen’s personal writing.

The writing from the first semester represents a lot of Eileen’s questioning: why she feels certain ways, why her students respond in certain ways, how her courses should be structured. The intersection of the personal pulls within a professional endeavor was due to her identity within the space where she was teaching and feelings of being an outsider in some ways from her students. Though her students were, like her, white and predominantly female, their lived experiences, families, dialects, and worldviews were different from her own. Our writing group provided the necessary space to sort through tensions she experienced when teaching, tensions that were heightened by social and political unrest in the fall of 2020.

Building on her fall semester questioning and reflections, the prompt that asked how writing could *serve us* during the second half of the year allowed Eileen to use writing to more deeply reflect on teaching experiences that she had during the previous semester. With no clear plans for the writing outcome or product, Eileen started a (potentially) academic piece that felt far more personal than a typical academic article. In order to produce academic writing about what was occurring in the classroom, she needed to first engage with the personal elements to provide herself time for processing and reflection. In this way, writing was positioned as an act that allowed for nurturing and further understanding one’s self. As the discussion on 4/8/21 suggests, the questioning and mirroring by Sarah and Amy that ensued after she shared her writing each month, prompted her to dig



deeper to consider how she used writing to make sense of her teaching and her place in her community.

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### **Sarah: Assistant Professor, Surfacing Fictions**

#### **September 20, 2020, Sarah**

*I wonder if I am disconnected from their writing because of teaching online. I cannot see their notebooks, the way they hold their pens. I cannot hear them in the break or Zoom rooms reading their journals—no laughing...The feedback, reciprocity of the classroom, shared physical space with our bodies—it all has a sort of energy and real-ness, maybe corporeal...I am struck now about what to do—maybe there is nothing to do. Maybe the writing students do during the write-in is for them—not me—that I don't need to nor did I ever need to know what they wrote. Have I been selfish? But don't we teach because we get something from witnessing their writing lives?*

Eileen: Sarah, something that you said I found interesting and almost mirrors some of our thinking about ourselves as writers is...if I caught it right. I thought I heard you say that some of your students were drawn more to fanfiction as opposed to other types of responses to literature that other types you may have provided, but that students were drawn to fanfiction. And I guess that has me thinking about each of us and the different types of writing we are saying that we are drawn a little more toward or want to make time for, so we are trying to do something with our students that is hard for us to do. Trying to do something with students or make them—maybe not make—push our students to try different types of writing and process big ideas.

#### **October 8, 2020, Sarah**

*A journal during the write-in at method class on Tuesday night; the poem for the October open write; the comments on lesson plans; the revisions to the ABAR [anti-racist anti-bias] article with E.R. [Educational Researcher]; the reminder for the LGBTQ+ book group; emails for projects. I wrote a lot today -- ... because I am in relationships, because I am trying to keep conversations going with other teachers... Teaching, for me, has always depended on others and this sense of needing someone at the table waiting for me, welcoming whatever I bring. It's the same for writing. I have found that I do not really write for myself... -- as if the writing itself is only valuable if it is connected to another in some way...*

Eileen: When you first started listing all the things, I wrote *writing opportunities* and then I put *or obligations* because it depends. You can look

at it or think about it in different ways that feels like both to me at different times, at least.

Amy: I feel like that is all part of figuring out your purpose in your career early on. I was like that, too. I did a lot because I was thinking about what I wanted to focus on, what's my purpose here. Then, once you figure that out, you can ask yourself if this thing is fitting my purpose or not. I like it, but it is not doing what I need it to do, and then you can start saying no to those things without being afraid. I don't know how others feel.

Sarah. I worry that if I say no that you won't ask me again.

### **December 10, 2020, Sarah**

*After our last session, I came across a Facebook message about a writing workshop with Kate Messner, a MG [Middle Grades] author. I realized that I have been doing a lot of PD [Professional Development] but not participating in much... I signed up. It was last Saturday. I wrote about my character's bedroom; about my character's "knot" i.e., who or what tightens it, who or what loosens it... I felt sort of like me—not a teacher/educator/researcher—but me.*

Eileen: Sarah, I am thinking about you as a writer and not as a teacher writer...you giving yourself time and space just to be a writer that is, in a way, developing. Think about what you've already learned about that and what has developed you as a teacher-writer and practitioner. So it is related. I see it as being related even if it has to—it's people not understanding the teaching of writing who are saying those things [don't write a book] that you need to be focusing on academia.

Sarah: It is a call to educate others on this [relatedness of writing for different purposes], but it was also really joyful. That is how it felt, and I was out of the academic world for those couple hours, and it was very, to use your word, Eileen, *restorative* for me to do that.

### **February 4, 2021, Sarah**

*My name is Fin, short for Finnigan. I really don't know where that name came from. My mom's name is Fran. She said once that she liked the sound of Fin and Fran because it is "alliterative" which means the F sound is repeated. I guess it could be "ph," too. My mom always fancied herself a poet, always writing in a notebook tucked away in the corner of wherever we were living. The notebook would appear out of a pocket or a bag or a corner or between the cushions on the sofa. Still, I never called my mom Fran. I called her Mom, so she never really heard the F of Fran and the F in Fin in the same conversation unless my grandma was nearby, in which case, she was called Francesca, which, my mom said defeated the*

*other purpose for naming Finnigan but calling me Fin, because Fin is one syllable and Fran is one syllable. That is something like meter or rhythm. She said she wanted us, as mother and son, to have a rhythm of being, of always saying what we mean and meaning what we say. I am not sure if she likes the simplicity of Fin and Fran—just the two of us, two syllables because Finnigan and Francesca are three syllables each, a trio. We are not a three. And because of that, we are not a two anymore either. And that’s all I have to say about that.*

Sarah: Well, I went to my story. I had a blank page and all these notes from December, and I didn’t think about it at all until we got here today, and I wrote almost 1000 words in the past 20 minutes...I was doing something you were doing, Amy. Zooming in and zooming out... I enjoyed it a lot and I, kind of, don’t want to leave it.

Amy: I am glad your head’s back in it.

Across the scenes, Sarah knows but doesn’t name the ways academic and creative writing can serve her—as though writing cannot be at once academic and creative. This perceived binary is something that Eileen helps Sarah recognize in the excerpt about students writing fanfiction. The fiction Sarah’s students are drawn to—perhaps as escape—is precisely the writing Sarah felt she couldn’t do during the first semester due to academia expectations. Witnessing Sarah’s felt tensions, Amy supports Sarah in “figuring out your purpose,” and Eileen invites Sarah to “think about what you’ve already learned.”

By the end of the writing group, Sarah used the meeting time to write fiction. For Sarah, writing her novel meant stepping away from research and service projects with others to write something for only her, for only her eyes (and the group). Sarah admitted that she didn’t write unless someone was waiting for her or welcoming her writing; this group was waiting for her, giving her permission and space to choose how writing would serve her, and witnessing her in the act of creating.

## **Discussion**

Writing teacher educators have a unique experience as they are writers, teachers of writing, and scholars of writing education. For us, that meant writing as self-service and witness. Below, we discuss how those two themes emerged from the three collages.

### **Writing as Self-Service**

Across the three collages, we found that we all valued having time to write in ways that served us, what we call writing as self-service. There was no goal of publication or rigorous critique at the forefront but rather a commitment to

embodying the practices we ask of the pre- and in-service teachers with whom we work in our service to others. Indeed, we posit that strong teachers of writers are those who write. The act of writing can take many forms, which we share with teachers (e.g., journaling, social media engagement, creative writing, practitioner journal articles, blogging, and family newsletters). However, as teacher educators with research expectations, we found that we pushed aside or undervalued other forms and acts of writing that could and do serve our whole writerly self. In other words, creative writing helps our research, and our research writing helps us with our sense of audience.

In our writing sessions, there was no pressure to serve students or our institution, as other teacher-writer groups have created for each other (Fallon & Whitney, 2016; Dawson et al., 2013). For example, Eileen described her written reflections about teaching as nurturing. As mentioned, this writing time gave her permission to reflect on connections between students and content, specifically during a tumultuous time. For Sarah, she was able to return to a piece of fiction that she longed to work on. This time allowed her to develop the main character in her story, better understand the situation he was in, and develop other characters in the story. Within this fiction, we noticed that she was processing her move to Oklahoma and integrating memories from her life in Chicago along with her appreciation for poetry. She created characters to talk about the move and adjust to unfamiliar surroundings. Amy worked on a piece of creative nonfiction that helped her make sense of how the violent and racist neighborhood that she grew up in shaped her whiteness. Inevitably, this story related to her academic writing, which raised questions about what stories need to be told and when writing is purely for personal growth as opposed to publication. Thus, the group brought to light, as other teacher-writer groups have done, that personal and professional writing can open space for writers to explore experiences in ways that add to learning and writing (Moffett, 1989; Whitney, 2009).

### **Writing as Witness**

In a writing group, members bear witness to the writing of others. They listen, validate, and sometimes question the writing they receive. Across the three collages, we found that we all discussed the significance of writing as witness. For example, Eileen discussed how her writing helped her to make sense of her instruction during the pandemic and tensions that were heightened by social and political unrest in the fall of 2020—presidential election, murder of George Floyd—in particular (e.g., why she feels certain ways in the classroom, why her students respond in certain ways). During our writing group discussions, we received her story and helped her to make sense of the tensions she was experiencing and validated how her writing was helping her remember her place in her community. For Sarah, the writing group gave her permission to write her

novel, which meant stepping away from research if only for 20 minutes a month. She admitted that she didn't write unless someone was welcoming her writing, and this group was waiting to witness and receive what she wrote. Amy discussed how important it was for her and her students to have opportunities to write in multiple ways (teacher research, academic papers, personal/creative pieces, and written discussions) and for multiple audiences (colleagues, peers). Group discussions helped to articulate these purposes, validating the value in the act of writing, especially for personal growth. These opportunities open space for ourselves and others to bear witness to writing about experiences, to make connections to each other and the world, and belong in a supportive community, as Carr et al. (2020) and their colleagues experienced in their faculty writing group.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

As we closed our final session, we reflected on our time together, capturing the essence of our group:

Sarah: I just need to do it. Sit down and do it. This dedicated time with you helped me.

Amy: It helps to have dedicated time and people with you.

Sarah: Accountability.

Amy: Support.

Eileen: It's easy to cancel on yourself.

The significance of this scholarship lies in the support and accountability offered by our writing group and the implications of that for other teacher educators. With regards to practice, we hope that this work encourages other teacher educators to make time to join a writing group dedicated to fostering both the personal and professional sides of our work. Some useful questions for servicing and witnessing include the following: What do I need today? What systems could be put in place to provide peer support and accountability for my ideas? What norms and processes would benefit us?

Like other teacher writing groups initiated or amplified during the pandemic, we found that our collective space for processing and supporting the affective parts of teaching and writing nurtured our beings (Owen & Whitney, 2022). In essence, our togetherness fostered the individual selves that we brought to our separate work environments each day. Sustaining us as writer-teacher educators is necessary for pushing back on the potential for burnout and creating space for the type of work that gives us life. As Amy recalled a conversation

between her and a friend about making room in the present for the work that fills our cup versus saving it for another season in life, we are proud that our personal professional writing group carved a small space in our monthly grind to achieve this cup-filling goal. We hope this paper will encourage other teacher educators to make the same commitment. We recommend meeting with a small group for at least one hour each month to write, talk about the writing, and discuss writing lives and cup-filling practices.

In addition to implications for our practice, our process provides contributions to collaborative autoethnography and traditional notions of academic writing. As described previously, after all our personal writing together, when it came time to collaborate around drafting a manuscript, we fell back into traditional notions of academic writing: thematic coding, data analysis, and a very typical structure of academic paper. Blending thematic and collage findings in the manuscript served our study as it allowed us to consider our data from multiple lenses and to explore new writing possibilities—in our case, trying out our own form of collage (Elbow, 1999) to represent data. Our research has offered a window into the potential for other hybrid approaches to conducting research and writing it up, like poetic inquiry and composite for example. Just as we were inspired by other collaborative autoethnographers who told their stories in unique ways (e.g., Cruz et al., 2020), there is a need for further research by educators across backgrounds and fields to do similar work. Breaking the mold for academic expectations and also the expectations one holds for oneself—and holding up a mirror for others to do the same—can nurture personal and professional souls, as it did for us.

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