

Lawnmowers, Parties, and Writing Groups: What Teacher-Authors Have to Teach Us about Writing for Publication

Whitney offers advice for potential authors that she developed from her own experience and by studying NCTE journal contributors from 1998 to 2008 and then conducting follow-up interviews with the authors.

W

hen I was in my third year teaching high school English, I was fortunate to write a short article for the magazine of a professional development network I was working in. I had written a lot in my life—by that time I had a master’s degree, had written dozens of term papers in English and education, and like many English teachers I had a file full of unsubmitted personal essays and poetry. Still, writing this piece, an article describing a classroom project, felt different. It felt difficult.

It was difficult in that, unlike a graduate course paper in which I wrote for a teacher-as-evaluator, or unlike a poem or essay in which I wrote for a vague “general audience” that I could mostly ignore as I wrote, in crafting a professional article I imagined an audience of smart and critical teacher-peers, distant peers who undoubtedly had more experience than I did, taught more challenging students than I did, and certainly had already thought of anything I might say. *Who am I*, I thought, *to tell another teacher what to do, when really what I need is others to help me know what to do?*

I now work in English education at the university level, and in my professional development work with teachers and in my research I find these same themes. I’ve often heard a similar reaction from teachers who find themselves, in my workshops and graduate courses, challenged to craft a professional article for publication. “Who am I,” they ask me, “to tell another teacher what to do?” In this question I hear both a concern about teacher-peers as an audience *and* a concern about

the teacher-author’s status as a potential author. Do I have the knowledge to say these things, and to this audience? Does my voice sound like the other voices in the journal—smart enough, experienced enough, “academic” enough? Am I free to say in an article what I might say in the hallway at an NCTE Annual Convention? In the lunchroom at my school? Who would want to read it?

For the past few years I have been studying the writing lives of teachers, first analyzing the contributions of teachers to NCTE journals for the ten-year period between 1998 and 2008 (Whitney, “NCTE”) and then surveying and interviewing teacher-authors whose works appeared during that period to learn more about their experiences (Whitney et al.). In this article I want to share some of the things those teacher-writers have taught me about writing for a professional audience, while adding my voice to the many others who have, in the pages of *English Journal*, urged readers to write and submit articles about the work of teaching English.

Lessons from Teacher-Authors

We’ve all heard about this idea of the teacher as writer; see the passionate and fascinating conversation that unfolded in the pages of *English Journal* in 1990 and 1991 for a powerful example (Jost, “Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write”; Jost, “Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write, Revisited”; Christenbury and related letters to the editor; “Should Writing Teachers Write? The Conversation Continues”; “Why Writing Teachers

Should—or Should Not—Write”). The notion that the teacher of writing in particular is bound to engage in writing of his or her own is a central tenet of the National Writing Project. And a number of other organizations promoting teacher inquiry, including the Bread Loaf Teacher Network and work of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, have engaged teachers in composing professional writing for an audience of other teachers and envisioned teachers as powerful voices speaking about teaching to a wider audience of those interested in education. However,

at the present time those examples sometimes seem like shining counterexamples of an overall picture of teachers that’s much less writerly: in the press and in the minds of many education stakeholders, teachers are too often depicted as basically just followers of instructions, and poor ones at that; a teacher is someone who

Writing a professional article is not exactly telling others what to do; it’s describing with complexity one’s own decisions and walking readers through the ideas behind those decisions.

carries out decisions made by a district or state or nation. In this discourse, teachers get positioned as thoughtless, or it’s implied that by thinking and by taking complex views on students and teaching, we’re somehow needlessly muddying the waters of something that would otherwise be quite simple. You and I know that’s an untrue perception and a dangerous perception, but it’s a real perception nonetheless.

Yet in the midst of this, there are teachers writing for publication, inserting their voices into these rich conversations about what education really can be and about the particulars of life in classrooms. I’m impressed by teachers who do this. It’s not easy to do on a practical level, given the working conditions of teachers, and it’s not easy to do on a rhetorical level, either, given the challenges of doing this kind of writing that few teachers encounter in certification or graduate programs. It is this impressed sense that has led me to study why and how teachers write and what they take away from it. From my conversations with teachers about their writing, I would like to share three main points that might be helpful to teacher-authors, and then pass on some of the teacher-authors’ ideas about the benefits they have gained from writing for publication.

1. Don’t fear the lawnmower.

Teachers in the study have explained that in order to write well about their teaching, they have had to overcome what I call the “dandelion feeling.” That is, just as the tallest flower to spring up in the lawn is the one to get its head chopped off, teachers spoke about feeling reluctant to raise themselves up above their colleagues or to presume to tell another teacher how to teach. While it varies from place to place, in many schools the most professionally active teachers, those who attend conferences and lead committees and who read and perhaps even write for journals, feel they must be quiet about these activities. For example, at the NCTE Annual Convention I meet many teachers who are the only ones from their department to attend or even to be members of NCTE. This facet of the culture of teaching discourages us from prescribing to others; we feel like it’s only inside the classroom that you can see what a teacher should do.

Teachers in the study who have been successful in publishing have found a way out of that way of thinking. As they came to find, writing a professional article is not exactly telling others what to do; it’s describing with complexity one’s own de-



© Tatiana Goydenko/Photos.com

cisions and walking readers through the ideas behind those decisions. So in an article describing a classroom practice, it's not a matter of selling the practice to other teachers or even of saying "look at me, I'm so great!" as many of the teacher-authors I work with fear. Instead, it's a matter of saying "here is something interesting that's happening, and here are the problems and potentials I see in it that might be interesting to you." When you simply describe your thinking and practice as carefully and critically as possible, then readers can see for themselves from your discussion how it may and may not apply in their own classrooms.

2. Treat it like a party.

I find it helpful to think about professional writing the way I think of getting ready to attend a party. Elsewhere I have compared calls for manuscripts to party invitations (Whitney, "Opening") that offer details about what to expect at the event. These include not only explicit details such as the time and place but also implicit details such as the level of formality (discernable by font, phrasing, paper quality, etc.) or who else might be in attendance (is this a big party of all one's work associates and neighbors, or an intimate gathering of a few friends?).

When invited to an annual party with people you've socialized with many times before, preparation is routine and even automatic. But in a new situation, or with people you don't know well, you

might scrutinize all available sources of information, including not only the invitation but also "inside informants," others who have gone before and know what the party will be like. For me, my uncertainty about an unfamiliar party takes the form of worrying about what to wear. I am by nature neither outgoing nor fashionable. Although I'm embarrassed to admit it, sometimes when I get ready to go to a party—especially one with a new group of people or where I really feel I have to impress someone—I'll change clothes six or seven times before I go, suddenly self-conscious about how I present my normally low-maintenance self. I also call friends to find out what they're wearing and gauge my own level of dressiness accordingly. More than once I've finally gotten around this by actually showing up with an extra outfit in my car. Before I head inside, I'll drive by once or twice, even peering in the windows if I can, noticing what others are wearing and, if I've dressed too formally or not formally enough, doing a quick change before going in. The minute I'm inside the doors, all my anxiety about my clothes dissolves, and instead I am drawn into the conversations and laughter happening inside.

Writing a professional article for the first time is like this. Uncertainty about the clothing can create all kinds of unnecessary self-consciousness and pre-party drama, where what really matters are the people I get to talk to once inside. Similarly, while beginning teacher-authors tend to get hung up on conventions of an academic article, worrying about MLA or APA format, the right amount and kind of research to cite, and even how to draft an email to an editor, the thing that really matters is the people you get to talk to once inside the broader professional conversation of which a journal is one instantiation.

As a teacher of writing, you already have all the skills you need to learn what you need to know about the party; they are the same skills we ask students to develop and deploy when we engage them in genre analysis. Aspiring article writers are usually told, "Read the journal!" and it is true that successful article writers in the study were usually readers of the NCTE journals and of professional books of the type published by NCTE, Heinemann, and others. However, many did more than read; in most cases they engaged in some systematic and deliberate thinking about the journal. How are the



© Dynamic Graphics/Photos.com

articles set up and organized? In what person and tense are they written, and with what tone? How do they begin? What is the role of the work of others? Are there “inside informants” who have been to this “party” before who can respond to a draft? These questions helped teacher-authors develop mental models of the pieces they were trying to create, and in many cases they helped teacher-authors to stop thinking of their audience as these faceless and intimidating editors and instead as a group of people, people talking about interesting things in ways that no longer seemed foreign. In other words, they used genre analysis, either explicitly or tacitly, to get comfortable with how people act in the professional discourse space.

For advice about writing specifically for *English Journal*, please see Ken Lindblom’s “From the Editor: Tips for English Teachers to Publish in *English Journal*.”

3. Group up.

Almost all the successful authors in the study have worked, at least at first, in a group, whether it was a graduate course, a teacher inquiry community, or a writing group. Other times, a teacher published for the first time alongside a more experienced author who took the lead. Either way, working with

a group can be helpful in several ways. First, they serve simply to force writing to happen at all; having promised something to my group by a certain date, I usually will compose *some* kind of draft by the deadline just to avoid letting my friends and colleagues down.

As we know from our work as teachers, groups also help a writer to understand audience. This works on two

levels: first, in seeking response from a group of live, but safe, readers, we get the chance to find out what readers understand, wonder about, get stuck on as they read a draft. This helps us in a concrete way to make revisions and edit for effective communication. In addition, however, a second benefit of a writing group works more abstractly: having a local and supportive audience of smart teachers

as readers can help us re-envision journal readers as well. We can fire the imaginary, intimidating audience of judges and cynics that sometimes keep us from writing, appointing instead a group of interested and intellectually curious colleagues, critical in their thinking but generous in their intentions.

If you find yourself without a group, you can make one. Teachers in my local area formed the Centre Teacher-Writers (named for our county), a group of K–12 teachers from around the area who meet monthly to write and respond to all manner of professional writing as well as producing a monthly education column for our local newspaper. The group began simply by word of mouth. Elsewhere, teachers have formed writing groups through National Writing Project sites, through connections formed in online spaces such as the English Companion Ning, and virtually anywhere else teachers gather for professional development.

Why Go to All the Trouble?

In some schools, there might be administrators who celebrate teachers as writers or merit pay systems that might reward publication, but for most teachers conditions are otherwise. That raises the question, “Why go to all the trouble?” Considering the many responsibilities of busy teachers, the bottomless crush of student work to respond to—that response itself a hidden outlet for much of teachers’ writing—one may wonder why any teacher makes the effort to publish. The teachers I have studied offer two main answers to that question.

First, writing for publication has helped teacher-authors to feel connected in a meaningful, more active way to a wider professional community beyond that of the local school. In the community of English education as represented by NCTE, for example, this means not just receiving information from NCTE but *being* NCTE and contributing to what it represents: a challenging and interesting community of people who are thinking about the same complex professional issues. Positioning oneself as a teacher-among-teachers in this way can make teaching more interesting, less lonely and frustrating, and broader in scope. It changes the scale of the objective from solely a matter of getting 30 students from one place to another (which is, in and of itself, obviously really important), to

We can fire the imaginary, intimidating audience of judges and cynics that sometimes keep us from writing, appointing instead a group of interested and intellectually curious colleagues, critical in their thinking but generous in their intentions.

also getting the *field* to a place where we can *all* do a better job of that.

Second, many teacher-authors report that finding a professional voice in writing for publication has helped them to find a voice to speak in other venues, too. Maybe nobody locally even reads the article a teacher publishes; certainly parents don't, for example. But having articulated the thinking behind some aspect of teaching to oneself and to one's professional peers makes it easier to defend those practices aloud to parents, or even just to stay committed to them. Do this a few times, and you might like how it feels, and in time find yourself taking leadership on questions that matter to you. This is a version of "author"ity that comes not from readers who read your article but from you.

In light of what I've learned from these teacher-authors, I now think back to my first try at professional writing and find that two critical differences stand out between this writing and the other writing I had done in the past. The first difference was how good it felt to write about what I was doing in my classes at all. Usually, my classroom life felt rushed, ideas and half-considered problems speeding by at an exhausting pace, coupled with a feeling of never really doing anything quite thoroughly enough. But when I worked on the article, somehow time would stop, and I had a sensation of ample time to think about and understand the short classroom episode I was trying to describe. How different it felt to reflect in this way, compared to the rushed pace of everything else in school! Given the pace of teaching English in a public school, I found it extremely difficult to find the time to work on my article at all, but when I did find it, working on the article created a luxuriously contemplative space in my head to think about teaching. And my job didn't have many such spaces.

The second difference between writing the article and other writing I had done was the stance I found myself taking. In my school building, I was a third-year teacher. While I was starting to come in to my own, I was still among the youngest members of the faculty, still reliant on the generous teachers next door for much of my daily teaching practice, and still a junior voice in the conversations we'd have in the department. While I had gotten beyond the "survival mode" of the first few years, and at least I usually had clean laundry and enough

"teacher immunity" to avoid catching every single cold the students brought to school, I still thought of myself as a beginner. However, in the article, I found myself describing exciting work I had been doing with my class, and speaking quite confidently about the rationales for that work and even the problems I was having in that work. In the article, I found myself saying things about the way I was teaching that I might not have tried to say in a meeting of my own English department—mak-

ing statements about the values that inform my teaching practices and the research and theory that have helped me to build those values and practices. Once I had made comments such as these in writing, I found I had a language in my head for making them in person in my school or even in response to relatives and neighbors who questioned teachers and schools in passing conversation. I liked this feeling.

And while these feelings alone would surely have been enough for me to continue in trying to write for an audience of fellow teachers, I now also find them hopeful for our profession as a whole. There are those in the educational conversation who would like to hear less from teachers, leaving deliberations about teaching and learning to "experts" outside the classroom. I hate to see them get their way. Instead, I imagine what is possible when we as a profession find ways to speak about and for ourselves. I hope we will continue the fine tradition of teachers writing in the past 100 years of *English Journal*, building a vision of English teaching and learning informed from *within* the classroom. 

My classroom life felt rushed, but when I worked on the article, somehow time would stop, and I had a sensation of ample time to think about and understand the short classroom episode I was trying to describe.

Works Cited

- Christenbury, Leila. "No Ivory Towers: An Open Letter to Karen Jost." *English Journal* 79.5 (1990): 30–31. Print.
- Jost, Karen. "Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write." *English Journal* 79.3 (1990): 65–66. Print.
- . "Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write, Revisited." *English Journal* 79.5 (1990): 32–33. Print.
- Lindblom, Ken. "From the Editor: Tips for Teachers to Publish in *English Journal*." *English Journal* 100.5 (2011): 10–12. Print.

“Should Writing Teachers Write? The Conversation Continues.” *English Journal* 80.3 (1991): 78–83. Print.
Whitney, Anne Elrod. “NCTE Journals and the Teacher-Author: Who and What Gets Published.” *English Education* 41.2 (2009): 95–107. Print.
———. “Opening Up the Classroom Door: Writing for Publication.” *Voices from the Middle* 16.4 (2009): 17–24. Print.

Whitney, Anne Elrod, Katie Anderson, Christine Dawson, SuYoung Kang, Elsie Olan, Nicole Olcese, and Michael Ridgeman. “Audience Matters: Authority in the Professional Writing of Teacher-Authors.” Manuscript under review. 2011. Print.
“Why Writing Teachers Should—or Should Not—Write.” *English Journal* 79.5 (1990): 25–29. Print.

Anne Elrod Whitney is assistant professor of education at the Pennsylvania State University. She may be reached at awhitney@psu.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Interested in submitting a journal article? Have a lesson plan or teaching idea to share? Learn more about publishing with NCTE at <http://www.ncte.org/write>. Want to have conversations with other educators and authors? Contribute to the NCTE Connected Community: <http://ncte.connectedcommunity.org/>.

Olive Juice

I love alliteration’s tricky licks and the *ahs*
of assonance—time to relax—delicious
fricatives and glottal stops. The blunt
flat hammers of *stab* and *shit*!
Those Anglo-Saxons really knew their,
er, stuff, and the polysyllabic latinates
aren’t too shabby. But rhyme
that chimes, *Ay, ay, ay*, some
subtlety, puhleeeez! And it
amuses me how love and loathe
are close, in sound, anyway,
how “olive juice” said to someone
across a room sounds like “I love you.”
Try it. And no matter how nicely someone
says my full first name, it always
sounds like Mother yelling.

—Susan E. Oringel

© 2012 by Susan E. Oringel

Susan E. Oringel is a writer, poet, and psychologist whose work has appeared in a number of literary journals. She teaches creative writing at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, New York. She offers workshops in the Capital District of New York. She is co-translator for *Messengers of Rain*, a collection of Latin American poems for youth, edited by Claudia Lee (Groundwoods Press, 2002; new bilingual paperback edition, 2011). She may be reached at sueoring@aol.com.