

Mining our Archives: Reflecting on Artifacts to Improve Writing Instruction

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Abstract

By carefully considering our past, we can better adjust our present to improve our future writing and instruction. This article features the reflections of a former high school English teacher and current undergraduate writing methods instructor along with three pre-service English teachers on writing-related artifacts from their personal archives. The co-authors present teaching principles they have developed after reflecting on which writing-related artifacts they've kept, why they've kept those artifacts, and what those artifacts suggest about how we should teach writing. Finally, the co-authors encourage both students and teachers to engage in a similar reflective process and productively dialogue with our writing pasts.

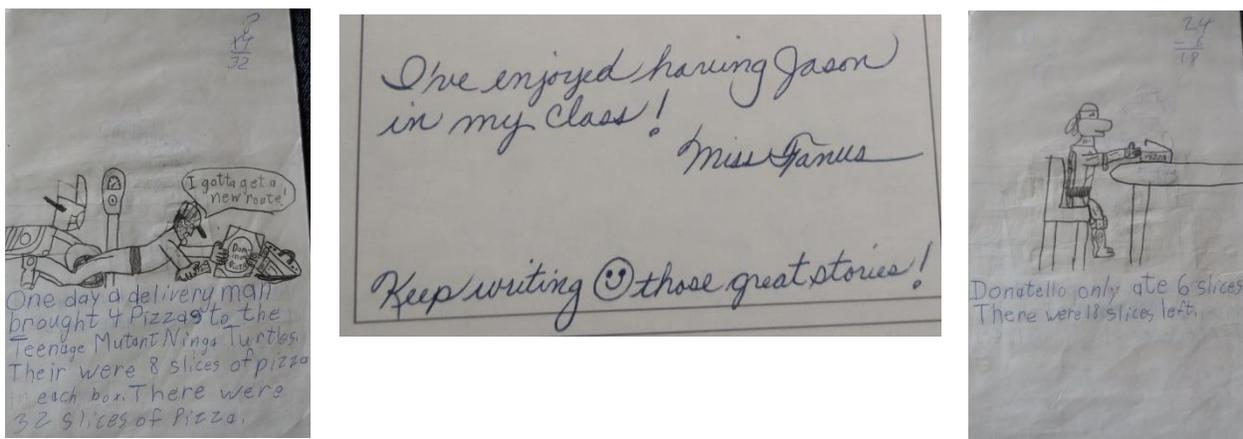
Keywords

autoethnography, writing instruction, writing artifacts, reflection

Introduction

Among the personal archives of my (Jason's) filing cabinet, there's an overstuffed folder dripping with various scrawls and scribbles from my past. These writings include things that I've kept from school as well as items holding extracurricular meaning; there are pieces I've saved myself along with those my parents have passed on during purges after I moved out of my childhood home. In addition to the writing products themselves, I've also kept related artifacts including report card comments and teacher feedback.

Figure 1: Photos from Jason's 5th-grade Report Card and Math Story-Problem Book



At first glance, this folder's contents suggest chaos and disorder, but there are some gems within (see Figure 1) including an encouraging note from my teacher on my 5th grade report card, and my hand-drawn illustrations from a math story-problem book starring the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. My mom, an elementary special education teacher, asked me to create this book so she could use it as a mentor text and model for her students in the creation of their own.

Besides nostalgia, reflecting on these artifacts uncovers a deeper reason why I've kept them; each was a hallmark of my writing development. When my 5th-grade teacher wrote, "Keep writing those great stories," she planted a seed for me to start to identify as a writer rather than just as a student who wrote well for school. When my mom asked me to create a book for her students, which she bound with contact paper and string, it's one of the first times I can remember my writing going to an authentic audience for an authentic purpose.

Reflecting in this way on my writing-related artifacts helped me to recognize the value in leading students through the same type of work.

The Assignment: Autoethnography of a Writer

Having taught middle and high school English for 12 years, I (Jason) am a firm believer in the importance of reflection for both writers and for teachers. By carefully considering our past, we can better adjust our present to improve our future writing and instruction (Hillocks, 1995; McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 2005; Yancey, 1998).

So, when I transitioned to teaching undergraduate writing methods courses to pre-service teachers as I worked on my Ph.D., I incorporated reflection into our major course assignments by requiring students to curate an autoethnography of past writing experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2016) call autoethnography, "A reflexive approach to understanding the human condition through critical and engaged analysis of one's own experiences" (p. 24), and Hughes and Pennington (2017) add the element of "Critical reflexivity: seeing ourselves as complicit (at least partially) in the problems we perceive" (p. 22). I hoped that by assigning an autoethnography, I could help my students better process, recognize, and discover important insights about writing instruction from their own writing experiences.

To engage students in this reflexive investigation, I instructed them to remember, reflect on, and write about their positive and negative writing experiences, while drawing from writing-related artifacts from their pasts. Requiring students to reflect on their writing-related artifacts set this assignment apart from the sort of literacy narratives common in both secondary and undergraduate English Education classes.

As Pahl and Roswell (2010) note, "eliciting stories about objects from students opens up their home experience and enables teachers to access communities which may not be visible within schools" (p. 1). By considering why they've kept a particular artifact (or why they had few or no writing-related artifacts), students opened the door to a catalytic question: what do these artifacts suggest about how I should teach writing? Identifying and reflecting on writing-related artifacts allowed students to consider some specific ways they'd been shaped as writers by mentors and contexts and, in turn, to transform those reflections into best practice principles informing their own teaching of writing.

Such reflective work takes on even more significance for pre-service teachers, considering that research suggests teachers teach the way they were taught (for better or worse) by their past teachers, rather than teaching how they were taught to teach in undergraduate methods courses (Saidy, 2015; Whitney, Olan, and Fredricksen, 2013; Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore, 2011). Therefore, why not intentionally bring past experiences and artifacts to the forefront of our discussion to encourage reflection and inform our teaching philosophies?

Featured Artifacts, Reflections, and Teaching Principles

To demonstrate the value of this autoethnography assignment, I've partnered with three of my former pre-service English teachers from my writing methods class, to each share one of our identified artifacts, our accompanying reflection, and our teaching principles in response to what the artifact says about how we should teach writing.

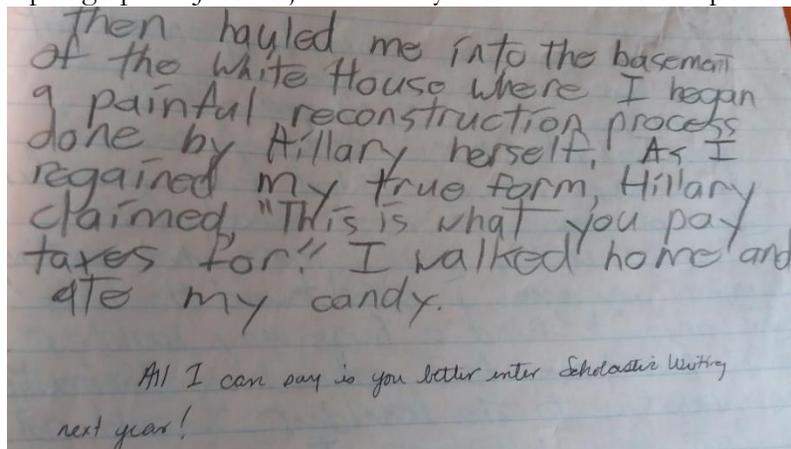
Jason's Artifact: 9th Grade Journal Entry

Mrs. Mentzer, my 9th grade English teacher, gave us a weekly journal prompt at the beginning of class each Friday, and her instructions were simple. Write for ten minutes. Shoot for at least one full page. If you don't like the prompt or you get stuck, then write about whatever you want for the remaining time. Mrs. Mentzer didn't penalize for lack of quality or correctness. If you wrote for ten minutes, you got the participation points, and you might have earned a bonus point or two for incorporating a term from our vocabulary list. Mrs. Mentzer's weekly journal assignment embraced Penny Kittle's goals for freewriting as "no-fail time to write" with freedom to "experiment with their thinking and ideas, to try on voice, or to rant about life" (2008, p. 29).

I still have a stack of my journal entries from Mrs. Mentzer's class, and despite being a freshman when I wrote them, my work could still best be described as sophomoric. For example, one Thanksgiving-themed entry embellished a meal where my mouth watered as my grandmother served a delicacy on a steaming, silver platter: a single green pea. A Christmas-themed entry took cruel aim at Santa Claus, calling out his unfit physique and penchant for breaking and entering. I frequently poked gentle fun at Mrs. Mentzer or my classmates. Though only a few of my off-key entries, upon re-reading them as an adult, achieved my original goal of being funny, there's one main reason (besides simple nostalgia) I've kept them.

Each journal entry, no matter how ridiculous, includes an encouraging comment from Mrs. Mentzer. For example, I ignored one weekly prompt to instead invent a tale where I was squashed by an asteroid on my walk home from school and then reconstructed in the basement of the White House by a secret government team led by Hillary Clinton (this was during Bill Clinton's presidency). Mrs. Mentzer could have encouraged me to stay on topic, she could have scolded my lack of seriousness, she could have required a re-write or deducted points, but instead, she encouraged me to enter the Scholastic Writing Contest (see Figure 2). The rest of my entries bear similar comments: compliments on my emerging voice, validation of my attempts at humor, encouragement to apply my strengths beyond the journal entries, and even some light sarcasm prompted by my frivolous tone. Mrs. Mentzer only deducted points if I fell short of the single-page requirement.

Figure 2: The final paragraph of Jason's journal entry with Mrs. Mentzer's positive comment.



Though I didn't take Mrs. Mentzer up that year on her suggestions for extra-curricular writing opportunities, her positive comments on my journals helped me to self-identify as a writer and bolstered my confidence for future activities such as joining the school newspaper's staff as the sports writer during my senior year. I wonder how my path as a writer might have been different had Mrs. Mentzer been discouraging or punitive with assignments like our weekly journal.

What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing? From Mrs. Mentzer's comments on my journal, I learned not to be too quick to dismiss student writing as silly, frivolous, or nonsense. We need to give students time to play in their writing and look for the bright spots within. Some students don't yet have the emotional maturity to write about something serious, but by recognizing their success in other areas like emerging voice or use of pacing, they can build upon this encouragement when they're ready to tackle writing of substance.

Joshua's Artifact: Letters to Dorothy

When I was a boy, my grandmother taught me to write letters. She was an avid letter writer. Up until the days that she could barely move at 93, before the accessibility of the email or text message, she wrote two to three letters a week. The final piece of mail she received in return was, in fact, from me on the day that she passed away.

Most of our letters simply recounted events of our lives taking place so far from each other at times, and others were significant moments that we wanted each other to hear about as if we had been there to witness.

The most significant gift that I could have received after her passing was the bulk of the letters which she had kept from our correspondence (see Figure 3). This history shows the evolution of my writing abilities insofar as I'd learned how to describe the minutia of life, weather, and the seemingly unimportant details that suddenly become important on a Faulknerian scale. One such letter described the sweaty, back-breaking work that my grandfather, along with two of my uncles had completed on a new machine building as large as the house that was technically permitted to be a 10 by 10 shed. All this work was completed in just under thirty days in the late July humid heat of Minnesota. She wrote:

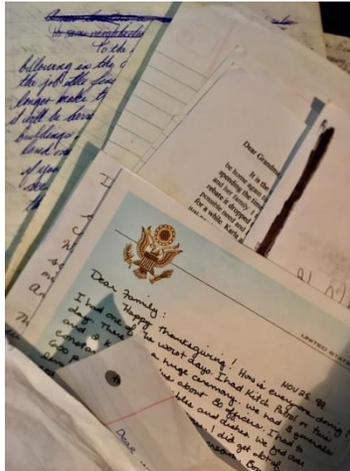
Dad and Davie near broke the new truck hauling the wood trailer but will finish his new shed for the tractors soon. He wants to finish because the sun has been so hot these past few weeks since they began work making him darker than what's good for him, probably not the desert heat you're used to now, Josher, but enough to make dad come in for more breaks when I holler at him. Dad can't finish the kitchen cabinets, put a floor in the basement or get me that gas stove but grandpa can bed down that combine with everything we got back from Uncle Sam. He did get the brown roof to match ours though and almost killed the dog getting it done before the storms start rolling through. You should come home and help a bit because he does too much. (personal correspondence)

What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing? The teachable moments from my letters to my grandmother sprout from the lost art of letter writing. Deserving moments may be simple thank you notes to a friend, those between grade-school pen pals on different continents, or they could be letters detailing a concern to a congressperson. Such abilities are taught less and less in composition classes and even less from parents.

As a form of art, I tend to think of letter-writing in three ways. First, letters are a type of persuasion for a family member or friend to visit more often or even come back home after being gone for years on end, such as in my absentee relationship with Minnesota. My grandmother found the ways to write about the weather that would make me miss the scent of rain. A second facet involves writing letters to an elected official about the careless damages to a community, such as when they taxed programs for children's lunch during the summer months when single parents were

working two jobs. Finally, letters are for the historians a hundred years down the road who try to document our quality of life and relationships who will be hard pressed to find truth in a tweet versus a welcome letter between two people, such as the letters between Vincent and Theo Van Gogh or those between President John and his wife, Abigail.

Figure 3: Joshua’s stack of letters to and from his grandmother, Dorothy.



Jannine’s Artifact: Published Short Story

On Halloween during tenth grade year, my English teacher gave us a bit of a “break” since Halloween is usually a day that teenager have everything but school on their minds. To keep things low-stress but also relevant to English class, my teacher had us do a creative writing activity; we could write about whatever we wanted, as long as it had a “Halloween edge” to it. I decided to write a story about an abandoned, haunted house, from the perspective of the house itself.

I was fairly impressed by my own idea, and once I began writing, I had a lot of fun with it. However, I did not think much of the finished product even though it was a lot of fun to write. I only wrote it because it was worth a portion of our participation points in the class, and my teacher said she wanted to read them when we were done. So, at the end of class, I handed her my gruesome little story about a house that witnessed one of its tenants murder his family, and I never thought that I would see it again.

To my surprise, the next time she saw me in class, my teacher came up to me with my story in her hands. I automatically thought something was wrong and maybe I had been too gruesome with my content, but it was actually the opposite. She loved my story! She showed it to another teacher in the English Department, and they wanted to get it published in a local magazine that featured student writing samples. With my permission, the story was published! At the time, I didn’t think getting published was a big deal, and I didn’t even get a copy of the magazine, which now I definitely regret because getting something published really is something to be proud of.

Not only do I realize now how wonderful it was to have my writing published, especially at such a young age, but I also have taken away from it something I hope I can accomplish as a teacher. My teacher that year went above and beyond to validate that I was, in fact, a good writer, which empowered me to keep writing outside of the classroom. She also allowed us to branch out of the typical, academic writing assignments and compose something that was completely our own, which is a great exercise for any young writer. I would love to allow opportunities for my students to express their creativity in writing, and I also want to take any possible opportunity to encourage them to keep writing outside of class as well.

What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing? My short story experience suggests that I should validate student writers by encouraging them to submit their work to contests or for publications. When students have another incentive other than just an “A” in their English class, they are more likely to be motivated to make great strides in their writing. Students who are fortunate enough to have their work published or win an award will start to identify as writers, and even if students aren’t published, the direct encouragement from a teacher can help to build confidence and independence. My experience also emphasizes the importance of allowing students to branch off once in a while and write creatively. When a student has the opportunity to practice their writing with a topic they enjoy or have created themselves, their academic essays will be strengthened as well.

Alex’s Artifact: Senior Journal

Senior year of high school is not typically characterized by mature decisions or reflective practices. It’s a time plagued with first tattoos (usually regretted), last-minute flings, and milestone celebrations. However, amid such rambunctious activity, my senior English teacher strove to instill one last skill in his students before their foray into college; self-reflection. To do so, Mr. White utilized the practice of journaling. We began our class, every morning, with a 10-minute free-writing warm-up. It didn’t really matter what you wrote, you just had to get your pen moving. All our assigned writings and poems were completed in our journal. We often edited right in our journal as well, which allowed us to reflect on the entirety of our writing practice.

As both my familiarity with the writing process and writing portfolio grew, I began to feel myself develop a new identity: that of a writer. As silly as that may sound, watching my leather-bound journal fill with art that came straight from my melodramatic, teenage soul was both cathartic and empowering. To support my conclusion that I was, in fact, now a *writer*, Mr. White would read through our journals (if we gave him permission to do so) and provide insightful feedback. Throughout most of my schooling, the feedback I had received from my English teachers fell somewhere between “Great work!” and “Keep writing!” There wasn’t much to support my aspirations as a writer or to help me reflect on or improve my skills.

Mr. White, on the other hand, went beyond the standard grammatical corrections and explored how words, *my words*, could have an impact on the audience. He made comments such as; “Strong passage, maybe consider moving the main character’s murder to after her mother’s suicide to elicit more of an emotion from your reader.” Mr. White was clearly taking my writing seriously, and I felt validated. My writing, although morbid, held value to someone other than me.

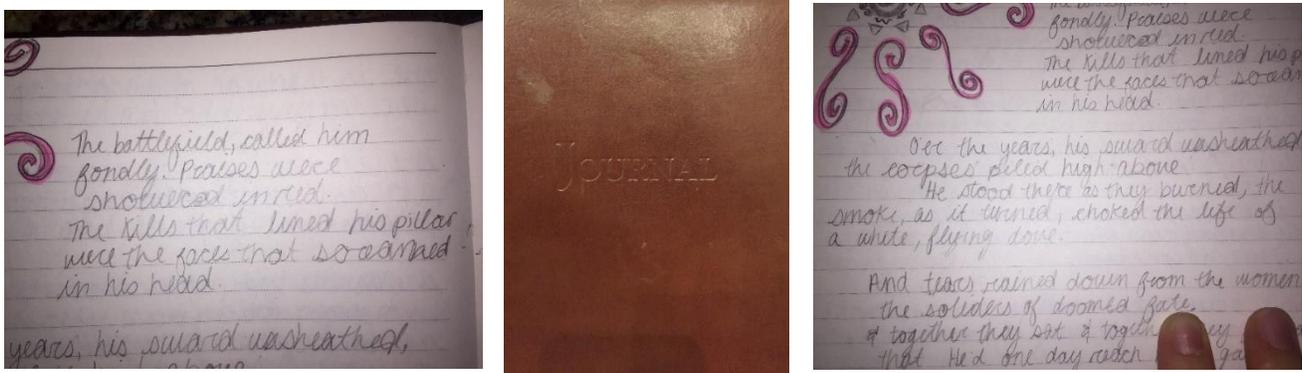
Flash forward to the future where I have not become a famous writer (yet) but instead have wholeheartedly thrown myself into a career in education. Now that I have begun to curate my own pedagogical practices, I look to the examples that have been set for me in the past. Namely, I look to Mr. White. I still have my journal (see Figure 4) from all those years ago. I kept it, not only as a time capsule containing my emotional treasures from the time but, because it connects me to my passions as a writer. My journal still fulfills its intended purpose: reflection.

As a future teacher myself, I intend to use journals in my classroom in multiple ways. I, too, will have my students begin the day with a free-writing exercise. I’ve found that starting my English class this way helped to bring me into the present as well as engage me in the creative process. As a portfolio of sorts, my students’ journals will also be used to facilitate both formative and summative assessments. That way, both I and my students can monitor and reflect on their growth. Lastly, I will be mindful of the feedback I provide to my students. Not only do I want my words to validate and enrich their writings, I want my guidance to enhance the reflective and lasting properties journals intrinsically hold.

I recognize that not every student is going to fall head-over-heels in love with writing or even enjoy English as a class. However, it's important for all students to learn how to communicate effectively with themselves and others and to reflect on their intellectual growth. Most importantly, it's crucial for students to feel like their contribution to their own education matters. Journals are a good way to hit multiple targets with one stone, so to speak. Regardless of what career paths my students choose to take, their journals can help them grow personally and professionally. Mine certainly has helped me.

What does this artifact suggest about how we should teach writing? Through my journal writing experiences with Mr. White, I learned I should allow students to use writing for reflection. Using a journal will give them a record of progress and a method for looking back at their growth. I will give personalized feedback respecting students as writers and gives them a chance to improve.

Figure 4: Pictures of the cover and entries from Alex's senior journal



Conclusion

There are evident themes in our collective featured artifacts and lessons: the importance of providing student choice in topic and genre, the lasting nature of tangible writing products in physical form and giving respect to the process and choices of student writers; however, none of the teaching principles shared through these examples are all that revolutionary. By and large, they line up with advice from Kittle (2008), Gallagher (2011), and other student-centered writing pedagogy. What's unique about these principles is that the co-authors developed them through reflection on artifacts they've kept. And, like with many practices, we're more apt to adopt principles we've discovered ourselves rather than those that were taught to us as rules.

For secondary English teachers, there are several takeaways from this work. The first is an encouragement to look through your own archives. What writing-related artifacts have you kept? What do they suggest about how you should teach writing? Are there provocative examples which challenge your current practice, or which would make interesting models for students? Considering these questions while looking through your archives and reflecting on the artifacts you re-discover can be a valuable practice for discovering and clarifying pedagogical principles in the teaching of writing.

In addition to reflecting on our own writing-related artifacts, we can ask students to engage with their writing pasts. Ask students to comb their own personal archives and to check in with their families about any writing-related artifacts they may have kept. Then, ask follow-up questions about why the artifacts were kept and what they reflect. Even discovering a lack of writing-related artifacts can be valuable by considering how the fact that nothing was kept reflects on past writing instruction and experience. We believe that identity and development as a writer, is based on past

experiences, and by bringing conscious reflection and understanding to the physical artifacts of students' pasts, it could foster a generative platform for future, intentional growth.

Perhaps most importantly, English teachers should strive to generate for students the kinds of writing products they'll want to keep as artifacts, to look back on and reflect, celebrate, and maybe even pass on to future generations.

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Author Biographies

Jason J. Griffith is an Assistant Professor of Language and Literacy Education at Penn State University. Jason taught middle and high school English for 12 years in PA before earning a doctorate in English Education from Arizona State University. A National Board Certified teacher and fellow of the National Writing Project, Jason's book *From Me to We: Using Narrative Nonfiction to Broaden Student Perspectives* was published by Routledge Eye on Education in 2017. As corresponding author, Jason can be reached at breathedeepandteach@gmail.com.

Joshua Kornexl writes both children and adult fiction books, represented by the publicist, Louise Crawford, founder of Brooklyn Social Media with the New York Writers Coalition. His children's book, *A Tiara for Dara* is currently under panel review with Brooklyn's Light House Publishing Firm. He has BA from Arizona State University where he studied Arts Secondary Education in English and Writing and teaches Honors English at Andersen Junior High in Chandler, Arizona. He is also a member of Tempe Screen Writers Group. He is the author of two unpublished novels, *Smile, Happy Psycho* and *One Round of Blood & Sand*, the children's book *A Tiara for Dara*, and one book of unpublished collection of poetry, *Bukowski, my god, where are you?*

Jannine Amore is an 8th grade Language Arts teacher in Tempe, Arizona. Throughout her college career, her love for literature and the written word became stronger and stronger, and that is when she knew she wanted to be able to share that love with young adults and aspiring writers. Having the ability to share her passion with middle school students and encourage them to be confident in their writing abilities and appreciate literature extremely rewarding and something she enjoys doing each and every day.

Alex Hoffman is a recent college graduate currently working at LifeTime fitness as an Assistant Manager in the aquatics department. She enjoys using the leadership and educational skills she learned at Arizona State University to lead her team of employees, as well as instruct young swimmers in the water.