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Teachers writing in/out of school: writing and affect

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Abstract

Research in the UK and Australia confirms that Secondary English practising and pre-service teachers are typically characterised as great readers. Indeed the subject position of English teacher entails a "love" of reading (Peel, 2000). However there is no corollary with writing. Few English teachers are simultaneously 'writers' in any sustained, pleasurable or publicly successful ways. This paper analyses data from collective biographies and interviews with beginning and experienced secondary English teachers about their own writing practices and experiences and the relationship between these, issues of affect and classroom pedagogy.

“Affects” says Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things including other affects” (2003, p. 19). The project that I describe in this section of the symposium explores the work of writers and teachers in and outside of schools. It is predicated – in part - on the assumption that teachers matter and that the attitudes, emotions and affects that they embody and that they engender in their students are fundamental to the success of any pedagogical practice. My work attends in particular to the embodied subjectivity of the writer and what happens in secondary English classrooms in particular when the body of the teacher and the body of the writer converge. I’m as interested in the affective dimensions of writing as the cognitive and social dimensions. Indeed they are inextricably intertwined. What happens when the teacher is a writer? When the writer is a teacher? How does that person perform - or not perform - their writerly self in the writing classroom? How does that person create enabling pedagogies for writing for secondary students? How does the teacher writer come to writing and keep writing? How does writing infect their lives and their lives infect their writing – including their professional lives as English teachers? How are affects attached to *people* including self, students, teachers and other writers, to *activities* particularly the activity of writing, to *ambitions* - why do people keep teaching who write (disrupting the folklore that says those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach), and how are affects attached to *institutions* particularly to secondary school English classrooms and the regimes of control that impact upon them. This paper cannot encompass all these elements but rather it is a sampling and first reading through the lens of affect of some of the data that I am gathering.

The project that I’ve called “Teachers writing in/out of school” has three strands of data – collective biographies, surveys, and extended interviews. The collective biographies provide a small pool of texts about embodied memories of writing in and out of school. The surveys gauge the attitudes towards writing of our current cohort of English Method students. Finally, extended interviews - still in progress - detail the writing and teaching histories of people who are both published writers and English teachers. All of this data is

shot through with threads of emotion, affect, feeling that to me enrich the data and make it both deeper and more luminous.

In the latest issue of *Metaphor*, the journal of the English Teachers Association of NSW, poet and academic David Brooks describes himself talking to dispirited poets. He tells them, he says, that they have:

forgotten what it was all about in the first place, ...surely they write poetry, or began writing it, because something in the art itself, in poems themselves, excited or enchanted them – that it all started out of love. (2005, p. 28)

Love is my starting point in this paper. I attempt to trace the path of ‘love’ through fragments of data gathered thus far in the teachers writing project. ‘Love’ does not appear in the usual schemata of affect that most writers in the field use. The most influential figure, psychologist Silvan Tomkins, identifies an “affective table of elements...infinitely recombinable but rooted in the human body in nine distinctive and irreducible ways” (Tomkins, 1993, p.23). Tomkins’ list of “primary affects” includes just two positive affects – *interest-excitement* and *enjoyment-joy*; one that is neutral or what he calls re-setting *surprise-startle*, and six that are unpleasant: *distress-anguish*, *fear-terror*, *shame-humiliation*, *contempt* or *dissmell*, *disgust* and *anger-rage* (Tomkins, 1993, p. 74).

However we might take up or contest this schema, Sedgwick argues that it provides a rich phenomenology of emotion that is anchored to the body and can enrich contemporary critical theory (1993, p. 2). Adamson and Clark (1999, p. 2) argue that affect theory enables us to recoup imagination, creativity and emotion into contemporary philosophy and literary theory. Affects persist over time, have multiple aims and effects, and combine or rub against each other to form complex emotions – like love. The *shame-pride* axis in particular, is seen by Tomkins as the “yardstick” against which “we evaluate all of our actions and along which is strung our precarious and fragile sense of self” (1993, p. 20). Like Sedgwick in her latest book on the topic *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity* (2003, p. 21), I find myself drifting in my reading and thinking and listening away from that most theoretically popular affect - shame – towards the positive affects. Thus I turn to love in my data. Love – such as the love that brings the poets to writing – is amorphous, imprecise, doesn’t figure in the list but it is a drive

towards action, an embodied and emotive/ affective productive and positive disposition, analogous to that Megan Watkins traces with younger writers in schools (2005). It is a complex emotion nuanced by several affects, an amalgam of positive affects. Tomkins (1993) recognized that affect was intrinsic to learning. He says “In the case of positive affects which are drained of their intensity by learning, and negative affects which are heightened in their intensity by learning, the individual has lost degrees of freedom. The same mechanisms however enable him under other conditions to continually increase this freedom” (1993, p. 66). Although ‘freedom’ is a construct that I’m inclined to use in a radically conditioned form, it is unequivocal that pleasurable experiences in writing will engender further pleasure. Where and how does love of writing come into my research?

Initially, one of the catalysts for this project was work by Robyn Peel in the UK (2000). He found that English teachers do not generally regard themselves as writers though in schools much of their work involves teaching children to write. They are trained to be expert and enthusiastic readers rather than expert, or versatile, writers. Peels’ respondents “invariably” he says, “referred to the satisfaction and fulfillment of reading” while “relatively few” were drawn to that discipline by equivalent pleasures to be had in writing (2000, p. 164). English was seen by them –despite their exposure to various theoretical and literary paradigms at university - as a “*personal* subject” where the “self and reflections on personal experience are seen to be central” (2000, p.164) and are deeply pleasurable. A multiple choice survey of 48 UWS English Method students found that exactly half of the respondents (24) selected “love of reading” as their primary reason for becoming English teachers. One third of them (16) also indicated on the list of possibilities offered that a “love of writing” had influenced their choice. So far then, the responses of UWS students match those of the UK English specialists but the closed set of multiple choice options would have undoubtedly influenced their responses. In a different activity at the beginning of their course, seventy three UWS students from both campuses wrote prose responses to the open-ended question: “Why do you want to become an English teacher?” The gap between reading and writing here was much more marked. Again approximately half the students said that their primary motivation was a love of reading or of literature.

Only ten of 73 mentioned a love of writing in their responses. Reading is the mode that invites English teachers in to the profession and that incites their passions. They deployed a lexicon of love in their responses – love of reading, love of the subject, love of their own English teachers. They used nouns like “interest”, “enjoyment”, “enthusiasm”, “beauty”, “contagion”, “pleasure”, “intensity”, “joy” and “passion”; adjectives like “engaging,” “favourite”, “passionate”; and verbs such as “enjoy”, “engage”, “enthuse”, “inspire”, “like” and “love.” Notably, the second most prominent reason for becoming an English teacher in the open-ended responses was a particular inspirational teacher. Twenty-two out of the 73 students mentioned a teacher, or teachers, many by name, who had brought them, they said, to a love of English. The pedagogical encounter as *eros*, where love of teacher and love of subject slide together, has been explored by Erica McWilliam who says that the “elating and elated teaching body is often the sight/site out of which future scholars are propelled into an on-going love affair with their disciplines...the body of the teacher... performs what it looks like to have a love affair with a body of knowledge” (1996, p. 374). The effect of this on the student body, can be analogous to what Anna Gibbs calls, after Tomkins, “affect contagion” (2002, p. 337). Later in this paper I’ll return to the teaching body infused by - and provocative of – love. Before then I’ll move to another strand of the data and another sort of love.

The collective biographies were a second strand of data informing this project. Small workshops were held with research colleagues and some English Method students. Each group talked about and then wrote embodied and particular memories of writing prompted by agreed triggers including “pleasure”. One of the themes emerging in these particular moments had to do with immersion, a merging, a becoming something other than one’s discrete and separate self through the practice of writing. In the following memory, whilst the writing task itself is clearly framed by time and place, there is a falling away of space and of the writing subject inside that space that is experienced as immensely pleasurable:

... We were to [observe nature] at the same time each day for two weeks. During this time we were to immerse ourselves into our surroundings and write what we felt, observed and what 'energies' we experienced. Most importantly we were to let ourselves go and write down anything that came to our minds.

The area I chose was in my backyard and at night time. This was a wonderful and amazing experience....One of the spell binding things I noticed was the absolute calmness I felt and one of belonging to this environment. The area of the backyard I was in is very beautiful, filled with many kinds of plant life and most noticeably, very large trees. In some way during my time in this area I noticed that the trees seemed to change. They were not trees anymore. They were individuals that all seemed to have their own personalities. Each tree had a different shadow they cast by the moon, each tree swayed differently in the wind, and even though this sounds bizarre, I felt they were aware of my presence too and were keeping me company. They seemed to speak to me in their silent voices and I felt comforted. I have never really observed the trees at night time like this before (my head is normally in the stars) and enjoyed this exercise immensely.

I wrote a long prose from/about this experience and have written many poems on the influences and emotions of those nights.

The love evoked by this writing is an artful close attention to the world. The task is a provocation to see differently, mindfully, to the point where the writer experiences a sort of sensual epiphany that fuels her writing again and again. Tomkins says that "to engage in any human activity ...one must care, one must be excited, must be continually rewarded. There is no human competence which can be achieved in the absence of a sustaining interest" (1993, p. 77). What is interesting about this memory is that it did not arise from an independent, spontaneous or original desire to write but an imposed task, taken up as part of a correspondence course in writing. The interest is provoked by the pedagogical encounter. One of the romantic myths of writing is that the desire and ability to write well are marks of the superior individual, and that writing emerges from the unique soul or sensibility of that individual. But it seems here, that an externally imposed assignment brought on a writing epiphany, a flood of text. Fortuitously there was something in the task itself, to paraphrase Brooks, that "excited or enchanted" this writer

and that started her writing out of a sort of love. That love, in this instance, is associated with a rupture of the self, a slippage between the self and what for want of a better term we call “nature.” This too, of course, invokes another old-fashioned Romantic conceit. It resonates also with what psychologist Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow” (1996). But what I’m intrigued by here is how the task itself had the capacity to provoke pleasure, or love, and how this was realized, even deepened, through writing. It is within constraint, in response to an instruction from outside – rather than in response to an urgent or spontaneous inner need or desire - that this writing became possible. Yet there was a certain freedom in her choice of the place, the time and the form of response. This productive dynamic – the tension between form and freedom - was also evident in the surveys. Students were asked to recall the piece of writing that had brought them the most pleasure through their writing lives and to identify the context of that writing. More than half the students indicated that this was inside a formal educational setting. Most (21/ out of 24) of them identified university as the site of that textual pleasure. Only 4 students recalled high school as the site of their most enjoyable or successful piece of writing. So pleasure is not incompatible with constraint, indeed opportunities for pleasure, for writing that the writer loves, that builds a positive disposition towards writing, can be afforded within formal educational contexts. This is also an emergent theme in the interviews with writers who are also teachers.

These writer-teachers write profusely, persistently and successfully. The love that started them seems still to sustain them. What then were the conditions for the emergence of that love of writing? Most of the people interviewed for this strand were known to me or were named by others in a sort of snowball recruitment and were significant contemporary writers who were also secondary English teachers. Most of them so far are poets. ‘What are your first memories of writing?’ was one of the questions in the interview. These memories for the most part are entangled with memories of the institutions of schooling, with technologies of reading as well as writing, and are populated by bodies of others – most of them teachers. The following extract demonstrates the multiplicity of these entanglements:

My best subject in yr 12 was Economics and I enrolled in an Economics degree straight after that but it was actually in yr 12 that [English] started being meaningful to me. I wouldn't have said I was that good at it but I had a really inspirational English teacher...He didn't have a great breadth of knowledge but he knew what he liked and he was very passionate about it and what he liked was... especially the poetry, I remember Eliot, Hopkins, Wilfred Owen and we did a smattering of the Romantics and also he liked DH Lawrence. He got me into that... We did 'The Rainbow' in yr 12 which I think, I was the only one in the class who actually liked it. I really connected with it but I was from Nottingham originally so that's kind of Lawrence country. And yes, so from there I started writing.

The teacher in this extract is represented as inspirational and passionate. Passion is expressed here as a love for language and for particular texts, rather than a passion for students or for teaching per se. Passion is knowing what you like, embodying that and articulating it in the classroom and bringing students – or at least this student – towards that passion. The pivotal text he names is one that speaks to him – to his experience and particular history. “And yes” the poet says, “so from there I started writing” In another interview, another poet also named a text and a moment that was pivotal.

I had a couple of English teachers who did that wonderfully inclusive thing of saying you know I think you'd like this book or like this poem why don't you try them...My grade 12 English teacher said I think you'll like Ulysses you know it's a bit controversial but I don't think it'll bother you why don't you try it...And yes I loved Ulysses...If someone says read Ulysses, read Dylan Thomas, read this, read that and by the way there's a writer coming to the school next week, you might like to meet them even though they're coming to meet the grade 9s or something ... Now my English teachers weren't writers but they were readers and they loved the word.

Loving the word is the thing. And it seems from these extracts that this is a virus can be transmitted through reading as much as through writing. Reading is where the form comes from, for early writers. As artists used to train by emulating their masters, so many

of the poets interviewed emulated their favourite poets, feeling their way gradually and with many fits and starts into their own work.

...I started writing really bad kind of imitation Eliot sort of poems and they didn't really mean and they were about old age or mediocrity or what's the meaning of life or something like that. ... And also just down the road from me when I was a student there was this shop that was selling all this Australian poetry for \$3 that were normally \$20 and so I started buying them... I discovered people like Andrew Lansdowne and Peter Goldsworthy and Robert Gray. It was contemporary, and it was using language that I used. I started getting into a lot of South Australian poets like Peter Goldsworthy and Steve Evans and it just excited me that the world around me was suddenly you know charged with meaning. That I could see something just down the street or in local areas and poetry transformed everything. Everything was the material for poetry. So it was really ...poetry was a way in to writing in general.

The lexicon of love, almost of seduction, underpins this extract – being excited, the suddenness of the coming to language, everything being charged, everything being changed, transformed. In these writer's stories, their writing experiments take place apart from but alongside the reading that they are doing in school and uni. Another poet describes how:

when I was 15 and we were doing some Romantic poets Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind ... I remember writing a few odes to depravity or something using Bondi Beach, looking down Bondi Beach on a windy grey day at that time as an analogy for depravity or something... but that's not what I call 'being a writer' ...when I started to write poetry. I don't mean poetry poetry but writing a few poems, I particularly remember it was during my first year at university I was studying for English 1... and I was going through the Penguin history of English poetry and there were lots of Shakespearean sonnets and John Donne etc all sorts of poems it was an historical kind of journey and I started writing poems just like that. But of course they were absolutely chockablock with cliché and ...lavishness like purple prose and I was writing them.

Transcribing this text I wanted to go back and change her words to say “but” – “lavish like purple prose but I was writing them” but it was “and” that she said: they were cliché ridden and purple “and” she says “I was writing them”. There is an excess in this writing – in the “and” – which resonates for me with the transformation of everything in the earlier memory. It is the “and” that brought her to writing and that kept her writing, despite its risks.

Of course one of the risks is purple prose, or “bad kind of imitation sort of poems” as the first writer says. Writing is risky, for students in schools as well for authors out in the world, in ways that reading is not. Writing exposes and makes one vulnerable. It destabilizes the self along what Tomkins calls the *shame-pride* axis of affect. The teacher who writes him or herself understands this, but writes through it and despite it and helps his or her students to do this too. In the last extract, a novelist describes how he uses his own writerly fragility to defuse that of his students:

[Another teacher] picked up one of my books and was reading it when I was in the office but I just remembered, I told the kids about it because they know her, and they know all the offices so I could describe it and she picked up my book and she's reading it and I said, you wouldn't believe it, I said how old am I? I'm nearly ninety-three now and I'm nervous! I'm sitting there at the desk and I can't concentrate on what I'm doing because she's reading my book, and I'm waiting for her to say this is very good or whatever, and just hoping it's okay, and then she laughed and my immediate response was she's laughing at me, and I went where was something funny in that book? I didn't put a joke in that book. And I really couldn't remember what it was that was amusing in the book, and afterwards I had to ask her, I turned around and tried to look very calm and nonchalant and I didn't want to ask her what did you think of it, was it good? I just waited for her to say something, I said what was it, I heard you laughing, and then I realised there were a couple of lines in there that were humorous and she'd found them humorous thank goodness for that, but I was really tied up in knots as she was reading it. So I think those things put kids at ease and help them through.

As he tells me this story that he told his students I can imagine the shared sense of relief and pleasure washing through his classroom. Writing, say Adamson and Clark, is “potentially an act of the most dangerous exposure” so “it often becomes an artful and ingenious playing with masks [that] allows one to hide and reveal oneself at the same time, [and] also allows for an intimacy and trust to be established with another...perhaps in a way that no other situation provides” (1999, p. 28). Tomkins, they go on to say, suggests that the writer seeks to surmount shame and that this is the goal of both creativity and love (Adamson and Clark, 1999, p. 29). For the writers that I’ve quoted in this paper, the enchantment and love of the word that got them through their early writing, the love that some of their own teachers modeled, and the passionate possibilities that particular texts and tasks opened up for them have been influential in the accounts they give of themselves becoming writers. Later phases of the project will explore the classroom practices they describe themselves utilizing. To what extent do these writers of young people create what might be called *enabling pedagogies* for writing that are inclusive and that informed and shaped by their own experiences and particular embodied knowledge? Thus far, it is already evident that the pedagogical encounter – whether mediated by persons, texts, or tasks - is deeply affective, fraught with emotion and fuelled by passion.

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