

Educational Pedagogy Explored: Attachment, Voice, and Students' Limited Recognition of the Purpose of Writing

Rebecca A. Fairchild¹

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ABSTRACT

The following teacher research case-study involved an exploration of educational pedagogy by working with a freshman composition student at a college university. All data collected for the study was gathered during the 2013 spring semester. The study was driven by an inquiry based approach where the researcher determined the center of focus that arose from an exploration of the student as a writer through a survey, a classroom observation, multiple one-on-one meetings, and email conversations. The focus area that arose was the student's limited recognition that writing was done solely for school purposes. Related puzzlements stemming from this focus area included the student's lack of attachment and lack of voice in her writing. The conclusive data provided insights for how to educate students in future classrooms regarding how vital it is for students to be able to attach themselves to their work.

1. Assuming the Role of Teacher Researcher

Teacher Research refers to an evidence based practice where a teacher becomes the focus of inquiry as she actively researches and examines her current pedagogical practices in a systematic, self-directed, and self-critical way. It is a trial and error practice where the researcher gains insight into her own teaching methods. Even more than this, the inquiries should be communicated effectively to the professional community where the like-minded can benefit from her findings.

As I began conducting my teacher research, I found it alarmingly different from what I originally associated with the word "research". Instead of constructing a hypothesis to be tested and proved with a definite end result, teacher research seemed rather to be planned, conducted, and shared to come to an understanding, "the goal of teacher research is understanding rather than proof" (Borg, 2006). This thinking allowed me to break my preconceived notions about "research". We are in a profession of constant change; axioms do not do it justice. Because teacher research honors the view I hold that students *and* teachers are life-long learners in a classroom, it serves as an opportunity to thrive in the generative environment of knowledge where understanding is of paramount importance. Teacher research is a way to stay informed and to continuously inquire about how the learning process works, changes, and how best to accommodate those changes for students by closely examining experience. Ultimately, as Borg(2006) says "teacher research is an opportunity to enhance the quality of education" and as an educator I can effectively fulfill my professional duties to my students and my professional community by a constant drive of inquiry, experience, reflection, and sharing of findings.

2. Developing a Relationship

My teacher research began by developing a relationship with a girl who will remain anonymous throughout this case study under the pseudonym "Lily". As a freshman student enrolled in a 110 English Composition course, she volunteered for a position to work with me. From the first arranged meeting where I verbally asked her survey questions to explore the role writing plays in her life to my last meeting delving into her own writings together, we have formed and maintained a solid relationship. I asked her how her day was going at every meeting; Lily laughed as I explained how I believe my handwriting looks like wet hair put on the side of a shower when you do not want it stuck to your body; Lily entrusted me with revealing her frustrations with an American history essay that she recently received an unsatisfactory grade for; together

¹ Millersville University, 200 East Scarborough Fare, Stewartstown, PA 17363, E-mail: rafairch@millersville.edu

we chuckled at the boy who belted out “Single Ladies” by Beyoncé in the quiet recess of the Student Memorial Center on the university’s campus. Every meeting became an opportunity to form a natural bond between the two of us to establish a safe environment to learn together.

It was my utmost concern to get us laughing before we truly dug into her writing. Relationships are important in education: “The reason we learn has a lot to do ...with our relationships with important others. We are motivated to learn out of relationships” (Kent, 2007). Richard Kent advocates relationship building in “Matthew’s Portfolio”—an essay that is a part of a larger collected anthology titled *Teaching the Neglected “R”*. The theme of rethinking writing instruction is central to the larger body of work as a whole. For Kent, he sees the benefit of connecting personally with his students to set the tone and a sense of community for his classroom. His study focuses on one student in particular by the name of “Matthew”. Matthew is a self-proclaimed “math guy” that completes Kent’s first quarter portfolio ranging from formal papers, informal papers, journals, readings, presentations, and a quarterly reflection. By the end of the quarter Matthew is able to see and express himself as more than “the math guy” to Kent and his fellow classmates (Kent, 2007). Kent’s one-on-one time and personalized feedback that allowed Matthew to grow as a writer is deeply representative of his belief that learning is a process that starts out of a relationship that is to be built along the way as well.

In much the same way, the bond I formed with Lily allowed me to successfully follow through with the inquiries that I began to develop as I worked with her. Lily trusted me and was therefore not afraid of failure in our lessons. Moreover, the data I collected was genuine. I was not a random glorified editor to help her with her composition papers during the semester; instead, I was a friend and a mentor who worked with her collaboratively that made the process of this case study not only possible, but easier and better for there was a genuine engagement by the both of us.

3. Getting to Know Lily as a Writer and Related Inquires:

One such pattern that I noticed while working with Lily throughout the Spring 2013 semester revolved around her views of writing as something only done for scholarly purposes—specifically, only for English courses. Constantly, this distinction Lily made hindered her as a writer so I began to examine it closer. Her mind seemed brain-washed by this belief; she was trained—stuck in a perception that seemed to have developed from previous writing experiences in school. I began to think that perhaps she was not the only student to be tied down by this perception of writing so my exploration commenced.

Lily’s responses to my survey questions on the role of writing in her life given at the first meeting illustrates how she views writing as something only to be done for a grade and in an English classroom. When orally asked “How often do you write (this includes the entire spectrum of writing: notes, journals, emails, text messages, academic papers, creative writing, facebook chats, etc.)? Do you find writing to be significant in your life,” Lily paused lifting her eyes to the ceiling as if she was searching for an answer. Then she responded, “Wow. I just didn’t think of all that as writing.” Her genuine surprise in coming to that recognition about the whole array of writing that she had actually been doing was the first hint that she viewed writing as something with only one purpose. Her final answer revealed that she did not write emails often except for in her 110 English Composition course, she wrote papers when she had to, she would write notes during lectures, and in genuine honesty she really did not see writing as significant for her: “It’s not a big part of me”. Here, she continued to only answer with scholarly situations where writing was required of her.

Survey question 6 illustrates her belief once again. I inquired, “In your opinion, why do people write? Of these, which best applies to why you write?” Lily told me three reasons: people write for school, for their job if writing is their profession, and for communication. It is important to note that I had to pull the last answer out of her with questions for why she would write an email to her English Composition professor. After answering my first part of the question she ended up choosing writing for school “to get the grades” and to communicate with people (“Oh, I text all the time.”) as the main reasons for writing that applied best to her. Provided that her first response for why people write was for school, I started to gain the sense that she truly believed writing to only be done in an English classroom for one purpose because her previous experiences locked her writing exclusively in the context of educational purpose. Clearly, Lily wrote for other reasons like communicating but her trained brain did not let her recognition of it expand beyond that context as made evident in her response to this survey question.

This pattern appeared again at the end of the survey in her response to the question: "Of all your interests, hobbies, or goals, which of these do you see writing being useful with? Which of these do you think have little or nothing to do with writing? And would you like to connect writing with these hobbies, goals, and/or interests?" Alarming, Lily expressed that she saw writing as useful to none of her interests, hobbies, or goals. I began to extract a little more from her by asking what some of her hobbies or goals are; she said she enjoyed decorating cupcakes (to which she added that that did not involve writing in any way "so that's kind of irrelevant") and that she wanted to become an Early Childhood Education major (to which she only said writing emails would be of value). As a person who values writing in my own life, I wanted so ardently to give her examples of ways writing could be used to complement her own interests and bring even more value to her, but I held my tongue to truly observe Lily as the writer she was without the imposition of a "teacher" *telling* her things that she does not *feel* are true. Here I remained an observer as a researcher. Finally, her desire to connect writing to any of her hobbies, goals, or interests was as self-extinguishing as her other answers: "no, not really." Perhaps later, I thought, I could help her by *showing* her through a scaffolded experience where she could undergo a self-discovery to see how writing can be applied to herself in relevant ways and for purposes beyond the classroom.

Lily's responses to my survey questions began a waterfall of inquiries. I wondered if she truly believed in this distinction for writing. The fact that she was able to agree that she wrote to communicate could have been a slight crack in the barrier set up in her writing-is-for-school-only-purposes schema. However, her blindness to seeing her own interests as unrelated to writing was alarming. Would it be possible to break the distinction she held in her mind? And what would it look like if I could help shatter the hold it had on her? In my rattled brain, one thing stood out for certain: she would enjoy writing more without this limited recognition of writing as a purely academic activity.

4. The Focus Area Surfaces

Another governing pattern that I saw throughout our meetings was that Lily distanced herself from her topics when she wrote. Her lack of attachment to her topic resulted in a lack of voice in her papers that contradicted her sociable and engaging personality that captured my interest when we talked one-on-one. I could not help but feel this stemmed from her foundational belief on writing as solely done for school to get a grade.

The dissonance between the voice of Lily's papers and the personality she displayed in social interactions cropped up in many places throughout this study. In my initial meeting with her I could rightly conclude that she was a pleasant, happy, and eager student of sociable demeanor. She smiled at my dorky excitement to work with her this semester and she expressed a genuine desire to improve her writing with my help. She was punctual to every meeting, polite, and an ease to work with. My favorite conversations with her always involved music—her love for it got her through life. Something flared in her eyes as she would say how she could not get the new Rascal Flats' song "Stand" out of her head. Furthermore, Lily's behavior in her 110 English Composition class on a day that I observed her learning environment put her true personality on display as well. She interacted with a group of classmates on the side of the room she was sitting on and she spoke with her professor about her latest draft for a paper with as much politeness and openness as she did in all other situations I had the opportunity to see her in; however, her lively personality never transferred to her writing.

In the first paper assigned to her in 110 English Composition Lily was asked to write an essay on what she believed living "The Good Life" involved. I read her first two drafts of the essay and was left perplexed. By the end I wondered if she even believed in what she wrote, because it came off voice-less, dead, and a rehashing of a standard self-help book's advice on how to be happy. The thesis of her paper was "The best way to live the good life is to stay true to yourself by doing what makes you happy, keeping an open mind and working towards a goal." Lily's lack of an attachment with her topic was made evident in each paragraph justifying how these three ways will result in living "The Good Life". Nothing was written that screamed "Lily wrote this!" or "this is what I truly believe; listen to what I have to say!" for me as a reader. She lacked a connection to her three main points, because it seemed as if nothing was inspired by her personal experiences with living "The Good Life". Most shockingly to me was that she did not draw from her own experiences of how music brings her happiness. It was a familiar essay asking for Lily's beliefs on what she personally believes living "The Good Life" is, but no part of the paper indicated her applying it to herself

and her own experiences in life. As a teacher researcher this sparked my inquisitive mind. During our next meeting when asked (hoping for complete honesty) if she truly believed in what she wrote about for her paper, Lily stretched her bottom lip down to show clenched teeth and she responded, "Eh...no. not really at all" with a chuckle.

At this point I could not help but remember a previous meeting with her during my survey when she revealed a time that she was truly attached to her writing topic. Her personality poured out of her when she revealed without a second thought that the one piece of writing that she was most proud of composing was a creative writing paper she wrote in 11th grade where she had to write from the perspective of a pair of shoes living during the Holocaust. Just listening to her talk about the piece convinced me that this was probably a piece she wrote with voice that showcased her personality. She remarked, "I don't know. The prompt was easy to write about because it was so interesting and we could relate it to anything. I love the Holocaust...well learning about it. And I ended up getting a good grade on it." I instantly began to see a connection between her voice and writing assignments that she could attach herself to. The relationship between voice and attachment has been illuminated by other researchers in the field who say "in voiceless writing, the author stands far back from the subject. Such distance can impact a cold, detached feel to the writing. When writing has a real voice, you can sense the author pulling in close, cozying up to the subject" (Fletcher, 1993).

Ralph Fletcher, in his book titled *What a Writer Needs*, believes that voice is one of the trickiest components of writing to grapple with as a secondary student. In Chapter 6 there is a subsection titled "Finding A Writing Voice" in which Fletcher targets audience as "the major murder suspect [of voice]" in upper-grade level classrooms. Fletcher comparatively examines an excerpt from a 1st grader named Theresa about her mom to his secondary students' writing and finds that voice is lost as students approach adolescence. He claims that the tougher demands of upper-level education (grading, grammar, essays, etc.) stifle their voices and justifies it by proving that young writers are free from such demands in the supportive writing environment of the primary grades (Fletcher, 1993). However, this assertion conflicted with my own experience with Lily for she had no issue "cozying up" to the subject of the Holocaust in an 11th grade college preparatory classroom, yet she lost her voice in an essay about what makes her happy as a freshman composition student. To me, it seemed that the tougher demands were secondary to a larger issue. As I agreed with Fletcher's assertion, I still believed there was more to be investigated in regards to the subject of writing assignments. Why can Lily attach herself to the Holocaust while showcasing her voice, but not to an essay about living "The Good Life"? Where does the difference lie?

Again I began to get an itchy feeling that this all may revolve around the first pattern I identified. In fact, I began to see it as the cause for her lack of attachment and transfer of voice into her writing which helped me form my goal of this teacher research case study: *to break the distinction Lily held in her mind about writing for only one purpose in school and writing for other relevant purposes in hopes of her being able to become attached to her writing which will in turn allow her to transfer her voice into what she writes.*

5. A Backtrack that Provides Insights Later on

Before I examined Lily's writing, I wanted to see what Lily hoped to get out of this mentored experience, because "any way that we [teachers] can help students set goals and monitor them builds self-regulatory behavior towards writing" (Dean, 2010). Deborah Dean advocates a strategic approach to all aspects of writing in her book *What Works in Writing Instruction*. In Chapter 1 "Writing Strategies" which includes an introduction and overview of what writing strategically does for students, Dean explains that students' having goals is a strategy in itself where self-regulatory behavior stems from achieving and not achieving their goals: "if they met the goal, they know what helped them. If they did not, they reflect on what prevented them from meeting the goal, and they readjust, noting how they will make up what they didn't accomplish, so they can stay on track in their inquiry" (Dean, 2010). I desired these self-regulatory behaviors and their benefits for Lily; therefore, I saw getting Lily's goals as a writer addressed as an essential component in carrying out this exploratory case-study. In my concluding question of our first meeting with the survey I asked her: "If you could accomplish one dream/wish with your writing in the future, what would it be?" To which she replied that she did not have one. I could say I was shocked, but her previous answers in the survey that displayed how little she valued writing in her life because she only saw it as something to do to get a grade made this answer unsurprising. However, I was giving her a chance to give her a say—making the question relevant to her personally as a developing writer! Without an

intrinsically motivated goal, where could I proceed? I continued to pry for an answer from her and she finally said, "I want to overall improve my writing so I can know I am a decent writer." I began to think that giving her a say in her educational growth was something unfamiliar to her so instead of assuming she did not have any goals for writing, I believed Lily simply did not know how to react so she gave me a vague answer.

Another question that Lily answered earlier in the survey allowed me to see that she held a more specific goal when I re-examined her responses to the survey days later. Mid-way through the questioning I inquired, "Do you consider yourself to be a strong writer? Why or why not?" Here, she admitted two aspects of her writing that she believed she could improve upon when she revealed that she viewed herself as "not the strongest writer": "I don't have a big vocabulary so my papers turn out pretty basic...and I tend to get lost in what I'm saying. I'm definitely not the best writer at all." Lily's answer revealed to me that she would like to improve her vocabulary (getting lost in what she's says becomes important later on); at this point I saw this as an opportunity to honor Lily's own wishes to grow as a writer in a constructive way where her focus areas for improvement are being taken into account to encourage the "self-regulatory behavior towards writing" (Dean, 2010). This facilitates ownership and personalization that is critical to writing, "something both teachers and students need to remember is that writing strategies should be personalized" (Dean, 2010).

6. Pursuing My Inquiries

Thus, my first pedagogical practice arose: "Writing Strategy 1: Eliminate 'to-be' Verbs." Because Lily saw her papers as basic because she did not believe she had a large vocabulary, I decided to borrow a writing strategy that my Introduction to Film Professor, Dr. Craven, had me practice to start integrating stronger verbs into my own paper at the time—to which I used the first page of as a mentor text for Lily in our meeting. Implementing mentor texts in unit plans for the educational community is gaining more respect as an effective tool in the classroom: "studying models is a strategy supposed to aid students' writing development by having them learn about how others use language as a way to build options for their own use" (Dean, 2010). In Chapter 10 titled "Study of Models" from her book *What Works in Writing Instruction*, Deborah Dean explores the benefits, possible drawbacks, and plausible ways to integrate mentor texts into lessons as a way to write strategically. Dean believes this strategy is especially helpful for students to become familiar with different genres in writing; I found mentor texts to be an incredible aid for Lily to be able to envision the possibilities she has as a writer on the smaller sentence level scale of writing. Again, I wanted Lily to feel that I was listening to her and respecting her views of herself as a writer so I began constructing this worksheet for us to practice eliminating to-be verbs with Dean's writing strategically mindset of including the aid of a mentor text in her latest drafts of "The Good Life." I held the highest hopes that she would see how eliminating to-be verbs improved my own paper in the mentor text I included, how I struggled with it as a writer as well by verbally talking about the process of practicing this writing strategy, and that through practice she would be able to integrate it into her own writing strategy tool belt. This strategy of writing with students, and working through the process has also been supported in research, "by using a mentor text, it can teach students a practice they can use throughout their lives as writers to the point where knowing and using options is both engaging and enabling" (Dean, 2010). I printed out two copies of the worksheet and walked to the meeting feeling prepared for anything.

After I explained why I chose this writing strategy for her to practice with me, we instantly dove into the lesson. Together we read the worksheet and then began to follow the precise directions I gave with her first draft of "The Good Life". Lily underlined all of the to-be verbs that she could find and then with two copies of the same draft I had us both trying to rework a few sentences to use a stronger verb. I began to think my full proof method was turning into a failure; Lily could not seem to rework any of her sentences. At one point she hunched her shoulders and said, "This is a lot harder than I thought." From here I picked out one of her own sentences and showed her how I reworked it. Lily's original sentence read: "Along with happiness, it is important to keep an open mind." I transformed her sentence into "Along with happiness keeping an open mind holds importance as well." She understood how I transformed her sentence by keeping her same thoughts but using a more powerful verb, but she still seemed lost when I gave her a couple minutes to rewrite another sentence. Lily spoke aloud, "Every time I redo it in my head I use 'is' again!" I started to think she was overwhelmed by all the sentences in front of her so I wrote one down on a separate sheet of paper for her to rework. I had my fingers crossed and she successfully did it. We tried another one with my

new adaptive method of writing a single sentence on a piece of paper to rework and her transformation worked once again! My teacher heart was beating with excitement. She was understanding it through practice.

By the end of the meeting I felt confident that my first pedagogical practice turned out successfully. I asked if she could follow what we practiced in her next paper to keep a minimum of two to-be verbs per page and she replied, "Yeah. I'll definitely try to. It's hard but I think I can do it on my own," and then she continued with a laugh, "I feel like now when I see an "is" in the rest of my papers I'll be like Oh! Wait! Gotta change that! ...but no really, I could actually use this." I felt I had an impact on Lily for her to see that she had the power to improve her own writing.

7. Revealing the Truth

In retrospect I realized the feelings that I was truly aiding her with this "Eliminate to-be Verbs" exercise were exaggeratedly built up in my head and that perhaps the exercise was not as helpful as I assumed it to be; however, I gained incredible insights into a link between Lily's vocabulary and her attachment to writing later on in this study when I looked back at this meeting. I began to see that my meeting was adequately delivered as it followed the "I do, we do, they (or Lily) do," but I just simply did not give her enough time and practice to fulfill my wishes for the pedagogical exercise. I held the hope in the beginning that Lily would be able to practice eliminating to-be verbs enough that she could see the tangible worksheet as a writing strategy that she could choose to use in her metaphorical writing tool belt, but she definitely did not have enough time to practice it enough for the strategy to sink in. Recent research reveals these results as well: "unless students have some time to practice the skills exemplified and discovered in the models, they might not be able to use those skills in their own writing and for their own purposes" (Dean, 2010). Besides this disillusionment about effectively teaching Lily, I still found the experience to be worth the sense of success for another reason. When examining Lily's attempt to practice the "Eliminate to-be Verbs" strategy on her own for her next required paper, she revealed something in a Writers Memo (that I asked her to complete) that provided me with further insights into my teacher research goal of breaking Lily's limited recognition of writing only for school and for other purposes in hopes that she will become attached to her writing which will in turn allow for her voice to be transferred into her work. After all that practice trying to improve verbs, the true bigger issue of her "basic" papers turned out to once again be—attachment.

8. A Glimpse into Lily's Writer's Memo

It became clear to see that Lily used stronger vocabulary and acknowledged an ease of finding stronger verbs when she was attached to her work. The final piece of her writing that we worked together with titled *A Mother and Son's Life with Race and Religion* revealed this notion in an objective form; her Writer's Memo did so in subjective and highly personal form that displayed her views as a writer. I intended the Writer's Memo to serve as a reflective piece of writing "that encourages [her] to make connections between the strategy used and the successful learning or writing that occurred because of it...beyond that, the reflection should also help students consider what other situations might be a good place in which to use the strategy again" (Dean, 2010). In her introductory chapter titled "Writing Strategies," Deborah Dean claims that there is more to strategic writing than just providing students with possible strategies. Reflecting upon using the strategies is a key component (Dean, 2010). From my own experience working with Lily, I found this to be true as Lily's Writer's Memo not only benefited me with insights, but it also benefited her as a writer. In Lily's first paragraph of the paper we were working with, I was impressed to see her integrate stronger verbs such as "embraced," "experienced," "witnessed," "struggled," and "grew" instead of her endless to-be verbs that she used in her "The Good Life" essay. However, by the last paragraph of this first draft the to-be verbs began to crop up as they did in her other essay. Lily's Writer's Memo provided insight for why this happened.

Because of inclement weather Lily and I could not meet face-to-face for a meeting so I took this as an opportunity to explore technology in pedagogical practices. I asked her to upload her draft using Google Drive and I asked her to complete a Writer's Memo for me—specifically gearing it around her experiences with attempting to follow the "Eliminate to-be Verbs" writing strategy on her own (to which I also emailed her a list of powerful verbs to aid her in transforming her sentences). What she had to say revealed how important it is for Lily to be attached to her writing pieces.

When reflecting on the process in her Writer's Memo of trying to use this writing strategy on her own, Lily revealed, "I had no trouble at all without using them [to-be verbs] for my introduction. I noticed I used them a lot more once I started rambling on with my ideas...I did struggle a little bit to understand the book when we were reading it in class so that made it a bit hard to write this paper." My teacher research inquisitive mind took a halt. Maybe it *is* all about attachment for Lily. How can she write well or use powerful verbs when she can not relate herself to the topic, because her own ideas are not developed to begin with?

I found myself wracking my brain trying to remember where this issue was addressed before and discovered that it appeared in our first meeting with my survey questions. When I asked, "What does a person have to do or know in order to be a good writer?" Lily replied, "they have to know what they are writing about." This simple answer reveals a multitude of depth for Lily as a writer. Later on in the survey I inquired if she experiences writer's block and if she did I asked when it did happen for her. Lily explained, "it really depends on what I'm writing about. Like for my history paper I didn't know what to write because I didn't understand what we were learning. It made it hard to write." These answers further justified that Lily did not write well when she did not know the topic (thus, she could not attach herself to the topic). Attachment became my main pivot point in this teacher research inquiry driven exploration.

9. Gearing Towards Attachment

In order for Lily to become attached to her writing, I still had to address the problem of her preconceived notion that writing is solely done for scholarly purposes in an English classroom. In *Teaching the Neglected "R,"* Barry Lane uses the concept of "thought-shots"; this is an exercise that involves depicting a scene in as most detail as the writer can, drawing only from personal experiences and then ending the scene with one thought about her description (Lane, 2007). Lane's essay honors the overarching theme of the anthology of works by using these "thought shots" to rethink writing instruction where the normal method of attempting to aid a student's writing is by "scribbling 'show, don't tell' in the margins of their papers" (Lane, 2007). He believed there was a time to show and a time to tell and he witnessed a particularly notable breakthrough in a student named Dwight who "often wrote one sentence and counted the words in that one sentence as though volume could substitute for the meaning and purpose missing in his words" (Lane, 2007). I saw a connection between Lane's student Dwight and Lily—they both struggled to find writing as something meaningful. After practice with the "thought-shot" exercise, Dwight found meaning in writing by drawing from his own experiences (Lane, 2007). At this important part of my research, I wanted Lily to undergo a similar breakthrough as a writer. I saw this "thought-shot" exercise as a perfect way to get Lily writing for fun, a way to get her attached to her writing by drawing from her personal experiences, and ultimately a way to show that a "thought-shot" could be used in her own expository writing. I hoped that this would break her distinction enough for her to see the potential she has as a writer who transfers her voice into her writing. I wanted her locked schema about writing to open up to greater possibilities.

The "thought-shot" lesson began with Lily and I reading the worksheet I made to understand the exercise and the value the exercise holds. From there I had Lily bring out a piece of paper and I dug through my bag for my writer's notebook for us to do the activity together. I intentionally asked her to think of an experience that made her happy (a time she genuinely felt she was living "the good life") in hopes that I could show her how this exercise could be used in the essay she just wrote. However, I made sure to emphasize that the exercise was just for fun and I wanted to see her draw from her own experiences as much as she could. We wrote for about ten minutes and exchanged our "thought-shots" to read; Lily's piece blew me away. She wrote a description of an experience entering a children's hospital during Christmas time and provided the concluding thought that "Donating toys to the children's hospital warmed my heart and changed my life." Finally, her words screamed "Lily wrote this!" to me. Her kind personality showed through in her words; she established a voice by becoming attached to her work. That moment as a teacher was thrilling. She was learning and little did I know I was learning just as much in return.

10. A Kink in the Success

After I expressed my delight in reading her work with a genuine attachment and her voice transferred on paper, I attempted to show Lily how she could use the "thought-shot" exercise in her academic writing. My teacher elation soon deflated. I explained how this thought-shot could have been the introduction to her

"The Good Life" essay, because it sets up a scene with related aspects that could be explored in her definition of living the good life. I suggested her thesis could have been that living the good life means being able to give back. Although her "thought-shot" clearly indicates that she believes this to be true, she told me, "I don't know. I liked writing that, but no professor would ever want to see that in an essay. Your introduction has to introduce the topic like it's supposed to." Her word's "like it's supposed to" indicated that her recognition that writing is only done for academic purposes in school (that "does not really count as writing") was a far deeper seeded issue than I anticipated. After attempting once more to justify that thought-shots could be integrated into an academic paper, I realized my pleas were futile. Lily's preconception of writing as an academic exercise kept her from immersing herself in her words. In this way, she matched the description of a student who "recognizes school as an obstacle course of meaningless facts and tests which they must endure in order to reach the goal of getting beyond it all, rather than as an ongoing involvement in meaningful and life-related inquiry" (Moher, 2007). In her essay titled "The Writing Conference" in the anthology *Teaching the Neglected "R"* Terry Moher asserts that many high school students accrue this recognition over many years towards school-related learning (Moher, 2007). Based on my findings, I believed this to be true. Lily could not attach herself to her writing because previous experiences with writing seemed to force her only to see writing as an obstacle: grades, grammar lessons, research papers, writing tests, the five-paragraph essay, etc. Providing opportunities for attachment was something clearly missing in Lily's previous classrooms learning experiences.

By the end of the teacher research experience my data seemed to conclude in full circle: I wondered once again about how without breaking this distinction Lily holds about writing, how will she be able to attach herself and transfer her voice into her writing? In the end the cyclical nature of my data actually allowed for me to gain invaluable insights throughout this journey of the co-learning experience between Lily and me.

11. Reflections and Insights Gained for the Future

I have come to the understanding that teaching depends not only upon time, but a goal-driven use of it geared towards the needs of the individual student. Looking back on the entire process I lament the lack of time where my hard work, collaboration, adaptability, and in-depth investigation could have truly solidified a positive learning influence in Lily. If I had an entire school year to explore writing with her, I believe I could help Lily become the writer she has the potential to be by revealing the many ways writing goes beyond the classroom. Further explorations with "Eliminate to-be Verbs," and "thought-shot" exercises, and other pedagogical practices could help Lily see the tangible worksheets as actual writing strategies that she could incorporate into her own writing. These writing strategies would liberate her writing for possibilities that stretch far beyond worksheets and the classroom.

Teachers need to understand that we need to give our students writing assignments that are relevant to their lives so they can attach themselves to their work and ensure that the work they are completing is not just for a grade. This small but meaningful step would produce an insurmountable amount of positive change in the writing classroom. Exercises such as writing portfolios can help teachers gain insight into what truly matters to their students. We must engage students in exercises that likewise go beyond the classroom, "We need to encourage students to meet their audience in authentic ways—not just by sharing sessions with their peers but also by going public in other ways beyond the walls of the classroom: complaint letters, articles, contests, etc" (Fletcher, 1993). I undoubtedly believe that if Lily or any student like her was given this kind of education where she was personally invested in her writing, she would easily be able to carry it with her beyond the classroom.

For me teaching is not about following a formula to get a desired result; it is about getting to know your students by discovering who they are and building and rebuilding that connection through the learning process on a journey of self-discovery in which they see educational growth as something powerful and relevant in their individual lives.

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