

Reading, Writing and Materialisation: An Autobiography of an English Teacher in Vignettes

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Abstract: This article treats the act of writing about past experiences as a material influence on the 'self' I am becoming, particularly the 'self' I call English Teacher, and explores how language is a material component in the 'new materialist turn' in the humanities. The vignettes in this article describe experiences in my past, each with its own self-contained narrative; I then thread them together as part of a larger chronological narrative written in a more expository style that further explicates themes that emerge from the vignettes and reveals how I am affected by the language and stories I encounter through literature, and in my own writing. Inherent in the structure of the article is the exploration of different narrative styles, intertextuality and the affective potential of 'thinking again' through re-writing past experiences.

Vignette 1 – The Moving Finger Writes

Marjorie Brush, Aofie McGrandles and I lingered by our lockers. Summer spilled through the windows and wafted down the hall. Not only was it the last day of the school year, it was our last day ever in that school. Maybe that's why we were reluctant to leave.

Four teachers gathered at the end of the corridor. Mr Pepper and Ms Bradley – my two basketball coaches – and Mr Lao and Mr Cull. They snickered and passed a piece of paper between them.

'Whose initials are those?' Said Ms Bradley.

'I'm not sure,' said Mr Pepper.

'You should frame it and put it on your wall, Bob!' Ms Bradley laughed, Mr Lao laughed, and Mr Pepper laughed. Ms Bradley handed the note to Mr Cull.

We ambled toward the teachers.

'What's so funny Mr Pepper?' Aofie McGrandles asked.

'Tell us the joke,' I said.

'Do you know anyone with the initials ST?' Asked Mr Pepper. Aofie McGrandles twisted her lips, narrowed her gaze and rubbed her chin.

'ST?' said Aofie McGrandles.

'She's ST – Sarah Truman!' said Marjorie Brush. She pointed to me.

'Yeah, those are my initials!' I said.

Mr Cull handed me the note. It was a stupid note I'd written months ago to stupid Lesley Scherer who had lost it in her stupid locker until that afternoon.

It read:

Dear Poopums;

Meet me in the upstairs washroom at 1:45. I'll escape from 'Mr Dull's' art class.

I hate art; it is quite the royal bore.

ST

'Now that's a work of art!' Mr Bradley laughed.

'Mr Dull. Quite the royal bore,' Mr Pepper said with a British accent.

Mr Cull laughed and looked away.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I don't think art is a bore. I didn't mean it. And you're not *dull*.'

Mr Cull looked at the ceiling. He laughed and went back into his classroom.

We left middle school and never returned.

Two months later I entered the portable of my grade 9 English class. Laminated on the wall was a quotation from Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.*

I memorised the quatrain that morning.

Introduction

This autobiography in literary vignettes explores how my experiences in school, at work, and with literature shaped my path to becoming an English educator. The vignettes describe experiences in my past, each with its own self-contained narrative; I then thread them together as part of a larger chronological narrative written in a more expository style that further explicates themes that emerge from the vignettes. The paper also explores how my identity and interests as a teacher arise through social circumstances, life experiences, and through the material affects of writing about such events.

Methodology and methods

Encouraging teachers to narrate their personal stories has long been considered a tool for professional praxis (Latta & Kim, 2009). Following this tradition, the vignettes I present in this article are drawn from what Butt, Townsend & Raymond (1990) suggest as three categories of experiences that influence teacher development, '... the teacher's *private life history, professional experiences*, and the teacher's own *experiences as a student in school*' (p. 255, italics mine). Ideas for the vignettes came through exploring 'Personal Experience Methods' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), and using 'free writing' (Elbow, 1973) to access '*epiphanic moments*' from my life (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 75, italics in original).

Vignettes referred originally to the stylised vines (vin) that framed a page of photographs, and later to a style of photos, and later still, to writing. Coulter and Smith (2009) posit, 'the event that is transposed into a vignette is often representative of a large set of confirming data instances' (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 587). I don't use these vignettes to confirm a larger set of

'data.' However, I think that vignettes are efficient, and potentially poignant ways to articulate affective experiences that have influenced my path as an English teacher and writer. Brian Massumi (2002) states, although 'the skin is faster than the word,' language can amplify or dampen the intensity of an affect through articulation or writing (p. 25). This has been my experience in revisiting episodes in my life through writing about them and allowing themes to emerge. I hope that re-crafting these events as vignettes generates verisimilitude for the readers that may resonate with their own experiences.

Carl Leggo (2008) describes autobiographical writing as a means for 'seeking diverse possibilities of identity' and recognising how a sense of self is 'composed in the intersections of multiple processes of identity shaping and reshaping' (Leggo, 2008, pp. 17–18). The vignettes and expository writing in this article articulate the ongoing process of identity shaping and re-shaping, and the affect of language on this process. Accordingly, in this article, I treat the act of writing about past experiences as a material influence on the 'self' I am becoming, particularly the 'self' I call English Teacher. I'm not positing that I'm 'created' through language, rather I acknowledge that I am affected by the language and stories I encounter through literature, and in my own writing. In doing so, I keep language as a material component of the 'new materialist turn' in the humanities – not as the seat of all meaning, but as a material contribution to the ongoing production of a 'self' alongside other *material* vectors such as culture, life experiences, and genetics.

Structurally, this article draws from Donal O'Donoghue's (2010) question, 'In what ways might the representation of research findings in new and different ways productively serve to enlarge, advance and deepen ... consciousness?' (O'Donoghue, 2010, p. 409). As an English teacher and lover of stories I deliberately use intertextuality, interimagery, different narrative styles including free (in)direct discourse, free direct thought, narrated discourse, different tenses, and quantitative statistics to explore O'Donoghue's question.

Vignette 2 – Mikey's Desk, Grade 2

'Who remembers the words to *You Are My Sunshine*?'

Nineteen hands shoot up from the circle.

'Okay, put your arms down. I just have to tune my guitar and then we'll all sing together, Mrs Truman will hand out the song books,' Says Mr Halim. My mommy is

the class helper today. She comes in every second Tuesday. I like it when she's here.

Mr Halim tunes his guitar. The notes bend and wobble into place. We fidget. Mr Halim strums the familiar rhythm, and we begin:

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are grey
You'll never know dear how much I love you
So please don't take my sunshine away.*

'Okay, that was good. This time, I want everyone to listen to the person beside you. Make sure you are singing on key ... what is that noise?' Mr Halim looks toward the door.

A long, piercing, metallic sound echoes in the hallway. It scrapes like knives sharpening. It's getting closer. Scrape. Bang. Mikey drags a desk over the threshold and into the room. Rainwater drips onto the floor from the desk, its blue metal finish rusty, and red painted chair cracked. Mr Halim leans his guitar against the sideboard gently and Mommy crosses the room swiftly.

'What have you brought to class, Mikey?' Mommy asks.

Oh gross! Garbage picker. Stinky Mikey. What a dirty dumpster diver. Whisper children in the singing circle.

Mr Halim and Mommy place the garbage desk next to Mr Halim's. Mommy collects brown paper towels from the dispenser and dries the chair. Mikey stands close to her.

'Here Mikey, you dry the legs,' Mommy says. Mikey gathers the paper towels and kneels beside Mommy. He wipes the rusty blue legs of the garbage desk.

The front left leg is missing its cap. The desk wobbles as Mikey works.

'Are the legs uneven? I can fix that,' says Mr Halim. He folds a piece of blue construction paper so it's the right width. He tapes it beneath the left leg with shiny strong tape. He grabs the back of the chair and shakes it gently.

'Good as new!' Mommy says. Mikey smiles.

'Mikey, this is a fabulous desk. You can sit at it when we do our class work. But for now, I want you to join the circle while we finish singing our song, okay?' Says Mr Halim.

We sing *You are my Sunshine* three times through. The song feels sad.

According to a 2009, Canadian Teachers' Federation report, 'Nearly one out of every nine Canadian children lives in poverty,' and 'Children in racialised, new Canadian and Aboriginal families as well as children with disabilities are at greater risk of living in poverty' (Canadian Teacher's Federation Report, 2009, unpagged).

Vignette 3 – The Vandal, Grade 4

'Who knows what vandalism is?' asks Mrs White. Hands flash from the row of grade five children fanned beside her feet on the library floor.

'Is this vandalism?' Mrs White holds a copy of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume. Someone has drawn a stick-man flipbook illustration on the top right corners of about half of the book. Mrs White doesn't flip the pages quickly enough to let us see the narrative. Mrs White flips to the back of the book, pinches the library card with her thin fingers and extracts it from its casing.

'Over twenty students have taken this book out of the library. We will have a difficult time catching the vandal. But we are diligent,' she says.

'Is this vandalism?' Mrs White holds a copy of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Mrs White points to a passage of the book underlined in green ink. My stomach flip-flops. The students nod and agree it is vandalism. Mrs White turns to the back of the book, pinches the library card and extracts it. She flicks the card. 'Only seven students have ever taken this book out. And one of them is still a student here. Sarah Truman, you don't draw in books do you?'

I squirm. Mrs White peers. I gulp. Mrs White smiles, 'I know Sarah, you like books, you wouldn't *vandalise* a book.'

My older brother always underlines passages in his books. He says it helps him remember the important bits. I underlined the important bits from *The Little Prince*:

All grown-ups were once children – but only a few of them remember.

Words are the source of misunderstandings.

Mrs White displays several other books, reveals how they have been vandalised, removes their library cards and chimes off students' names.

Our class files into the hallway.

I've always loved marginalia. I didn't always know that term, but since I was a child I enjoyed reading other peoples' scribbles in books. Since the episode with Mrs White, I haven't written in a public book myself, but I don't mind when others do. For many years I've kept a journal of notes pulled from other authors as well as my own diary.

The tradition of keeping a diary, or 'commonplace book' of important works we've encountered is part of a long tradition in western literary traditions in the past few hundred years (Jackson, 2001). And according to Michel Foucault (1997) the ancient Greek practice of *hypomnemata* (keeping a diary or personal journal) is a method 'to capture the already said, to collect what

one has managed to hear or read, for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self' (Foucault, 1997, pp. 210–211). Foucault argues that by creating *hypomnemata* we transform, 'the things seen or heard into tissue and blood' (Foucault, 1997, p. 213).

Although these statements make metaphorical reference to the visceral affects of language building a physical 'self,' I am not suggesting that language inscribes the 'self'. I am suggesting what many English teachers seem to know intuitively – that the texts we read and write can have material effects on the people we become.

Vignette 4 – A Lesson From Aloes, Grade 12

I bring down the lights on the closing scene of the play. I love the thick blue-black darkness at the end of a production. My chest hums. The crowd is silent for an instant then floods into applause. I breathe deeply. I bring up the front lights again, illuminating the crowd. The room smells like coffee and baked goods. A woman in the front row wipes her face. Someone whoops in the back row. We did it.

Mr Wilson strides onto stage. 'Would you think that a group of teenagers in suburban Toronto would care about Apartheid?' Mr Wilson asks.

'They do. And they care about drama. They built this room!'

Mr Wilson calls me, and the other volunteers who came in over the summer on stage. Applause rattles the rafters. It's been a wonderful few months. We turned the former electronics lab into a drama studio, hung lights, curtains and painted the walls slate blue grey: we made a new space for drama in the school and already the community is benefiting from it.

The first play we presented in the new drama room was *A Lesson from Aloes*, Athol Fugard's play about South African apartheid. Although we were only grade 12–13 students from a suburb in Toronto, seemingly far from the turmoil of apartheid, we knew that the play's message needed to be told because it was relevant in North America too – and remains so. There was no question of drama and the written word's power to transport and transform us in that moment.

I can't remember my life before reading. As a child, my mother used to read entire books to me aloud – *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Secret Garden*. Even at a young age, I recognised the affective potential of literature. In high school, along with becoming involved in theatre, I set out to discover my own 'favourite author'. Inspired by my favourite

pop star – the British singer Morrissey, I chose Oscar Wilde. At the age of 15 I read his complete works and marvelled at his witty prose. I then devoured Salinger, and later Steinbeck; they remain three of my favourite authors.

Entering university it only made sense that I would study English literature and philosophy – and after graduating I planned to become a high school teacher so I too could inspire a new generation of readers and writers.

Journey to the East

Vignette 5 – The Aneurysm

I hang up the phone softly and stroll into the common room tentatively. I tap my roommate Karthika, a nursing student, on the shoulder.

'I just got a panicky call from my sister-in-law. She says my mom's had a brain *aneurysm* and I need to come to the hospital. What's a brain aneurysm?'

Her eyes grow wide. 'Is your mother alive?'

'Of course she's alive. What the hell does that mean? What's a brain aneurysm?'

'You'd better go to the hospital. Now.'

I take a copy of the *Diamond Sutra* from my desk so I can do some reading for my Chinese philosophy class. I run out of the residence, down to College Street and climb on the streetcar towards High Park where my brother lives.

Life can change in an instant.

Watching the rain through the window on a gloomy November day I have the sinking feeling that something horrible has happened.

My mother's aneurysm was misdiagnosed as a migraine and she wasn't operated on for 10 days. By all accounts she should have died. She didn't. My mother's short-term memory was damaged irreparably and she had to train her long-term memory to store recent events. She was in hospital for six months.

Deborah Orr (2002), while discussing equality in classroom settings describes pedagogical innovation as the 'willingness to deal with the life experiences of students outside the classroom' (Orr, 2002, p. 478). Although I do not consider myself a *marginalised* student, during the year of my mother's aneurysm, I couldn't concentrate on my studies and felt like I had to truncate my emotions in order to get anything done. My second year of university remains a blur of hospitals and doctors and my mother's hallucinations during recovery. The only thing I read for pleasure was

Chinese philosophy. All the other subjects I was studying felt dead – even literature. I decided that school was pointless and nearly quit. My father forced me to finish my third year, ‘or work in the chicken factory sweeping giblets.’ As I was a vegetarian, this was the worst threat he could present. I finished my degree, begrudgingly.

*Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*

Diamond Sutra

Vignette 6 – Yunnan Province, China

Outside the window, water gallops in the ancient canal. I can smell coal from the stove in the courtyard where the Na’xi woman roasts sweet potatoes. I’ve been in Yunnan for a week, and China for more than two years. I still feel like a ghost most days – observing, keeping notes, watching Chinese culture, but not belonging. This threshold life is fulfilling, yet lonely. My main medium of communication is mailing letters back to Canada. I imagine my words travelling by post to the other side of the world – a tenuous link in this large landscape.



After finishing school I found a job as an editor of English translations of Chinese medical texts in Nanjing, China. While in China, I spent my spare time travelling through the country.

During my travels throughout China I handwrote letters to one of my old teachers – David, and he responded via post. We modelled our missives on the Ming Dynasty tradition of Qingshu (情书). Qingshu translates as ‘love

letters,’ but in the Late Ming dynasty Qingshu referred to letters written between close friends that intermingled ‘literary genres’ and ‘expressed one’s innermost feelings’ (Lowry, 2003, p. 243). The writing process occurs in liminal space in between affective experience, and the written word. Over time, I’ve come to see writing as both a ritual act and a physical and mental space of being neither here nor there, but becoming. My own experiences are transformed through writing about them, and I am transformed by writing.



During my time in China I wrote several articles – one won a National Magazine Award in Canada. Afterward a small literary publisher from the US wrote to ask me if I would write a book. I did. I used the archive of correspondence of 100+ handwritten Qingshu (情书) letters as the basis for my book.

English Teacher

After I returned to Canada, I worked for several years as a magazine editor and then decided it was time to do what I always planned to do – become an English teacher. I studied for my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the United Kingdom. As a British citizen, I had always wanted to live in the UK so I thought that studying there would be a good opportunity. I loved the program – for the teaching, but more surprisingly, and unlike most of my cohort, for the two Master’s level research projects we conducted in schools. One study I conducted over a 10-week period questioned whether the reading of literature had the ability to incite empathy in teenage readers. We used journal writing, visualisation and role-play in conjunction with the novel *Private Peaceful* (Morpurgo,

2003). The study and the unit were both successful and fostered my hope in the power of literature, and my curiosity in educational research.

I felt at home in the UK. I had a love and familiarity with the land and the people and the beer. My first placement school was in one of the most affluent districts in Cardiff. My second placement school was in the Welsh valleys near one of the poorest council estates in the country – yet with a tremendous view of the windswept landscape. Those varied environments reminded me again of the social justice issues that accompany education.

Vignette 7 – The ‘Library’

Books lie in damp piles on the floor, and those that have been placed on makeshift shelves are not classified in any usable manner. I’m told the library has been in this condition for over a year. It was formerly in a portable that was destroyed when the rotten floor gave way to dirt.

The English teachers did their best to relocate the books to this room, tucked away behind the cooking facilities – but with no librarian, and little time themselves they struggle to maintain the space.

Students can access the ‘library’ by passing through the home economics room as long as they don’t disturb the other students testing out recipes, and only if accompanied by a teacher. If someone walks outside around the back of the building and rolls up the grey garage door that covers the window, some daylight will grace the space. But that doesn’t usually happen.

At the time I didn’t think it possible that in the United Kingdom, a high school would be without the funds, and the staffing to support a functional library. I remember the libraries of my youth as the brightest, warmest and most important rooms of the school. When I inquired about the lack of space for the library I was told that IT suites and ‘Learning Resource Centres’ were replacing libraries across the UK; this is seen as an initiative that will help students in lower economic areas access information and ‘keep up’ with their more affluent counterparts by bridging the digital divide. I agree that digital literacy is important, but something still nags about how its always students in poorer neighbourhoods who suffer from lack of access to physical spaces like libraries.

Return to the East

After teaching in the UK, in one of life’s spirals, I moved back to China to work as an English teacher at a British high school. Students in the school were affluent and did not suffer from a lack of space, yet our

experience of English was still hemmed in by the reality of summative assessments in the form of IGCSEs and A-Levels. Daily class content was geared toward end of year exams. The students completed their work in the knowledge that their academic futures depended on the results of exams that would be mailed across the world to London to be marked.

Vignette 8 – Dufu’s Cottage

We wander through the lush bamboo park reading poems inscribed into the pathways in granite calligraphy. The day is bright, our movements deliberate, the students abnormally contemplative. It’s difficult to believe that we’re in the middle of Chengdu.

We arrive at Dufu, the 8th century poet’s cottage. It hides in bamboo solitude near a silent river.

‘Okay, don’t everyone crowd into the cottage at once’ I say.

‘A-level students wait outside while the GCSE students go in. Make notes in your journals.’

Dufu’s desk is simple, near the window overlooking a bamboo garden. The aesthetic space inspires me the same way his poems about wandering do.

‘So Chun Chun, what do you think you’d have to do to be able to write like Dufu?’ I ask.

‘I’d need Dufu’s peace in order to write like him.’

‘How would you find that peace?’

‘Live in the forest for many years.’

‘Do you think you could bring that peace to your life at school?’

‘There’s no peace at school,’ she says.

Further thoughts

This paper began *in medias res* – in the middle – and opened with a dramatic event rather than an exposition that I hope drew the readers into the stories. The next vignette took place years earlier, chronologically, and the rest followed in chronological sequence, interspersed with expository writing and theory that I will now ‘synthesise’ in this final section.

Bill Pinar (2004) states the moment of synthesis can be thought of as a ‘moment of intense interiority ... a conversation with oneself’ where one becomes ‘mobilised for engaged pedagogical action’ (Pinar 2004, p. 38). Similarly, Eliot Eisner (1991) states, ‘... writing forces you to reflect in an organised and focused way on what it is you want to say. Words written confront you and give you an opportunity to think again’ (Eisner, 1991, p. 34). The themes that have emerged from writing this piece are so familiar to me that I

didn't recognise them until I asked myself to 'think again.'

The three themes that stand out for me among the vignettes are the affective potential of the written and spoken word, social justice issues in education, and the necessity for space and time to develop writing and reading skills – which seems to feed back into the first two themes.

Through reflecting on my life experiences and reading through my own vignettes regarding my memory of social justice issues in school – specifically 'Mikey's Desk' and 'The Library' – I recognise that social, geographic and economic circumstances can radically alter students' experiences. Sara Ahmed (2010) states, '... We may walk into a room and 'feel the atmosphere' but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival ... The pedagogic encounter is full of angles' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37).

The 'angles' that mitigate each person's experience are varied and complex. In reading through my own history, I see how certain moments in my past – such as my mother's aneurysm – changed the course of my future. I know from experience that enduring emotional hardships can make it difficult to concentrate in school and it does not require much imagination to envision how coupling an emotional hardship with existing poverty or racial injustices would make it even more difficult to concentrate, or even arrive at school.

Regarding Eisner's challenge that *words written confront you and give you an opportunity to think again*: I recognise that had I not written 'Mikey's Desk,' I might not have thought to look up poverty rates in Canada. But I did. I now know that as of 2009, nearly one out of every nine children in Canada lives in poverty, and that rate increases among racialised, aboriginal, and disabled students, while the over-all child poverty rate has remained unchanged since 1989 (I challenge educators from other countries to check your own national statistics).

Rereading my vignettes has revealed the affect and effects of language and literature in my life – from the opening vignette's citation of the *Rubā'iyāt*, to *A Lesson from Aloes*, to the *Diamond Sutra* – I can see that words have had a material affect who I am becoming as an educator (I also note that many of the literary works I cite in this article were not originally written in English, and most of them were written by males). Continuing in that vein, I would like to include other forms of writing and speaking, for example the child

poverty statistic, as material forces affecting what I am becoming.

Tibetan philosophy outlines the Three *Vajras* – the triple gradation of Body, Mind, and Speech – as an ensemble of intersecting parts that co-constitute a being (or more appropriately, a becoming) (Guenther, 1986, p. 9). This vector relates to the new materialist notion of *discursive-materiality* that recognises myriad material reconfigurings in co-constituting or determining who I am in a given instance. I view language and stories as material components of this process. Writing this article has re-affirmed how as an English language educator it is my job to help students, and myself understand the material effects of language on what we become. To be clear, in the new materialist (and Foucaultian sense) the term *discursive* is not a synonym for language, rather what is discursive describes the constitutive apparatus that allows something to be said and have meaning (Barad, 2007, p. 146).

According to Anne Kolodny (2005), the mitigating screens of culture and discourses inform how we think, and write about the world. 'Nobody writes without having some sense of what has been previously written, and what kind of generic patterns, story shapes, or stylistic possibilities already exist ...' (Kolodny, 2005, p. 9). This has been true of my experience writing this article; but it has also made me consider how I can learn to include new forms of writing into my own practice. As a teacher I am versed in teaching others narrative conventions, but that does not preclude me from striving to learn different forms of writing myself. Rather, I think it requires me to learn new (to me) forms of storytelling that have traditionally been excluded from the English canon.

Significance

In *What the Arts taught me about Education*, Eisner (1991) writes about the processes of *individuation* and *generalisation*. Individuation is when an artist renders a unique object into an identifiable form. But although that 'unique object' is perceived as singular, if it is rendered well it becomes 'universal' and can be applied and recognised elsewhere (1991, p. 41). Many stories of the English canon were once believed to be universal – the story of everyman, with themes recurring across the ages and cultures. In a postcolonial, postmodern, and now posthuman era I am wary of making generalisations with my stories. I even begin to wonder about the notion of *verisimilitude* which I invoked in the opening section of the paper – *veritas* ('truth') for whom? How

many stories don't we hear because they don't fit into our narrative/discursive conventions?

After reading through the vignettes again, and viewing them through a defamiliarised lens, I can postulate that the method, and perhaps the themes, if not the specific content of this study will be useful for other English educators in recognising their own procedures of becoming and how language impacts that process. For me the vignettes are poignant reminders of transformative instances in my past that continue to transform me through writing.

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