
Speaking Truth to Power

Speaking Out in the Public Sphere: Why, What, Where, and How Teachers Can Enter the Fray

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Most teachers I've met since entering the profession in the mid-1970s have said that they decided to teach because they want to make a difference in kids' lives. Teaching is their identity; it's their work and passion. It consumes their day and their thinking throughout the year, and leaves little time for much else.

With teaching their primary orientation, and with their jobs designed primarily to support and sustain their direct work with students, few teachers have the time and inclination to become public advocates for education. They have no work-related obligation to do so, either in print form or online. Even though most English teachers are accomplished writers and love the written word, they have not yet, as a group, made substantial contributions to the public debate about education. As a consequence, control of the rhetoric and related policies that surround their work has been seized by others.

This situation is understandable given the lack of a clear forum through which teachers may express their views; and the availability of time, resources, ghostwriters, political clout, and well-organized efforts of those who see education as the next great market to exploit and agenda to control. However, in not taking a more visible and aggressive approach to contesting the incessant images of failure and ineptitude constructed by antagonistic critics who hope to dominate the education budget, K–12 teachers are losing the battle of public perception in a big way. The public discourse has been hijacked by those with other schemes that often involve gutting public school budgets, directing funds to well-connected edupreneurs, and advancing their own political, religious, and societal agendas through their influence.

In this column I hope to persuade teachers that taking a public stance is possible and available, if difficult, and to provide some avenues for making their experiences and positions part of the local and national debates about education. The widely spread dogma that we work within a failing educational system has been propagated largely from outside our ranks. Yet teachers are the ones best positioned to provide counternar-

ratives and an alternative perspective about how schools are indeed working, and working quite well. Nobody understands kids, schools, teaching, and learning better than teachers. It's time for their perspective—*your* perspective—to be advanced and respected as schools take shape in the coming era.

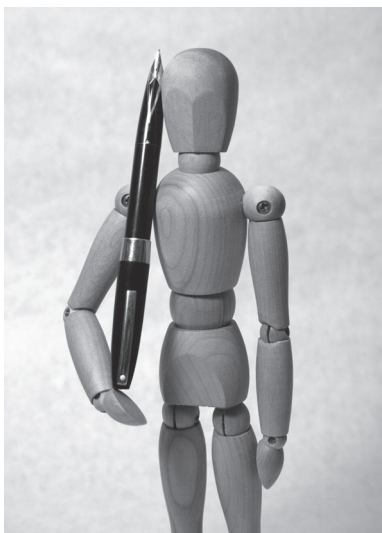
A Personal Note on Public Writing

I was a public school teacher from 1976–90 in Illinois. At the time, there were few forums for anyone to write for the public beyond the occasional letter to the local newspaper's editor, which I did on a few occasions, such as during a school strike my faculty called, when I made an appeal for community unity in the midst of an angry conflict. Otherwise, there simply was not the extensive platform available from which to express oneself that there is in today's electronically connected world. Working in this environment as a university professor, I began writing op-ed pieces in 2010 for a variety of outlets, primarily the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which has graciously provided me space to express my views (see <http://smago.coe.uga.edu/vita/vitaweb.htm#OpEd>, which provides links to the essays I've written for the *AJC* and other online sources).

I relate this experience to acknowledge that, as a professor at my state's namesake university, I'm not in the same position as most teachers, who lack that sort of visibility and access to such a high-profile outlet, and further lack the time and rewards that my job provides for me to write. At the same time, I do think that I've learned a lot through this writing that I can bring to bear on questions of how teachers can enter their own views into the public debate and make their voices heard amid the greater cacophony, in spite of some genuine obstacles to their doing so.

Why Don't Teachers Write for the Public?

I'll begin with an exploration of why teachers tend not to write for the public, no matter how fluent and belletristic their prose might be. Most obviously, teachers don't have a whole lot of extra time, particularly as class sizes balloon in this era of underfunded school districts, a condition that makes demands on their time and energy that policymakers and critics appear to believe are not a problem. A friend of mine in Athens, Georgia, is a high school science teacher who has been assigned 193 students this year, with little time for planning and grading, much less writing op-ed essays that outsiders might just dismiss as the whining of another lazy, malcontented teacher. English teachers, with more extensive responsibilities for teaching and grading their students' compositions, have even less time to dedicate to public writing. And teachers, given their orientation to the humanities,



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might choose other means of written expression should they write in their spare time, such as a personal journal, poetry or fiction, letters to friends, and so on. With world enough and time they might also write op-eds, but for most teachers it's quite a luxury to take on such a demanding avocation.

Another reason that teachers don't write is that there is no expectation for it at work. University faculty often have publish-or-perish job requirements, even if op-eds and blog essays might be regarded as publications of low value in annual reviews. But for K-12 teachers, all rewards for writing are personal, unless the writing has enough impact to have a demonstrable effect on practice and policy. Not only is there no reward; in my experience such writing may even invite resentment from colleagues who believe that getting recognition is a form of self-aggrandizement that is discouraged through social ostracism in the workplace. That was my own experience as a

teacher who had begun writing books and journal articles while still in the classroom: The more I wrote, the less I was accepted on the faculty. So not only is there no support or encouragement, there can be downright hostility from colleagues for taking on a role beyond the confines of the school.

I have also talked with teachers who are discouraged from writing out of fear of administrative reprisal, as articulated recently by a teacher in Delaware who would only publish her essay anonymously (Anonymous). Although it's possible to write essays that accentuate the positive—for instance, among my own *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* essays is a series on great Georgia teachers, which I undertook to provide a counternarrative to the vile rhetorical context with which our Red State's residents surround us—teachers might be more inclined to write critical pieces that suggest ways for their own schools to improve. It turns out that administrators, for the most part, would prefer that teachers not write such pieces for publication. My friends in the classroom say that, in a “Right to Work” state like Georgia with no job protection (we are a union-free state), they might be dismissed at a moment's notice for anything deemed critical, and thus negative, by their administration.

Teachers further often feel that, compared to Bill Gates and others influencing policy, they are simply outnumbered and outspent such that there's no point in even trying. If 40 million English teachers wrote powerful essays, Gates could trump their opinions by writing a \$40 million check to

increase testing, raise class sizes, and achieve whatever other whimsical end he and Melinda decide is the next mandate to impose on educators, relying on their expertise in the software industry to inform their beliefs about schooling. If not Gates, then Pearson, or McGraw-Hill, or another wealthy, politically connected private sector entity that sees a way for our work to work to their economic advantage.

The final reason I'll review for teachers not writing for the public concerns the toxic potential that Web 2.0 environments provide for hateful anonymous commenters to say whatever they wish with no accountability or consequence. I know of the consequences of this possibility from writing for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where a devoted group of Tea Party hardliners—all of whom appear to be out of work, given how copious their comments are—jump promptly on every essay published and write insulting, nasty, ill-informed, and often personal attacks on the author. A recent study indeed has found that such Internet trolls, regardless of political party, are likely to be Machiavellian sadists and psychopaths (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus), which can make trying to engage with them fruitless and frustrating.

You've got to have a mighty tough hide to write for such a forum; op-ed writing in this age is not for the faint of heart.

The fact is, you've got to have a mighty tough hide to write for such a forum; op-ed writing in this age is not for the faint of heart.

Teachers see how my own essays are treated by this crowd, and I can imagine that they simply do not want to subject themselves to such a high level of abuse. I don't particularly like it either, when they do it to me or anyone else to the left of Rand Paul; but I believe that their goal is to bully people with whom they disagree out of the discussion. I can't let them do that, and so soldier on. But I can see why others are reluctant to make themselves such easy targets for these cold-hearted cowards to snipe at from the safety of their pseudonyms.

Why, What, How, and Where Teachers Can Write for the Public

Given such a great range of obstacles, why should teachers write for the public, and how might they get their work published? It's easy for me to say from my current position what people in schools should do, because my job is designed to support writing and theirs is not, and for whatever reasons, professorial titles provide a degree of insulation that teaching might not. I also work in an institution characterized by academic freedom, which is often absent from school cultures. Still, I think that there are compelling reasons why teachers should, if their goals and circumstances allow, take to the keyboard and enter the fray.

Why

First, teachers understand schools, teaching, learning, and kids better than anyone else on earth. Letting people who have never taught control the public debate is a losing proposition, because

their assumptions are informed by rhetoric and images that rarely are founded in reality. Teachers know what is working and what is not, and the American constitutional right to free speech—compromised in many cases by administrative threats to remain silent—suggests that they may express their beliefs about their own work. It's probably bad form to write rants against the principal, but there are other things to write about, many of them positive: good things going on in the school, levels of achievement attained by students and teachers, curricular initiatives, and so forth. If the nation as a whole believes that schools are failing, then someone needs to present them in a more positive light. Who is better positioned to do so than teachers?

Even critical essays are possible to write, although that might require some level of seniority and job security of the sort not available in states like Georgia. At Oak Park and River Forest High School (IL), where I taught in the late 1980s, Steve Gevinson recently wrote an essay for the city newspaper lamenting the cancellation of a program designed to assist African American families with navigating the school's curriculum and other scholastic pathways, and explaining the consequences for these families and the community as a whole in the aftermath of the program's termination. As a division head (who serves as administrator to a cluster of departments) with a University of Chicago MAT and PhD, Steve no doubt had more capital to work with than do most teachers. Yet in his prudent review of the situa-

tion, he made his points without coming across as a raging bull, an approach that did not restore the program but did register with the public the idea that programs cancelled to save money do involve other, greater costs.

What

Steve's essay helps to answer the question, What should teachers write about in the public forum? In general, I'd say that teachers should write about what inspires them, whether on the local level as in Steve's case or the broader policy scene as has been the case with another department chair I know, Ian Altman of Clarke Central High School in Athens, Georgia. Ian is a passionate advocate for undocumented students in Georgia, where many residents take a xenophobic stance toward outsiders, especially those of color whose first language is Spanish. Ian addressed a problem of both local and national importance by writing about President Obama's effort to provide amnesty to children of undocumented parents. In doing so he considered the need to embrace kids who have grown up as American yet who lack appropriate paperwork for citizenship rights, such as attending college with in-state tuition and being eligible to attend any college in the state university system.

In both of these cases, the topics followed from the teacher's deep commitment to an issue; in both cases the issues involved equity and compassion for those whom the system serves poorly. Such a strong political foundation needn't motivate public writing. Ryan L. Neumann—whose autobiographical self-published book,

What Had Happened: A Work of Friction, was one of two 2013 honorees for the NCTE-CEE James N. Britton Award for teacher-research—keeps a blog, Neumannic Times, that has enabled him to teach more reflectively and appreciatively. In an entry that posts his Britton Award acceptance talk, he says of his blogging,

I would say the writing was cathartic but it would almost be more accurate to say it was a drug. It changed my perspective on everything. Instead of driving into school worrying about the day's lessons, I arrived wondering what my next story would be. Like, what's going to happen in today's episode? I began paying closer attention to the details, the small things that make up the day. And one of the things I learned, of which there were many, is something Maya Angelou has said well, "I've learned that people will forget what you say, people will forget what you do, but people will never forget how you made them feel." (<http://neumannictimes.com/falling-down-the-up-staircase-ncte-talk/>)

That's one powerful elixir, one available for teachers to partake of as they work through the challenges that their schools so abundantly provide.

Where

Ryan's blog leads me to a key question: Where can teachers write for publication? The Internet provides a multitude of places where teachers can maintain blogs, including Center for Teaching Quality (<http://www.teachingquality.org/blogs>), WordPress (<http://wordpress.com/>), Edublogs (<http://www.edublogs.org>), Teachers Speak Up ([\[teachersspeakup.com/\]\(http://teachersspeakup.com/\)\), Literacy in Learning Exchange \(<http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/home>\), Blogger \(<http://www.blogger.com/>\), and others. Voices Ideas Vision Action \(<http://vivateachers.org/>\) serves as a clearinghouse and digest for teachers who write public policy pieces and is worth checking out for ideas on what and where to write. Or, teachers can buy their own domain names and blog away, as Ryan has done. The advantage of a blog is that you can say whatever you want, whenever you want, although in an era when teachers get fired for posting seemingly innocuous things \(along with downright alarming things\) on password-protected areas of their Facebook pages, some discretion is advised.](http://</p>
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Others might prefer the perhaps more stringent approach of working under the guidance and judgment of an editor, which means going through some sort of news service. I've written for, in addition to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Get Schooled blog, the *Washington Post's* Answer Sheet and CNN education blog, and for other sites that invited essays after reading pieces I'd written. I know of some fairly well-known people who have been discouraged from public writing by having their essays, or even letters to the editor, submitted to the *New York Times* and rejected. But these highly visible, national outlets are relatively difficult to get published in, especially for those writing their first essays for publication. As I've noted, both Steve Gevinson and Ian Altman have taken both local and national concerns to their local papers, and in my view, these venues might be

the best place to start out as a public writer, and are good places even when you're established.

One outlet I've encouraged people to consider is the national collection of local community papers published through Patch (<http://www.patch.com/>), which hosted the essay of Ian's that I've referenced. I've published on Patch sites in both Athens and Monroe, Georgia, especially for issues that are of local interest. Patch editors are often eager to have local residents write for them, and education is an issue of concern to just about everyone. At the *Monroe Patch* site, the editor instructed me simply to set up a blogging account and post my essay myself; the *Athens Patch* editor in contrast ran my pieces after reviewing them. If you want to get started as a writer in the public sphere, Patch is a great place to begin.

Teachers might also consider finding websites that invite comments, reports, and testimonies on issues of relevance and importance to them. For instance, teachers helped to fuel resistance to the imposition of excessive tests in New York when the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project created a website at <http://elafeedback.com/> where teachers could post their experiences with testing. This site produced more than 1,000 highly critical pieces by teachers that helped to catalyze a broader mutiny against Pearson's takeover of their classrooms. Perhaps it takes a crisis of this magnitude to spur teachers to action; and perhaps once they see that they can make a difference, teachers may find other ways to take a stand on behalf of their profession.

Many, indeed, use Twitter quite effectively, and this option perhaps is the best way for teachers with little available time to make their presence and perspective known. Politicians pay a lot more attention to tweets than to scholarly articles, and they take a lot less time to write. So fire up your account on Twitter, Instagram, and other social media and say what you need to say directly to the people who need to hear it most.

Finally, YouTube, Vimeo, and other such sites offer a place where, should world and time and artistic abilities allow, you can spread your message through a film or animation. It needn't involve professional production values or expensive equipment; at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH9vxqljJVM>, for instance, a teacher simply explains why she can't teach anymore in the current environment. Now, I'm not encouraging anyone out there to resign your teaching job, only saying that your words can take on additional poignancy when readers see and hear you as you present your perspective.

How

My final consideration concerns how to go about undertaking public writing. I don't think I need to explain to English teachers how to write an essay, but there are some pointers that I received myself when beginning with this genre that I believe are worth passing along.

1. Keep your voice conversational. Your audience is the folks at the hairdresser, the mayor and city council, the parents of your students. It's not the NCTE audience that's

comfortable with educational jargon such as *discourse communities* and *curricular synergies*. Keep it simple and use your indoor voice. Don't use words such as *discourse* that put up barriers between you and lay readers.


2. Marc Lamont Hill, at a talk he gave on op-ed writing, advised us to "know what's at stake in this discussion." In other words, don't drift off into tangents, but stay on topic. You might have a word limit of 500 words (although some forums are more generous), so use them wisely. Don't provide 600 years of philosophical background before introducing your points; get to the point, stick to it, and get out.
3. When making your points, try to make them without unnecessarily alienating your readers. Well, I wish I could follow this rule more faithfully myself, but it's hard to make my points in Georgia without offending the Tea Party faithful. Especially when writing about local issues, keep in mind the political nature of the environment and how to work within it by being as gentle and generous as the situation allows, unless you just can't.
4. No matter how bad it gets, don't compare yourself to a slave, or the bad guys to Hitler. You can always walk away; slaves and Jews had no options.
5. Get help. No, not necessarily from a psychiatrist, but from friends and colleagues. Kevin Hodgson of the Western Massachusetts Writing Project has established a WMWP partnership with the local newspaper, the *Hampshire Gazette*, to feature teacher newspaper

columns once a month (see <https://app.box.com/s/y8inydlzu58x1xnoxbgp>). Kevin, similar to Ryan Neumann, also keeps a blog (<http://dogtrax.edublogs.org/>) in which he writes about things that matter to him. As teachers, we often encourage our students to get peer feedback when generating ideas and throughout the process of composition. If we think it's good for them, then it should be good for us as well. Our colleagues can help us stay on point, keep our tone right for the occasion, and provide the right evidence for our positions. Writing in the company of others also provides a feeling of solidarity and support, and this feeling has eroded among teachers as the educational environment has gotten further from our own control and into the hands of people who don't understand our work or, for that matter, appear to care about it.

To Write or Not to Write: What Are the Consequences?

If you don't have a voice in the public debate, the sky will not fall; life and school will go on. But if you don't have a voice, then someone else's will take your place. Whose perspective would you prefer? If it's not a teacher or teacher advocate, then you may position yourself as helpless against a tidal wave of political mandates that control your teaching and your school.

Unfortunately, you may feel that way even if you do write. But like McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* after claiming he could lift an immensely heavy object and failing, you can ultimately say, "But I tried, didn't I? Goddammit, at least I did that." And who knows, depending on the issue, your views may produce material changes in your work environment or contribute to the

aggregate of opinions that collectively produce shifts in opinion about the work we care so much about. 

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