Our Best Days

As Nancy Sommers reminds us in "Between the Drafts," being a writer and an academic “is a journey of learning to be both personal and authoritative, both scholarly and reflective. It is a journey that leads me to embrace the experiences of my life, and gives me the insight to transform these experiences into evidence.” In effect this is a pedagogical journey, one I too have learned to embrace, because Sommers’ transformation is what I pray my students will achieve—if not every day, then on our best days. Becoming part of a discourse community—sensing the context in which the writer is situated, crafting a purpose suited to an audience—is the rhetorical act upon which my philosophy of teaching depends. And I believe it's an act that can serve adult and English language learners as well as it does traditional students.

In embracing constructivism, I also want to acknowledge that the "blurring of genres," to use David Bartholomae's term, holds potential to excite possibility in the eyes of students who complain that they cannot muster passion for an essay, because the essay is already written for them. This is to say the canon of invention has been circumscribed by a rubric that favors, in tidy point formulations, appeals to logos over ethos and pathos, and forecasts, in unwavering terms, the thesis statement they will provide as the last sentence of their opening paragraph.

It is with "local inquiry," assigned in the final weeks of my composition course at Colorado State University, that I circumvent circumscription and hope to engage students in a passion for learning. This portfolio asks the student to investigate an issue to which she feels connected—her community's reliance on Wal-Mart for groceries, for
example, the damming of the Cache la Poudre River, or the number of migrant workers
drawn to local meat processing plants. She finds freedom here, but limits, too: the topic
must be exigent, narrow in scope, and infused with her own experience and values.
She conducts field research—interviewing professors on campus, surveying shoppers,
or spending a day with a group of activists. She narrates her inquiry in an essay pitched
to the *Fort Collins Rabbit*, a local arts magazine, or an online column for *The Colora-
doan*, a regional newspaper, and with her submission she includes visual rhetoric illu-
minating the question at issue. Finally, my student reflects on her own process in a
rhetorical analysis: what is my text’s purpose? Its intended audience? How is our un-
derstanding as readers enlarged?

"These are writers taking pleasure in (or making capital of) what are often called
"literary devices"—dialogue, description, the trope of the real, the figure of the writer at
the center of sentimental realism," concedes Bartholomae in a 1995 debate with Peter
Elbow. "There is great pleasure," he continues, "in writing this way (making the world
conform to one's image, exalting one's 'point of view'), and there are strategic reasons
for *not* doing academic writing when it is expected—I would say all great academic writ-
ers know this" (emphasis added). Wary as he may be of allowing storytelling to hold
sway over curricula, or become more "real" than other genres, and rightly so, Bartholo-
mæ is acknowledging a particular kind of revelry I want my students to inhabit, even as
they negotiate literacy or the boundaries of professional discourse. A “communicative
activity in which there is a real purpose . . . a genuine audience,” adds Jim Cummins in
his research on bilingual education, “can be highly effective in creating a sense of aca-
demic power.”
One of my best days came on an unusually sunny Wednesday in October of 2008. One student, we'll call her Kima, was having serious trouble visualizing her introduction. She sank low into the ragged, sea green armchair across from my desk, the one I imagine has received hundreds of students in past years. (Note that with description and imagination I am *not* doing academic writing here, even though it is expected.) Kima knew what she wanted to write about; the semester's master curriculum was devoted to climate change, and she had already posted research on correlations between temperatures and insects to an online wiki. But after ten minutes of prodding, dejection still colored her description of a draft that failed, try as she might, to write itself.

"Why did you become interested in insects?" I asked, becoming a little dejected myself. She paused, thinking. Then she began to tell a story about living in a southern Colorado suburb, about how mosquitoes had become incessant, so much so that the local government had begun bombarding parks and wetlands with insecticides. She talked about having to chase after her dogs and bring them inside during the "spray days" that came, during the bad months, every couple of weeks. I remained silent, watching, bird by bird, as Anne Lamott says, the light begin to grow in Kima's eyes. As with many consultations, this student was discovering a path to learning through her own articulations. It was a path that appeared with only the slightest nudge, and Kima left that day charged with new confidence about how she would frame her essay. These are the moments I live for as a composition instructor, and the moments I hope to cultivate in teaching nontraditional students. They affirm the academic and the personal. They come on our best days.