Writing as a Way of Staying Human in a Time that Isn't

Edited by
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Series in Language and Linguistics

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Introduction: Writing as a Way of Staying Human

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The human element of our work as teachers of writing has never been more important. Indeed, the political and social pressures of our shared institutions—both in the academy and beyond—have put us all under pressure to sacrifice humanity in the interest of efficiency. Recent decisions by the University of Wisconsin, the University of Central Missouri, and other colleges to consolidate or eliminate humanities programs are telling examples of this pressure (Kelderman). We can and should protest these kinds of institutional policies and decisions, but we also have a responsibility to hold ourselves accountable. Whatever constraints we face in our particular contexts, we make choices every day about how we teach, learn, and write, and about how we share these experiences with our colleagues and students. As Robert Yagelski observes, when we write, we also "enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world" (3). Given this reality, our teaching of writing necessarily involves teaching "fundamental lessons about the self and its relation to the world," and these lessons can prepare students to enact destructive or transformative lifestyles and cultures (4). Yagelski emphasizes that we risk intensifying the pressures students feel to prioritize themselves over others when our teaching practices reinforce dualities such as self/world, mind/body, and proficiency/experience. His argument in *Writing as a Way of Being*, and the argument underlying this collection, is that how we write and teach matters because our classrooms are places where we experience ourselves as participants in larger communities, and places where our students learn about interconnectedness and isolation, interdependency and competition, flourishing and survival.

The essays gathered here propose that intentional acts of teaching and writing can reawaken us to the power we have—as individuals and members of diverse writing communities—to address the challenges of our present and future world. Each essay outlines specific strategies for using writing as a means for staying human in inhuman times. The strategies emerge from a variety of settings, including composition and developmental reading and writing (chapters 1, 3, 4, 8, 11), professional and legal writing (chapters 7 and 12), middle school English (chapter 5), dissertation projects (chapter 2), academic conferences (chapter 10), and an online writing group (chapter 6). The

authors integrate personal stories with current research in writing studies to describe how writing practices can nurture vulnerability, compassion, and empathy among students and instructors alike. Their work demonstrates how writing together with each other and our students can contribute to personal, social, and political transformation.

The collection continues conversations started at the 2017 annual conference of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL). Now in its twenty-fifth year, the AEPL summer conference has become a venue for writers and teachers from a range of institutional contexts to commune together and nurture teaching and learning practices informed by affect, creativity, kinesthetic knowledge, silence, spirituality, and visualization (see www.aepl.org). AEPL's 2017 conference centered on teaching practices and research related to the human dimensions of writing. Participants responded to the core claim of Yagelski's *Writing as a Way of Being*—namely, that acts of writing can "foster a different way of being in the world, one informed by a sense of the inherent interconnectedness of all life" (140)—in a range of ways. We meditated, danced, shared stories and strategies from the classroom, and, most important, wrote together over four days. Five presenters expand and reflect on their conference workshops here (chapters 2, 5, 8, 9, and 10). Their essays are interspersed with remarkable work from seven additional authors that opens new lines of inquiry and practice (chapters 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, and 12).

The Experience of Writing

Estes Park sits in a high valley at the base of Rocky Mountain National Park. Crisp morning air, compelling scenery, and a relaxed atmosphere make it an ideal setting for reflection. As organizer of the 2017 AEPL conference, I hoped that immersion in the setting would remind participants of the expansive nature of both writing and being human. In particular, I hoped the winding ride up the Front Range from Denver would create a sense of distance and relief from the institutional contradictions that so frequently deform the intentions we hold for our writing and teaching. In other words, I hoped the conference would provide participants with an experience of being human despite the unrelenting pressures of our everyday work.

It had that effect on me. Keynote presentations by Yagelski, Kurt Spellmeyer, and Doug Hesse set a transformative tone that carried through the concurrent sessions, morning meditations, communal meals, and a late-night bonfire.[1] The experience of writing alongside so many insightful and inventive colleagues reminded me that I already have the tools I need to maintain my humanity whatever comes: I have my body, my pen, my thinking, and my willingness to open my heart and mind to everyone and everything around me. Further, it reminded me that "we need not wait for a new, radically changed, localized education system to begin

realizing a vision of writing instruction that is informed by the idea of writing as a way of fostering an ethical, nondualistic way of being together on the earth" (Yagelski 165). As Yagelski asserts, "We can begin realizing this vision now" (165).

Transforming our writing and teaching practices begins with a deceptively complicated question: "What is writing?" (Yagelski 2). Some answers to this question might be: It is a medium of communication; it is a mode of expression; it is a set of critical skills developed in college writing courses; it is a habit of mind that contributes to achievement across academic and professional fields.[2] These answers lead on to further questions, and in particular, to questions that pertain to our work as writing teachers, for example, "Why should we teach writing? How should we teach writing?" (Yagelski 2). Whether we recognize it or not, we are answering these questions each time we write and each time we enter into a physical or virtual classroom. For example, when we focus primarily on products, or the writings, we and our students produce, we define writing as a means for "impos[ing] order on the world and giv[ing] meaning to our experience in it," and we reinforce the notion that the primary objective of writing instruction is to train students to assert conscious control over their experiences (Yagelski 91). Process pedagogies enact different answers, for example, defining writing as a set interrelated practices and resolving the "how" and "why" of writing instruction into developing strategies to encourage students to engage more and more wholeheartedly in effective writing practices.[3]

Amy Williams poses a clarifying question about writing instruction in a recent *Composition Forum* article that speaks to the primary concerns of this collection. Comparing product and process-oriented writing pedagogies, she suggests a third way, approaching writing as an experience that unfolds over time and affects writers and their writing in the process. Williams's question is this: How can we "teach writers to honor the experience of writing, its virtual and actual unfolding?" ("Conclusion") Like Yagelski, Williams sees value in the things writers do and experience as they write. She defines writing as a way of experiencing self-discovery and self-creation: "When a writer deliberately initiates the act (verb) of writing, the affect (gerund) can be thought of as the ideas, words, connections, and knowledges that unwittingly wash over her and that she may only partially apprehend. She may choose to actualize a possibility at any given time by creating a text, but her writing (verb and noun) represent only one instantiation of a multiplicity of possibilities" ("Composition Experience Scholarship").

Williams departs from Yagelski in arguing that focusing on pedagogy imposes constraints on the possibilities of the writing experience. In place of teaching she calls for research, or "composition experience scholarship" as she terms it, that would examine "what writing does to a writer," and in particular how "writing stimulates and writer responds—automatically, involuntarily, and only sometimes consciously" ("Moving to the Gerund"). Williams and the

scholars she cites, including Sidney Dobrin, Byron Hawk, and Victor Vitanza, among others, urge writing teachers and researchers to attend directly to the experience of writing rather than using writing as a lever for promoting better written products or more effective writing practices. While these scholars turn away from teaching *per se*, their ultimate aims are not dissimilar from the goals of this collection. As Williams explains, composition experience scholarship aims to support the "creation of a writer who enjoys the process of entelechy," or becoming, that is always implicated in larger relationships and communities ("Moving to the Gerund").

What is Being Human?

Williams, Yagelski, and others convincingly argue that focusing our efforts on the skills and practices of writers in isolation from their immersion in overlapping contexts contributes to environmental and social problems. Yagelski sources this approach and its destructive effects to René Descartes and the humanist conception of the writer as an "autonomous, thinking being existing separately from other beings and the wider world" (46). As an alternative to pedagogies that reinforce this flawed conception of the writer, Williams and Yagelski urge instructors to divert attention from writers and writings to the writing experience. They insist that the messiness, chaos, and irresistible affects that characterize the writing experience can help us, as writers, to become more receptive to the ways we share the world in common with others. Williams and Yagelski's arguments align with broader posthumanist arguments regarding the limitations of anthropocentric conceptions of science, history, and everyday life.[4] Rather than eliminating humanity from the writing classroom, these scholars advocate for reframing writing instruction so that it more effectively locates instructors, researchers, and students in larger networks or ecologies.

Asao Inoue, for example, advocates for defining assessment as an ecological exchange that influences teachers, students, and institutions alike, rather than approaching it as an isolated transaction between teacher and student. His description of the ideal assessment ecology highlights the classroom's human and nonhuman elements.

> We might initially think of an antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology as a complex political system of people, environments, actions, and relations of power that produce consciously understood relationships between and among people and their environments that help students problematize their existential writing assessment situations, which in turn changes or (re)creates the ecology so that it is fairer, more livable, and sustainable for everyone. (82)

Inoue argues that the contexts in which students write and in which we, as instructors, assess their writing affect our experiences and shape our participation. The dynamics of these ecologies can produce oppressive outcomes regardless of our intentions. To combat the dehumanizing tendency of the assessment process, Inoue urges writing teachers to work with students to negotiate power and control over the "parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places" of assessment (174). In other words, he urges writing teachers to create ecologies in their classrooms that involve students as collaborators rather than as objects in order to nurture mutual growth and development. Inoue's model is grounded in the premise that we (instructors and students alike) are affected by interactions in the classroom and affect each other in an ongoing way.

Casey Boyle pushes further in this direction. Noting, with Inoue, that "writing and writers are codependent *with* things and all sorts of others," such as institutional policies, technologies, and media, Boyle argues we should view writing itself as a mode of participation in broader ecologies (533, italics in original). He argues that writing classrooms should be venues for "generating and sustaining dispositions," or practices of attention, that open instructors' and students' minds to the "abundance of relations" that surround and encompass them (550). Boyle's description of writing as a practice of attention to ongoing relations reframes the academic notion of a "habit of mind" in posthumanist terms. Indeed, he grounds his pedagogy in the habits of mind identified in the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing."

As I note above, the principle objective of posthumanist theory is to call attention to the destructive effects of prioritizing consciousness, and thus human actions, over all other modes of existence and experience. A key corollary to this critique is the idea that humans and nonhuman actors affect each other in equally powerful ways. In the case of writing and writing instruction, the category of nonhuman actors would include assignment instructions, technologies, physical and virtual classroom spaces, English or Writing Studies departments, college campuses, and institutional mission statements or student learning outcomes.[5] Boyle urges writing teachers to design activities and assignments that enable students to experience "serial encounters with a variety of different relations" between themselves, the tools and technologies of writing, and broader social and political communities (551). As much as this approach displaces the individual mind from the center of the classroom, it also reinforces students' and instructors' shared humanity.

Writing as a Way of Staying Human

Given these contexts and debates, what can it mean to "stay human," as the title of the collection asserts, or to humanize or re-humanize our teaching of writing? The essays collected here propose a range of answers. Situated in the

classroom, the privacy of research and reflection, and the public contexts of workshops and writing groups, they describe writing as an experience that brings minds and bodies together. Each essay advocates for new answers to Yagelski and Williams's pressing questions: What is writing? How should we teach writing? Why should we teach writing? How can we teach writers to honor the experience of writing? Three principles emerge from these answers. Grounded in practice, the principles provide a blueprint for using and experiencing writing as a way of staying human. I summarize them here to locate them in current research and prompt and guide further experiments.

Writing to care for ourselves and each other

Frustration, failure, incompleteness, imperfection. The idea that writing produces experiences of discomfort is a truism. Indeed, as Williams observes, our pedagogies sometimes imply that the "experience of writing is fairly miserable, as if writing is the penance one must pay to get her knowledge into the world" ("Writing as Verb"). We convince students that writing is uncomfortable because we are ourselves convinced that it is. W. Keith Duffy offers another perspective. Noting that "imperfections are precisely what make us human," he proposes that letting go of control over what happens as we and our students write might allow us to share more fully in our common humanity (4). Duffy describes a common scene: He sees errors in his students' work and starts to make corrections; the corrections bring him face to face with imperfection, his own as an instructor and his students' as writers; he makes more and more corrections, to the point he has "added 128 words to the student's original 59 words," in one example (2). Most writers and writing teachers have experienced some version of Duffy's desire to correct imperfect writing, but perhaps fewer of us have reached his insight: "[M]y tendency to want absolute control over my own imperfections—and the imperfections in my students' writing—is precisely what alienated me from them. Responding to imperfection by attempting to control it—very understandable though it may be—was a willful act of denial on my part. And when we deny our own and our students' imperfections, we deny everyone's humanity" (7). Duffy suggests that we can take care of ourselves and each other by honoring imperfection as it arises in our work rather than submitting to our innate desire to make corrections and take control.

Imperfect acts of writing permeate Chicana poet, storyteller, and (composition) theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's work. From the important essays of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), through the poems and philosophy of *Borderlands* (1987), to the reflective theory of *Light in the Dark* (posthumous, 2015), Anzaldúa documents her writing experiences in remarkable detail. As she explains in a 1999 interview, she views writing as a metaphor and technology for self-creation: "The art of composition, whether you are composing a work

of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense" (*Borderlands* 276-277). Since composing a life and composing a text are ongoing processes, the "whole that makes sense" at one moment or in one context differs from the whole that makes sense in another.

Like Duffy and Inoue, Anzaldúa explains that the pressures we feel from our families, cultures, and societies fragment our conceptions of who we are and who we can become. She argues that writing provides a means for excavating these pressures and re-forming more healthful and rewarding identities: "The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self" ("Speaking in Tongues" 167). Writing functions in Anzaldúa's theory as a means for identifying dimensions of ourselves we have judged, denied, or suppressed in order to conform to external and internalized expectations. Writing helps to soothe and heal the injuries we cause ourselves when we fall short of these expectations. As Anzaldúa explains in a 1983 interview, "Writing saved my life. It saved my sanity. I could get a handle on the things happening to me by writing them down, rearranging them, and getting a different perspective" (*Reader* 89). The experience of writing is what matters most for Anzaldúa because it brings her into greater awareness of herself and her connections with others.

Daniel Collins (chapter 1) urges us to prioritize well-being ahead of other goals for writing instruction. Integrating research from psychology, critical theory, and writing studies, he argues that writing becomes a practice of well-being when it enables students to reconfigure themselves and their worlds. The examples Collins presents demonstrate that the work of making meaning through writing can be work that iterates out from the classroom into students' and instructors' everyday lives. Jon Stansell (chapter 2) and Claire King (chapter 3) document the meanings writing practices have enabled them to make in their own lives. Their work situates us in the midst of familiar struggles, including the difficult work of completing a dissertation and the delicate process of coming to terms with complex family histories, and shows how writing can reframe these experiences as opportunities for self-discovery and self-care.

Megan Donelson (chapter 4) and Jim Selby (chapter 5) describe further applications of the principle that writing can function as a means of caring for ourselves and each other. Adapting classical pedagogies to diverse contemporary classrooms, they position writing as a means for cultivating emotional attunement. Donelson argues that writing deepens our awareness of own ideological preconceptions and prepares us for psychological transformation. She describes how applying the principles of Plato's *psychagōgia* in our teaching practices can prepare us and our students to share in this work. Selby discovers similar benefits in storytelling. Specifically, he details how the rhe-

torical exercises outlined in Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* can promote empathy and gentleness in twenty-first century classrooms.

Honoring the times and places of writing

Popular guides to becoming a writer or an artist recommend creating sacred spaces and times for practice. In *The Artist's Way*, for example, Julia Cameron explains that creative living requires the "luxury of time, which we carve out for ourselves—even if it's fifteen minutes" and the "luxury of space for ourselves, even if all we manage to carve out is one special bookshelf and a windowsill that is ours" (112). Time and space for writing are luxuries we can afford in most circumstances. As simple as fifteen minutes and a dedicated bookshelf or windowsill might be, setting them aside for creative purposes can transform how we view ourselves as writers. Kristie Fleckenstein makes a related point about the time and space we devote to writing with students in her book *Embodied Literacies*. Anticipating Inoue, she argues that classrooms are not neutral places and asserts that to make classroom-based writing meaningful for all students we must work together to coproduce spatial and temporal literacies that "root our students in a place called school without severing their roots to other places, other literacies" (66). This means holding time space for reflection and discussion on what it feels like to write in school and elsewhere, and it means crafting institutional and classroom policies that honor the times and places where students actually write.

Jody Shipka's "mediated activity-based multimodal framework" for writing instruction honors the times and spaces of writing in concrete and specific ways (93). Shipka's students choose the genres, purposes, and dimensions of their writing. They work in a range of media including digital composition, performance, and textile design, among others. Each project students undertake is accompanied by a written explanation of the purposes of the project and the choices made in the composing process. Shipka argues that engaging in multimodal, activity-based, creative projects helps students understand "process and revision as concepts that both shape, and take shape from, the specific goals, objectives, and tools *with which*, as well as the specific environments *in which* they interact while composing" and positions them to appreciate how "processes, processing, and revision also play integral roles in the continual (re)development of genres, practices, belief systems, institutions, subjectivities, and histories. And, of course, in the ongoing (re)development of lives" (103).

The framework of Rebecca Barrett-Fox et al.'s Any Good Thing (AGT) online writing group (chapter 6) honors times and spaces of writing that extend beyond the classroom. Involving more than 200 academic writers from a range of institutional contexts, the AGT writing challenge frames writing as a communal practice. Participants write and submit 400 words five days a week

and support each other through mutual commitments and digital (email and Facebook) exchanges. Because doing the writing and sharing it in the group counts more than whatever has been written, the AGT writing challenge encourages participants to prioritize the practice of writing ahead of other concerns. Almas Khan (chapter 7) holds time and space for vulnerability in her classes by sharing personal stories of success, failure, and perseverance in the academy. She links her students' journeys with her own in order to honor the productive risks they are taking in their writing and assure them that their experiences are shared. Sarah Parker (chapter 8) and Peter Huk (chapter 9) partner with their students to coproduce times and spaces for writing by using frequent, informal activities to layer together academic and everyday experiences. Inspired by Justin Bieber and the Black Eyed Peas, Parker uses song lyrics to teach rhetorical principles. Huk describes reflective writing exercises he uses in professional writing classes to help students negotiate contradictions between their experiences as emerging professionals and as writing students. The exercises integrate students' "interior geographies" with the external, shared spaces of the classroom" (Fleckenstein 62).

Writing to promote justice

Justice motivates each of the pedagogies and practices I have described in this introduction and each of the essays gathered in the collection. We write and we teach writing in order to create more equitable and sustainable worlds for ourselves and our students. Henry and Susan Giroux articulate this goal in helpful terms in their book *Take Back Higher Education*. Writing in a trajectory of critical pedagogy initiated by Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, they assert: "Higher education should . . . offers students the opportunity to involve themselves in the deepest problems of society and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for critical dialogue and broadened civic participation. [It should give students] the opportunity to take responsibility for their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a sense of respect for others, and learn how to think critically in order to function in a wider democratic culture" (279). Giroux and Giroux situate students, and thus our classrooms, in a "wider" public sphere. They remind us that teaching and learning are practices of democratic citizenship rather than preparatory stages and, as a result, they frame our primary responsibility as writing teachers as promoting involvement rather than mastering skills.

Critical theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney argue that our institutions are organized in ways that work against our students' and our own genuine involvement in public and political life. Their words recall Duffy's reflections on the risks and possibilities of imperfection: "There's a kind of fear in the university around something like amateurism—immaturity, pre-maturity, not graduat-

ing, not being ready somehow—and the student represents that at certain moments. And supposedly our job with the student is to help them overcome this so they can get credits and graduate" (116). Moten and Harney advocate for subversive practices that position instructors and students side-by-side. Rejecting Giroux and Giroux's reliance on the classroom, they point to informal study and the "moments beyond teaching" as the most consequential sites of justice work (27). As Laura Rendón explains, justice emerges through teaching and learning when instructors prioritize relationships with and among students. She argues that writing can promote these kinds of relationships when it prepares us to "work within the paradox that conflictual situations and chaotic disturbances are the guides to growth and true change" (147). Writing, to return to Yagelski's terms, can help us sit with the contradictions of our current social and political moment long enough to recognize our interconnectedness and develop ways of being that deepen our commitments to one another and the worlds we share.

Fuad Elhage and Bruce Novak (chapter 10) extend Yagelski's argument for writing as a way of being by reframing writing as a practice of dancing with others and with life. Reflecting on their experiences as leaders and participants in dance workshops at recent NCTE, AERA, and AEPL conferences, they describe embodiment and movement as building blocks for democratic engagement. Writers dance with readers from the moment they begin their work. Acknowledging that writing is always a shared, mutually affecting experience provides a first step toward rebuilding empathic communities committed to justice for all. Kathleen Rice (chapter 11) and Omar Swartz (chapter 12) demonstrate how our teaching materials can serve as resources and exemplars for promoting justice. Rice describes the transformative outcomes of using Walter Dean Myers's young adult novel *Monster* in an integrated developmental reading and writing class. Noting uncomfortable parallels between traditional schooling and racist policing, she suggests that we can work with our students to break the school-to-prison pipeline by examining and adapting the strategies Myers's protagonist uses to maintain his humanity despite dehumanizing circumstances. Similarly, Swartz proposes that we take courage and inspiration from Jack Kerouac's "Beat attitude" and his use of writing to enact personal and social change. "Theory aside," Swartz explains, "writing to transform the world at a time in which the world so desperately needs transformation is the right thing to do. Our students need to see that their freedom to call for and enact social change is not proscribed by university norms."

This collection is meant to inform, inspire, and provoke. I would add that it is also meant to offer you an experience of community as you persevere in the work of maintaining your humanity and the humanity of your students despite these inhuman times. I am deeply grateful to each of the authors for their commitments to the human dimensions of writing and their willingness to enact

vulnerability in their writing and their work. We are imperfect beings working and living in unprecedented times. I hope the writing and teaching practices documented here will bring us into greater and more meaningful contact as we struggle together to protect and nurture our individual and shared humanity.

Notes

1. Yagelski, Spellmeyer, and Hesse's keynote presentations are forthcoming in issue 23 of the Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (JAEPL) at trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/.
2. See the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" for additional answers to this question.
3. Yagelski argues that process-focused pedagogies are more similar to product-focused pedagogies than is typically acknowledged in that they remain oriented to the "texts writers produce" rather than centering on writing as an activity or experience (144).
4. See Haraway for a polemical elaboration of the possibilities and limitations of posthumanist theory. See Micciche for a careful application of posthumanist theory to writing pedagogy.
5. Inoue demonstrates how the nonhuman elements of writing assessment affect students' experiences of themselves as writers, instructors' experiences of their relationships with students, and thus how students and instructors respond to assessment tasks (158-74).

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Part I.
Writing to Care for Ourselves and Each Other

Chapter 1

Writing as a Resource for Student Well-Being

Daniel Collins

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Introduction

In this essay, I seek to articulate a vision of composition through the lens of well-being. That is, I identify the writing classroom, and in particular, the first-year writing classroom, as a place to develop student well-being. I take well-being as a concept denoting the development of student capabilities to lead constructive, productive, and meaningful lives. I frame composition studies as an academic field uniquely equipped to invest in the edification of student well-being.

Specifically, the writing classroom addresses how a deepened understanding of writing, of language, of rhetoric, is tied to the amelioration of student lives and of the world around them. As a composition teacher at a community college in New York City, I am drawn to the concept of well-being because it champions active engagement with ideas, events, and people to enrich day-to-day living. Well-being is also a generative concept: it creates opportunities for more engagement and more fulfillment.

Broadly speaking, I think about connections between composition and well-being in this regard: Author Maurice Sendak identified the following theme regarding the informing purposes of his work: "Children surviving childhood" (Kakutani). Sendak called childhood his "obsessive theme and his life's concern" (Kakutani). Sendak's enduring and celebrated reputation speaks to the power of these concerns. Something akin to Sendak's concerns can be articulated for adults surviving adulthood, particularly as these adults (our students) enter adulthood. True, the adult capacity for agency is greater than that of a child. But so, too, are the dangers and the damages. Thus, we help our students cultivate a belief in themselves through their work in our courses. This belief—and the ability to act on this belief—is embedded in the development of student well-being.

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