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Living Out the Christian Faith in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract
This article addresses three questions from the perspective of a Christian writing teacher educator: (1) How can we live out our Christian faith and values in the teaching of writing? (2) How can we help students become more aware of issues of spirituality and develop God-given abilities through writing? (3) How can we encourage students to write in ways that are pleasing to God? To address the first question, I draw mainly upon my own research on feedback and classroom writing assessment in L2 writing, as well as my experience as a writing teacher educator in Hong Kong, and address issues about Christian faith and values as we respond to and assess student writing. To address the second question, I explore a range of writing pedagogies that teachers can adopt to encourage students to attend to issues of spirituality, create meaning and express individuality, and above all, to foster God-given abilities in students. Finally, to address the third question, I examine what teachers can do to encourage students to write in ways that are pleasing to God, for instance, when they are engaged in Internet-based social networking. I conclude by suggesting that teachers can live out their Christian faith through writing and teaching writing, and it is important that they serve as good role models for students by taking on the role of writers themselves.

Key words: Christian faith, ESL/EFL writing, feedback, peer review, teaching writing

Introduction
I have developed a strong conviction about the power of the written language since I was a primary student. I wrote letters to pen pals, and I wrote encouraging words in bookmarks and cards for my friends. But that was decades ago. Recently, I learnt from a friend, a scholar in L2 writing, that my words have made a difference in her life. She has published an article in a well-respected teacher magazine in Japan, sharing her experience about getting to know me through our email exchanges, finding my messages warm and inspiring, and feeling encouraged by my words. I have become even more convinced that through writing, we can make a positive impact on others.

As Christian English language educators, how can we maximize the positive impact of the written language on students so that they can develop through writing and use it in ways that

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1 This article is based on a plenary paper delivered at the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT 2014 Taipei) conference held at Christ College in Taipei, Taiwan in May 2014.
are pleasing to God? This question provides the point of departure for this article. Wearing the hat of a writing teacher educator, and more specifically a Christian writing teacher educator, I attempt to explore three issues which are central to the writing classroom:

1. How can we live out our Christian faith and values in the teaching of writing?
2. How can we help students become more aware of issues of spirituality and develop God-given abilities through writing?
3. How can we encourage students to write in ways that are pleasing to God?

In attempting to answer these questions, I draw upon my personal, research and teacher education experience, using examples, where possible, to illustrate my points.

**Living Out Our Christian Faith and Values in the Teaching of Writing**

As I ponder my own research interests like feedback, peer review, and classroom writing assessment, as well as my orientation towards the teaching of writing, I find a strong link between Christianity and writing. I believe that how teachers deal with feedback, peer review and classroom assessment and how teachers teach writing can be informed by their Christian faith.

**Feedback in Writing**

In the writing feedback literature, teacher feedback is often referred to in negative terms – e.g., ineffective, time-consuming, demotivating, frustrating, taxing, and grueling (see Lee, 2009). Despite the time teachers spend responding to student writing, students do not seem to show marked improvement in their writing. While papers filled with red ink can easily frustrate, confuse and demotivate students, teachers are exhausted and suffer from burnout through never-ending marking that makes them play the role of error hunters (Furneaux, Paran & Fairfax, 2007; Hairston, 1986). This is a no-win situation where neither teacher nor students can benefit.

The concept of “grace” can help us revisit the role of feedback and re-think how feedback can be utilized to benefit student learning. Grace refers to God’s mercy and kindness, given freely even to those who don’t deserve it. In the writing classroom, students do not have to do anything to earn this favor; it is a gift from teachers (Wong & Lee, 2012). Inspired by God’s grace, a question worthy of attention is how teachers can reconceptualize feedback in writing so that they can mark with grace.
Because of sin, God punishes us. Similarly, many writing teachers penalize students for their grammatical mistakes. This often results in students’ loss of confidence and motivation, stifled creativity, and a hindered desire to openly express themselves in writing. The Bible, however, reminds us that, through grace, we are “dead in our transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2: 1-10), and that it is by grace that we are saved. Because of grace, God chooses to see past our sins and accepts us for who we are. Similarly, teachers can choose to see past students’ grammatical mistakes by responding to errors selectively and by commenting on other aspects of writing, like content and organization. Through a more balanced approach to feedback, students will be less afraid of making mistakes and are more ready to take risks to enrich the content of their writing. Marking with grace is, therefore, marking that brings out the best in our students; it is marking writing by a human being rather than by a machine or robot, and it is a means through which teachers interact and establish personal relationships with students.

**Peer Review**

In conducting peer review with students in the writing classroom, teachers usually remind students to focus on language and rhetorical issues. Much less attention is given to values and attitudes, which are crucial to the success of peer review. Oftentimes peer review does not seem to be effective because students do not approach it with the right attitude – e.g., not taking it seriously or not giving constructive feedback. Through peer review training, teachers can teach love, patience, kindness, acceptance, tolerance, truthfulness, mutual support and interdependence, in addition to language-related techniques. A few Bible verses can serve as peer review guidelines, such as the following:

- *Love is patient and kind.* (I Corinthians 13:4)
- *... speaking the truth in love.* (Ephesians 4:15)
- *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those.* (Ephesians 4:29)

To build a community of learners through peer review, it is important that teachers remind students of the fact that to err is human, and that constructive feedback that “builds others up according to their needs” is essential. In the following excerpt where a group of university English as a foreign language (EFL) students were engaged in peer review (they had read the
draft written by Kevin), one member (student A) was found to dominate the process, and in general the peer feedback provided was not very constructive:

Figure 1. *A Peer Review Example* [Source: Yu (2014)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Go on. A role model must have a dream and a long-term goal, which can . . . [Reading].</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B: Is this [Dr. Martin Luther King] a person’s name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Yes. In this case, you need to print the word in italics . . . <em>I have a dream</em> [Reading].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin: The current version is okay. I used capitals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: No, you should have used italics. In English, it should be in italics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Yes, italics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: No explanations here. So italics should be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin: I think capitals are fine. No need . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: That’s handwritten. Different from this [<em>the printed version</em>].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin: No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Okay, stop here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this excerpt, while A adopted an authoritative stance, C was completely quiet, and B simply echoed A. Kevin, the student writer, did not explain himself clearly and there was no real discussion among the students. I believe there was an absence of love, kindness and patience in this peer feedback excerpt. Using examples like this one, teachers can remind students of the importance of kindness and mutual respect when giving peer feedback. To facilitate the provision of constructive peer feedback, students can be provided with a peer feedback protocol such as the following:

Figure 2. *Sample Peer Feedback Protocol*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student writer: Solicit feedback from peer reviewer on a specific area (Can you give me feedback on . . . ?).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer reviewer:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Tell the student writer what s/he did well (You did well on . . .).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Tell the student writer what s/he did less well and why (These parts need to be changed because . . .).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Suggest how the student writer can improve (You can improve by . . .).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student writer: Seek clarification, if needed (Could you explain . . . ?).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer reviewer: Clarify.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The peer feedback protocol makes sure that students give comments in an encouraging and constructive manner, and that the feedback is concrete and specific. Through such a protocol, teachers can also inculcate positive values and attitudes like kindness, patience and truthfulness.

**Classroom Writing Assessment**

Traditional classroom writing assessment is primarily concerned with the assessment of learning, which focuses on finding out how well or how badly students perform in writing through teachers awarding scores to single drafts, serving summative purposes. It is referred to as “the dirty thing” teachers have to do (Belanof, 1991, p. 61), also something they do to students rather than with students. Such teachers primarily play the role of judges or assessors and dominate the assessment process, during which many of them in L2 contexts busy themselves with marking errors in student writing. For students, learning is a matter of achieving better grades (Huot, 2002), and they remain essentially passive during the assessment process. Such traditional assessment practices are counter-productive since assessment is not necessarily aligned with teaching and learning, while students easily lose interest and confidence in writing through receiving papers with unsatisfactory scores and filled with red ink. No wonder assessment is often referred to as a “curse.”

From a Christian perspective, God wants to bring blessings to our students and teachers, and hence a paradigm shift is imperative, which entails a stronger focus on assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment as learning (AaL), rather than assessment of learning (AoL). In AoL the primary purpose is to measure student learning outcomes and report judgments of such outcomes. AfL differs substantially from assessment of learning by focusing on the provision of descriptive, diagnostic assessment information to improve learning and teaching. AaL is a subset of AfL (Earl, 2013) but focuses specifically on the learner as the “critical connector” (Earl, 2003, p. 25) between assessment and learning; it serves to foster students’ ability to monitor, reflect on and analyze their own learning. While AoL is associated with the traditional paradigm characterized by summative assessment, the two contiguous objectives of classroom assessment comprising AfL and AaL are referred to as formative assessment (Clark, 2012). Through implementing AfL and AaL, where assessment is used to promote learning and improve teaching (i.e., AfL) and to empower students as critical connectors between assessment and learning (i.e., AaL) (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chappuis, 2009; Earl, 2003; Wiliam, 2009), teachers can motivate...
students, help them understand their strengths and weaknesses in writing, and support student learning.

Simply put, classroom assessment can become a blessing if it is used as an instructional tool, fostering greater alignment between assessment, teaching and learning. In the “assessment paradise,” teachers share responsibility with students, encourage and motivate them, emphasize student achievements, and help students bridge the gaps in their learning. Scores are not the main focus, but instead the quality of learning and student involvement in the assessment process become teachers’ top priorities.

**Teaching of Writing that Encourages Self-expression and Risk-taking**

In traditional writing classrooms, the focus on grammar and vocabulary can discourage students from taking risks and experimenting with language. God makes each of us unique, and we are all capable of self-expression and creativity. It is important that the teaching of writing encourages students to express their feelings and thoughts, imagination and creativity, instead of making students spell and use grammar correctly without really meaning what they say. The following two story openings illustrate two students’ attempts at writing. In (A), the story begins in an ordinary way. Each sentence starts with Johnny (or the pronoun “he”), describing the character’s feelings and actions in a direct manner. Language use is by and large correct. In (B), the story begins in a more special way, comparing Johnny to Thomas Edison. Though not perfect, (B) reflects the student writer’s attempt to craft a more attention-grabbing story opening. There is also a bolder attempt to use a wider range of vocabulary to explore feelings and thoughts and to describe actions, though the student has made a few grammatical mistakes. Compared with (A), (B) provides stronger evidence for the student writer’s creativity and imagination, which I believe deserves the teacher’s praise and encouragement. Some teachers, however, may mark down (B) because of the grammatical mistakes, hence discouraging the student to take risks in writing. In fact, (A) and (B) are both good attempts by the students in their unique way, and student efforts have to be recognized.

**Figure 3. True Story Openings**

| (A) Johnny was very bored. He was tidying the books on the bookshelf. He did not think that his job was fun. He put his hand inside the shelf and found a paper. He took it out and it was old and yellow. |

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(B) Johnny was not Thomas Edison, of course, but he could compare to him. Both were
men of huge curiosity and intelligence, born with natural talent and ability to analyze. One
day, Johnny put his hand into the vast, towering, bookshelf and gave another yawn. He
supposed to clear out all the volumes from the shelf, and to re-order them. It might’ve been
interesting at first, but after working for two hours, this task became extremely dismal.
Suddenly his fingers stroked something. When he reached and touched it, he felt a sense of
stimulus. The piece of paper was yellow and wrinkle, and anybody would agree that this paper is old.

The Bible reminds us that we are all wonderful creations of God, with potential for imagination
and creativity: *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are
wonderful, I know that full well* (Psalm 139:14).

**Helping Students Develop God-given Abilities to Create Meaning and Express
Individuality Through Writing While Becoming Aware of Spiritual Issues**

In the classroom, there are different things teachers can do to help students develop God-
given abilities. Even in examination-oriented contexts (like EFL situations in China, Japan,
Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong), teachers can design writing activities that tap into students’
imagination and help them explore spiritual issues. Below I share a few examples.

*Writing that is Personal, Creative and Meaningful*

Creative writing activities of different sorts can be implemented in the classroom. For
instance, students can write acrostic poems to celebrate friendship, or to show admiration for
others. The following acrostic poem was jointly created for me by the students in my teacher
education class:

- Inspire us to teach better
- Continue to motivate others
- You are an excellent tutor

When assigning topics for creative writing, teachers can use ideas or idioms from the Bible, such
as love, happiness, mercy and justice, go the extra mile, and it’s more blessed to give than to
receive. The following winning entry from a Bible-inspired creative writing contest held in Hong
Kong illustrates the creative attempt of a student as he shares his ideas about “love”:
**Love is Crystal Clear** (Chan, 2013)

I’m sensing insecurity,
The world’s filled with impurity.
I just can’t bear
Intimidating villains flashing glares.

The world’s so dark,
Thunder crashes and dogs angrily bark.
Looking out the window,
Wickedness hides around the shadows.

The slashing of knives, the trigger of a gun,
They steal the life of an innocent one.
Why is the world so dreadful?
Why aren’t any killers regretful?

Love is so unclear,
The world ends with a crude cheer.
But Jesus came and made a difference,
It wasn’t for His ignorance.

He showed unreserved love,
He died for us and suffered bloody cuts.
He changed the world and died for our sins,
Despite the kings’ hateful grins.

They tortured Him, they crucified Him,
They tore His body limb from limb.
Treated as a criminal and condemned,
Yet He prayed to God and forgave them.

In Jesus Christ, His love for us is crystal clear,
Simply for us, He accepted so much jeer.
He died on that cross for the sake of us,
We never think of this as we make a fuss.

Let’s be like Jesus,
Inherit His love and his pureness.
Because in Him, our Lord, my dear,
Love is, simply, crystal clear.
Rewriting Lyrics

Teachers can ask students to rewrite lyrics of songs with which they are familiar, not only tapping their creativity but also inviting them to explore issues of spirituality. For instance, John Denver’s “Perhaps Love” can give students an opportunity to examine the notion of “love” and rewrite the lyrics according to their own understanding of what love is. Alternatively, the focus of the song can be changed – for example, to “joy” (hence “Perhaps Joy”). John Lennon’s “Imagine” can be used to encourage students to share their notion of the utopia. Michael Jackson’s “Earth Song,” as another example, could be used to encourage students to think about what they care about most on earth. They can re-write the lyrics to share their feelings and thoughts about the things that matter most to them.

Digital Stories

Students can make use of technology to create multimodal compositions to explore a wide range of issues. They can produce a creative story, discuss social issues, or share life-changing experiences and insights through digital storytelling. In my teacher education class, I have asked my students to create a 5 to 8-minute digital story on a selected social issue for a special topic on “Teaching English Through Social Issues.” I have also organized digital storytelling competitions for Hong Kong secondary students on themes such as “An Unforgettable Experience” and “Something Special.” To demonstrate the power and impact of a digital story, it is a good idea if the teacher can create one and share it with his or her students. One of the best things about digital stories is that it is easy to produce them; students can download free software such as Microsoft Photo Story 3 and make a digital story without much effort - as long as they have prepared a script and some relevant photos (for the detailed procedure, see Cheung & Lee, 2013).

Blogging

Given that students of the 21st century are technology savvy, teachers can further capitalize on technology to develop personal reflection among students. Since I started teaching a reading and writing course at my current University in 2008, I have created a personal blog and shared it with my students. Not all my students, especially busy in-service teachers, read my blog, but from time to time, for those who have read it and have given me their personal response, I am amazed at how blogging can be used as a powerful tool for personal reflection.
and communication to explore issues beyond the confines of the classroom. A former student responded to my blog sharing, in which she reflected on her own religious journey:

_I was ONCE a Christian. I started going to church in 1987, baptized in 1990, but walking away from God in 1994 after one year I taught in my current school. I lost my faith in God after something unpleasant had happened. Afterwards, I chose to rely totally on myself, placing 100% trust to only my instinct for all the big decisions I had to make._

On another occasion, my blog sharing struck a chord with another former student who had just gone through a miscarriage:

_Thanks for sharing your blog with us and it means a lot to me especially. Soon after I read the first entry, I couldn’t stop crying because the words you’ve used are exactly the answer I’m looking for these days . . . when I was reading your first entry, I couldn't help thinking it's time for me to learn to be tough too. As you know, I’m always under the protection and family and friends, I’ve never had actually experienced anything too difficult for me to handle alone. There’re always someone to support me and to finish thing up. As you said before, pregnancy is a test and training opportunity for the mother as parenthood is more demanding and challenging. I now believe that I should learn to be braver and tougher from now on and it will give me even better preparation for future family planning._

By taking on the role of a writer and by sharing my own writing with students, I realize that I can achieve a lot more than what I originally expected. I was most surprised, for example, to learn that one of my former students shared my blog with her father and some of her relatives. She even forwarded her father’s comment to me: _Reading the posts therein not only widens my knowledge but also opens my mind._

In addition to a personal blog, I run a class blog with my in-service teachers on the Postgraduate Diploma in Education course. At the end of each class, I have some questions based on the class discussion and the readings, and my students are invited to write blog entries and/or to comment on each other’s entries. Although not all students are active participants of the class blog, the 10% assessment score serves as an incentive to encourage students to take part in the online reflection, sharing and discussion. One of my in-service teachers had the following to say about the benefits of the class blog:

_In today’s generation of smartphones, tablet computers and wireless internet, blogging allows for virtual interaction which is not restricted by time and place where we can choose_
to participate at our convenience, which is perfect for the situation of student teachers who already have a heavy workload and may not have the time to sit down and converse professionally.

Another said: *The class blog is a great inspirational and motivating source of encouragement, insights and teaching pedagogy.*

**Encouraging Students to Write in Ways that are Pleasing to God**

I am aware that not everyone uses writing for good purposes. In this last section, I consider ways in which students can be encouraged to write in ways that are pleasing to God.

**Internet-based Social Networking**

A lot of writing is done on the Internet. However, I know that online social networking is not always used in beneficial ways, especially among teenagers. Hate words and swear words are prevalent, and the Internet can become a platform for teasing and bullying. In a way, it is hard to teach teenagers to write in ways that please God. But teachers can tell them the consequences of using hate words, cyber bullying, and sexual harassment in cyberspace; these could lead to depression, and even suicide on the part of the victims, and when they are caught they have to face the consequence of their wrong acts. Once a group of boys, including my son, was found cyber bullying a girl in the same school. They thought it was fun but when the girl’s emotional disturbance was brought to the attention of the school, the school head intervened. My son wrote an apology letter to the parents:

*I write to you today in a sincere and apologetic manner. I sincerely apologize on behalf of my actions because I have reflected and realized what I have done was arrogant and perverting. I take full ownership for the pain your daughter has endured and am willing to take consequences as a way to avenge for your daughter. I am completely struck with guilt at the realization of what I did. Therefore, I implore you for your utmost and generous forgiveness despite the horrible being that I am and the horrible actions I committed.*

It is amazing to know that a boy who has used nasty words to tease a girl is capable of writing such a sincerely worded apology, which is probably pleasing to God. Perhaps the example shared here could be used with teenage students to encourage them to choose their words carefully when they are engaged in online social networking. We have a good reminder from the Bible:
Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29).

Writing as an Invaluable Gift

We write to develop God-given abilities, and our words can be a powerful source of encouragement to others. Our writings can be invaluable gifts for others, too. On my son’s 13th birthday, I sent him a poem to share with him my vision of a good life:

- Gorgeous son, be a big dreamer
- Aspire to become the man you want to be
- Regret not your missteps as a humble seeker
- Excel in qualities of honesty and integrity
- Treasure the gifts from God; be a firm believer
- Hang onto your dreams; live out your faith fully

For teachers, we can write edifying words to our students, and these words can become mottos that serve as their guiding principles. One of my best mottos for my students is: never give up.

Writing as a Source of Encouragement

We can always use our words to encourage others. Once I wrote a piece on “A Hurdle Race” on my blog:

Don’t look at our own problems with a pair of magnifying glasses and think that they are the worst in life.

I learnt that my son’s autism was nothing when I took him to Sandy Bay Hospital in 1994 and saw many kids with much more severe problems, some who couldn’t even raise their heads to look at the sky.

When we put life into perspective, we often find that we are one of the luckiest persons in the world.

A hurdle race need not put us in despair. We jump, we fall, we stand up and jump again. The next time we jump better, but we may fall again. However, it gives us good training, and it develops our strength and resilience.

Next time when there is a hurdle, or when there is a choice to make, don’t be afraid. Practice jumping, and you can jump higher.
A reader told me that she was tremendously encouraged by my blog post:

*I'm touched by what you have shared in your blog and I particularly like the entry about how you have become tougher and tougher throughout the years. I’m not trying to flatter you, but what you have shared is very inspiring and that’s what youngsters and “green” teachers today need. You have set a good role model for them, just like what you did to me.*

Indeed, teachers of writing can become good role models for their students by taking on the role of writers themselves (Casanave, 2004), and by writing in an encouraging way.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I believe Christian teachers can live out their Christian faith through writing and through teaching writing. In many contexts, teachers themselves are either too busy or too uninterested to engage in writing. However, to understand student needs and to help them develop into writers that bring glory to God, teachers of writing need to be writers themselves.

I began this article with a reference to my Japanese friend, who recently published an article in a magazine for Japanese teachers (Sasaki, 2011), where she referred to the written messages I had sent her. I would like to end the article with the following excerpt from my Japanese friend’s published article (translated from Japanese into English):

*Once I wrote about things I worried about in my work in my mail to her, and she sent me a set of PowerPoint slides entitled: “Tips for a better life for 2010.” The set came with beautiful music and pictures of flowers. It contains about 20 tips that can make you cheerful, the very theme of this essay, so I would like to introduce some of them here. “Realize that life is a school and you are here to learn. Problems are simply part of the curriculum that appear and fade away like algebra class, but the lesson you learn will last a lifetime.”

*If you think that life is a school and the difficulty you face is a problem given by God for you to solve, your heart will become lighter.*

Although my Japanese friend is not a Christian, I am glad that she referred to God in her article. We never know – perhaps the seeds we sow in our writing and our teaching of writing will someday bear fruit.

**References**


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