

Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability, by Robert P. Yagelski. New York: Hampton, 2011. 192 pp.

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The belief that all things are inextricably connected can be found in the work of Native American writers and spiritualists, Eastern philosophies of Zen and Taoism, and Albert Einstein, to name just a few examples. In Robert Yagelski's latest book, *Writing as a Way of Being*, this interconnection of all things is paramount, both as a problem and a solution. For Yagelski, contemporary schooling is deeply connected to the current environmental crisis because of an unshaking reliance on a Cartesian separation between self and world. Such a separation erases the connections we humans have with each other, other living beings, and the planet itself. Absent these connections, Western education teaches students to pursue notions of success that are antithetical to the common good and the health of the planet. Writing and writing instruction, argues Yagelski, foster this disconnection, not because writing itself is an alienating activity, but because our teaching of it, despite advances in theory, still prioritizes textual production over the experience of writing itself. Writing as gerund, not verb: we teach *writing* as a thing, texts to be produced and evaluated, rather than encouraging the act of writing, the experience of writers writing, together. *Writing as a Way of Being* argues that a focus on producing competent texts privileges form over content, genre over inquiry, textual revision over shared conversation. Yagelski's book skillfully yet radically challenges most of the accepted orthodoxy in composition studies today and does so with a welcomed sense of ethics and urgency.

Analyzing the scope and depth of each of Yagelski's chapters helps to illustrate the profound contributions made in this work. The opening chapter, "Writing and the Crisis of Sustainability" asks, "How can we teach writing so that we stop destroying ourselves" (32). This question recalls Mary Rose O'Reilly's desire in *The Peaceable Classroom* to teach English in a way that prevents violence. In this chapter Yagelski connects the growing global environmental crisis directly with education. He argues that most principles of Western education rest on a notion of the self as primary and separate from the world (Descartes' "I think therefore I am"), which causes notions of success to be defined individualistically, often in stark contrast to what is in the common good.

The next chapter, "The Cartesian View of Writing," seeks to prove that writing instruction in both secondary and post-secondary schools fails to live up to its progressive promises, despite advances in theorizing teaching. Ya-

gelski argues that “conventional writing instruction and assessment continue to operate on the assumption that writing is a sometimes challenging but relatively straightforward conduit for meaning” (24). While he uses the SAT as an example of the problem, he also asserts that standardized tests are based on the assumption that college faculty value similar criteria in student writing (24). Even social and post-process theories, argues Yagelski, fall short of their radical potential because of a tacit embrace of Cartesian dualism, which posits the self as an autonomous being, the world as separate and knowable from the knower, and language as a relatively unproblematic conduit for thought (45). While the content here straddles composition theory and philosophy, Yagelski does a particularly nice job working through the debates within composition studies regarding its social turn, stopping to dwell especially on the work of Richard Miller, some of the neo-Sophists, and Thomas Kent’s post-process ideas.

In “Writing, Being and Nonduality,” Yagelski calls on the Zen philosophy of Eihei Dogen and the phenomenological rhetoric of Barbara Couture to posit a view of writing that seeks communal truth through a focus on the process of writers writing together as a way to transcend Cartesian duality. This view situates writing as necessary but insufficient to help humans seek connection and understanding of the world; language is both vital and deficient. Unlike a purely relativist position, Yagelski posits the material world as real and separate from language, knowable only through communal inquiries toward truth. His goal is to imagine writing as action (not a thing) that can help writers move from subjective knowing toward a shared inquiry and intersubjective truth.

Yagelski moves from the theoretical to the practical in “Writing as a Way of Being” as he meditates on his own experiences of writing this chapter. He describes how he is both deeply rooted in a place while writing and connected to other familiar places; he is alone but filled with the voices of other scholars, his graduate students, and the inmates he taught in a local prison years earlier. He interweaves his meditation with further discussion to show similarities and differences between his ideas and those of Linda Flower’s cognitive studies and Donald Murray’s process writing. He ultimately describes his ontological theory of writing—one that posits writing as part of how we learn to be in the world. This theory focuses on the *act* of writing as intensifying the writer’s awareness while writing. Yagelski asserts that such awareness is qualitatively different from other senses of awareness because the nature of language is important but unreliable, the effects of writing experiences are cumulative, and the context of a writing act shapes that experience of writing.

In “A Thousand Writers Writing,” Yagelski begins with a memory of a National Writing Project event where he sat in a room with one thousand other teachers writing. That experience—rather than the texts produced—were powerful and act as a metaphor for writing as a way of being. He teases out

specific pedagogical practices that prioritize his ontological view of writing: giving more time for the act of writing, creating shared inquiries, and making content a serious and real concern. Surprisingly, the practices are less dramatically different from current practice than one might imagine, and in citing an analogy of Michael Pollan's advice about food, Yagelski suggests that shifting toward writing as a way of being means changing our fundamental views about ourselves and our roles in the world, rather than changing specific classroom practices (163).

When I first started reading composition theory—early in the 1990s—I was drawn to writers who wrote in big ways, those whose ideas, metaphorically, swung for the fences. In writers like James Berlin, Alan France, Elspeth Stuckey, Michael Blitz and Mark Hurlbert, James Sledd, and Mary Rose O'Reilly, to name a few, I encountered scholars who deeply questioned the foundations of composition studies and tied their arguments passionately to ethical and political goals. Even in the diatribe of Maxine Hairston against leftists like Berlin, John Trimbur, Patricia Bizzell, and in the scholarship of other leftists (which Yagelski unpacks nicely), one finds agonizing and earnest debates about the deep purposes and stakes of writing classes. Great scholarship, I believe, should question our basic assumptions and overwhelm us, a bit, with its implications. In this category, I would happily place *Writing as a Way of Being*. It creates a powerful response to Berlin's *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, which argues that the purpose of writing should be to create active citizens. Yagelski shows that the Cartesian separation of self and world prevents meaningful citizenship unless we make fundamental changes to how and why we teach writing. As such, this book goes against the trend of most prevailing scholarship, which stresses the need to prove our success as writing teachers, to persuasively enter public debates and quantitatively assess the outcomes of our courses. It also convincingly answers why, given an embrace of social and post-process theories of writing, classroom practices have not fully reflected those shifts.

This is a radical book. It questions and seeks to shift the foundations of what we think of as writing and why we teach writing. For me as a reader, this book filled me with the excitement of possibility and intimidation I have not felt since graduate school. Scholarship in more recent years seems to have become more careful, more circumscribed, working within what Yagelski calls a "silent consensus" about why we teach writing (52). Yagelski questions these frameworks and their assumptions, yet reasserts the excitement and value of teaching writing.

This book may have a revolutionary effect on what and how we teach, or it may be largely ignored. Because of how fundamentally it questions what we do as scholars and teachers, I imagine that many readers may dismiss it as quixotic. Or because individual scholars may be wedded to research projects

and pedagogies that rely on a dualistic view of education, many might reject or not even read this work. I hope this is not the case. But especially for those of us who are already drawn to nondualistic ways of thinking and being—and those who at semester’s end wonder if we really served our students well—will find much that will teach and provoke in this ambitious work.

My quibbles with the book are minor, and not related to Yagelski’s critique of dualism in writing. First, I would have liked to have seen writing placed alongside other practices of being—such as meditation, mindful breathing, storytelling, or walking in nature—that can help orient humans so that they deeply experience themselves as part of and connected to the world. Without placing writing in such relation, Yagelski risks reinscribing a view of literacy that is separate from—and superior to—other human experience. Second, his use of Couture’s theory suggests an ethical framework, but exploring questions surrounding pedagogical ethics more fully would have been helpful. For example, will giving students more space to write in less dualistic ways directly help them want to save the planet? If so, how do we do that?

But even for readers who might not be persuaded to embrace Yagelski’s philosophy for composition studies, this book offers a compelling and engaging history of writing theory over the past twenty years. He interweaves complex philosophical and rhetorical positions with relevant stories of writing and teaching, making this book both challenging and accessible. My hope is that the field is ready to have its foundations shaken, even just a bit, by this important and rich work.

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Works Cited

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