

USING *CURRERE* TO SOLVE FOR X: THE POWER OF USING EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT IN WRITING FOR TRUTH

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Midway through the semester, a student in my college writing class shared how much she had dreaded taking the university writing requirement. She recounted to the class how she had been asked by a family friend what courses she would be taking in the fall. She listed her planned courses, starting with those she was looking forward to. When she got to her last course and was about to say “a writing course,” she burst into tears instead. Six weeks later she walked into my classroom, fearful and anxious.

SOLVING FOR X

The idea of “solving for X” is foundational in mathematics and is essentially the process of finding what makes an equation true. What is to be learned and revealed is exciting to those who understand that the process of solving for X is the tip of the iceberg, and what is underneath that tip is expansive—equations are purposeful. I never understood the big picture when I was enduring high school math. What I felt was the terror of memorizing what-would-go-where-when on what was above the ice. What I was instructed to do was reductive and focused on the most expedient way of getting to the “right” answer—an answer that would have no meaning to me, a number bereft of relevance to my world, without context.

For my student who dreaded writing, her experience in her K-12 education was a parallel collection of attempts to succeed, in a dizzying array of rules without meaning. Expectations shifted from teacher to teacher; there was little solid ground of consistency to be found. *No writing in first person. Five paragraph essays. Be creative. Don't be creative. Page limits. Word limits. Be objective. No one sentence paragraphs. No sentence fragments.* And on and on.

When my student shared her story, it resonated with everyone in the room. On the first day of class, each student had responded to three questions. “How important is writing in general?” “What do you feel about doing writing?” and “How would you like to feel about writing at the end of the semester?” They wrote one word for each prompt on post-it notes that they then put on the whiteboard, where the mosaic of little yellow squares told the tale of their collective experience and hope for the future. Almost without exception, students felt writing was important. How they felt about doing writing was almost entirely negative—“fearful,” “anxious,” “hate,” “worthless,” and “boring.” But, they were hopeful about what they would like to be as writers in their futures. Most used the same word—“confident.” The message was moving. *Writing is important to the world. I am not part of that world. I'd like to be.*

The patterns that emerged in the words on the post-its have been repeated in every section of the course that I have taught. Students come into the class feeling defeated by writing. By extension, my classroom is initially perceived as a dangerous place where their grade is at risk and their spirits can be crushed. They hope for the best but, based on their experiences, expect the worst.

Although anxiety about math and writing share some characteristics, there are differences. For most people, math is not personal. There is armor around math. “Some people just aren't good at math—I guess I'm one of them” is often spoken casually and

without personal connection or shame. Solving an equation has little relationship to one's identity.

Writing, however, *is* personal and begins early. Most young children love to tell stories, and at an early age, they see how stories can help them understand their world. When my daughter was three, we were playing in the yard on a beautiful summer day. She made friends with an earthworm; they entertained each other for over an hour. When playtime was over, my daughter gently moved the earthworm from the grass to the sidewalk, where, in her words, "Worm can see things better." Within seconds, a bird swooped in and grabbed Worm, flying away with the little annelid whose body was dangling from its mouth. My daughter was hysterical and inconsolable. Realizing that there was no possibility of spinning what had happened into something that wasn't horrifying, I asked her if she wanted to write a story about Worm. She nodded and told the story, which I wrote down word-for-word as she talked. She titled it, "The Sad, Sad Story of the Worm that Got Ate by a Bird."

Currere, the conceptual framework developed by Pinar (1975; 1994), builds understanding through an autobiographical process of analysis. *Currere* is, arguably, a process to solve for X, where the meaning of X comes from the writer, the *currerian*. What comes at the end of the process derives from that development of ideas and meaning. From my memory of the details of my daughter's story, she explored the four stages of *currere*. Her past (the regressive stage) was articulated through description of her time with Worm—what they did, how she felt. She talked about what she had hoped for in her future with Worm (the progressive stage), the contexts of the circle of life and why the bird did what it did (the analytical stage), and how she felt—putting everything together—about the whole experience (the syncretical stage).

The inclusion of the *currere* process is often instinctive in writing. Even as a three-year old, my daughter, like most children, understood the power of telling a story in enhancing meaning, understanding, and, in her story, healing.

My daughter's writing solved for X.

USING EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT

Describing *currere* in one phrase, for me, is "*currere* uses everything you've got." Every experience, old and new, becomes fodder for examining the "everything" in what I know and who I am. Nothing is off limits; to the contrary, everything is relevant. *Currere* allows me to draw, both broadly and deeply, into what I know and think about ideas. The process is akin to the concept of "thinking global, acting local," where the expansive range of everything is distilled through the four *currere* stages into more specific meanings—meanings that can be transformative. The *currere* stages provide a systematic framework to guide me.

As I consider the notion of using "everything you've got," I am reminded of an example of my thinking about the process of writing lyrics in music. For reasons that remain a mystery to me, I was unaware of the poet-songwriter-singer Leonard Cohen until about ten years ago. The chorus of his song, "Anthem," became a guide and a source of inspiration. "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There's a crack—a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." The universality and human-ness of the message is robust and applicable to all aspects of life and thinking—joys, dreams, regret, love. I remember reading an interview with Elizabeth Edwards, activist, writer, and the ex-wife of former Presidential hopeful John Edwards. She was battling terminal cancer at the time. In a description of her office,

the interviewer noted that the lyrics of “Anthem” were painted as a border along the top of the office wall. I imagined the room and the purposeful choice and meaning of the words that she saw every day.

My interest in “Anthem” led me to read everything I could about Cohen, and there was a lot. Discussions of his most famous song, “Hallelujah,” completely captured me. I was obsessed and curious, immersed in a journey of scouring Internet sources, discovering connections to other musicians, reading details about his life, and listening to as many of the scores of recorded versions of “Hallelujah” that I could find—John Cale, Jeff Buckley, Rufus Wainwright, k.d. lang, Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, Justin Timberlake, Bono, and many others.

What emerged for me was a picture of a writer whose poetry, music, thinking, and reflections were synergistic and integrated. Unlike “Anthem,” where I was attracted to the lyrics, what interested me about “Hallelujah” was the meticulous process that Cohen used as a writer. He wrote and rewrote verses over the course of years. In concert, he often included different or changed verses. In one widely reported account of a meeting at a café in Paris in the mid-80s with Bob Dylan, their conversation turned to writing processes. Alan Light (2012), a confederate in my obsession, published a wonderful book about Cohen and “Hallelujah” a few years after my initial interest emerged, where he includes how Cohen described the meeting with Dylan.

Dylan and I were having coffee the day after his concert in Paris a few years ago...and he asked me how long it took to write [“Hallelujah”]. And I told him a couple of years. I lied, actually. It was more than a couple of years. Then I praised a song of his, “I and I,” and asked him how long it had taken and he said, “Fifteen minutes.” (p. 2)

In writing, “solving for X” is interwoven with the writer’s definition of what X means. For Cohen, X was elusive and haunting, changing with ongoing introspection on each step of *currere*—past, future, context, and meaning.

Leonard Cohen solved for X.

PERMANENCE AND TRANSFERABILITY OF *CURRERE*

I believe that the deep thinking required by the *currere* process leads to powerful and meaningful writing that has both permanence in “standing the test of time” and transferability. The permanence of the words of Cohen and Dylan are evident in the enduring nature of their work and the many accolades that each received. Both were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In 2016, Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His *Nobel Lecture* (Dylan, 2017), where he explored his thoughts about how his songs related to literature, was full-on *currerian*. Dylan described his early musical influences, including Buddy Holly and Leadbelly, the literature that influenced him—connections to war, life, and love—all in a sprawling and beautiful combination of self-reflection and tribute to words.

When writers use “everything they’ve got,” it creates nuanced and complex writing that enhances the ability of readers to draw equally nuanced and complex meaning. The writing becomes transferable to multiple contexts and applications. I realized early in my exploration of Leonard Cohen that I had heard “Hallelujah” many times before without realizing it. It was used in two episodes of the television series *The West Wing*, which aired from 1999-2006. One depicted the murder of a main character, and a second was a funeral scene of a character whose actor had died in real

life. It has been used in fundraising events (e.g., Justin Timberlake and Matt Morris sang it in 2010's *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon) and movies (e.g., *Shrek*).

Although first recorded in 1984 by Cohen, "Hallelujah" continues to be both recorded (e.g., Pentatonix in 2016; Tori Kelly in 2016) and used in ways that connect and support emotional moments. For example, on November 12, 2016, the "cold open" for the television series *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* began with a darkened set and a close up of hands on a piano playing the first chords of "Hallelujah." The hands were those of cast member Kate McKinnon, who, in character playing Hillary Clinton, then sang three verses of the song. It was four days after the 2016 Presidential election and five days after Leonard Cohen's death. One verse was particularly poignant and relevant in providing a tribute that simultaneously honored Cohen and Clinton.

I did my best; it wasn't much.
 I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch.
 I told the truth; I didn't come to fool you.
 And even though it all went wrong,
 I'll stand before the Lord of Song
 With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah! (Reilly, 2016)

In a more comedic turn, the cold open of *SNL*'s season finale in May, 2017, recreated the set of the season opener. This time, *SNL* cast members playing Donald Trump, his family, and his administration staff sang "Hallelujah" (Kreps, 2017).

WRITING FOR TRUTH THROUGH CURRERE

TRUTH, TRUST, AND TRANSFORMATION

In the context of this paper, writing for truth is about examining the unexamined in ways that tell the story. It is about "using everything you've got." It is not debatable truth; it is personal truth, derived from authentic exploration.

As an educator, I am mindful of the fact that past experiences shared by students are often antithetical to finding personal truth. Too often student writing doesn't use everything they have, and the meaning of X is prescribed and demanded, rather than self-created. External, rather than internal, expectations prevail, often in ways that are ambiguous and opaque to students. Students are asked to "think critically" and "write well," but they must try to divine what that means, generally subjugating what it means to them, personally, in favor of what they think it means to their teachers or professors. Students are asked to solve for an X that is reductive, narrow, and opaque.

Given their experiences, students are understandably reluctant to venture far from the low risk and compliant writing practices that they have honed over many years. Moving the needle from fear, anxiety, and confusion about writing to receptivity to and trust in authentic writing processes is essential and foundational.

Trust in the process is at the heart of feeling comfortable and secure in writing. Last semester, I learned that asking students to "trust the process" raised skepticism, even late in the semester after substantial trust had been built. At the beginning of a multi-draft paper, I asked students to temporarily defer premature thinking about assignment logistics and, instead, focus on idea generation and development. I asked them to "trust the process." In both sections of the course that I was teaching, I got a similar puzzling response. Students giggled and looked at each other knowingly whenever I used the phrase. I finally asked what was going on, and they were eager to tell me. "Trust the process" is the operative and commonly used phrase in the "rush"

process of the sororities and fraternities at our university, where the Greek system has a strong presence. My using the phrase conjured disingenuous images of rush and the suspicion of being asked to trust a process that has a primary tenet of judging those within it. We came up with an alternate phrase to replace the co-opted “trust the process” and proceeded.

Trust creates freedom, and freedom creates space to experiment fully and freely. Without freedom, transformation cannot take place. President John Kennedy (1961) said, “Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth.” A major constraint in student writing is the expectation for conformity that they have experienced; when conformity is familiar, they are sometimes reluctant to shed it, preferring the known to the unknown, even at the expense of transformative learning.

I imagine a continuum that represents receptivity to transformation in writing. At one end are the few students who mightily resist changing their writing habits—sometimes out of fear, sometimes because of serious trauma from previous writing experiences, and sometimes out of lack of interest in making the effort. In rare cases, those students are unable or unwilling to move along the continuum. At the other end of the continuum are the lucky few students who already have both confidence in their writing and histories of consistently supportive guidance in their school experiences with writing. Most students are somewhere between the two ends.

Using *currere* is a potentially transformative process, and assisting students in experiencing transformation is the best way to help them to understand transformation and why it’s worth the work. But, moving the needle from externally-driven, reductive compliance to freedom and transformation is difficult to operationalize.

Students can solve for X.

CRAFTING AND CURATING *CURRERE*

The process of *currere* means that, in initial writing, there will be many thoughts, ideas, and examples. Romano (2015) talks about the concept of “trusting the gush” in writing, where the writer writes freely and without self-editing. Many students have limited experience in such free-writing thinking or in the resulting need for revision. Most students are used to “one and done” (or, one to write and one quick go through for typos) writing assignments. Because of their lack of experience in free-writing, students are nervous about idea-development writing.

I understand the student perspective, because idea development writing is messy. In my own writing process, I usually begin by writing down all stories, experiences, thoughts, and words that come to my mind. Nothing is off-limits. I am unfiltered, and with immediate access to the Internet, I often indulge my curiosity. In the process of writing this paper, for example, I have (so far) listened to many renditions of “Hallelujah” that I hadn’t heard before; read about several people Bob Dylan included as his musical influences in his *Nobel Lecture*; and looked up the derivation of the phrase “moving the needle,” which led me to looking up how “number” became common as a term in music to refer to a song, which led me to exploring the field of etymology. And, those examples do not even include the furthest outliers—reading about Princess Diana and Kate Middleton’s wearing of polka dots, Bob Dylan’s Minnesota roots near where I had lived for ten years, and others.

My first drafts are a hot mess of word and idea clutter that sometimes crosses the line into word and idea hoarding. How do I move from frenetic enthusiasm and curiosity to polished thoughts? Editing down writing follows some of the same ideas as editing down objects in clutter. What do I love? What do I need? How do I craft and revise and move from the chaos I have created to clarity and order?

Using *currere* to guide the movement from all that is available in “everything you’ve got” to crafted writing provides a soft landing. It reflects a process of curating—selecting and weaving words to tell a story. It is parallel to curating a museum exhibit, where the essence of what is known and being shown is in the selection of a limited number of artifacts from the hundreds or thousands available. Achieving a balance of what is intended in the story or focus is challenging, whether in museum artifacts or words in *currere*. Too few and the meaning is reductive. Too many and the meaning is lost. For example, if Dorothea Lange’s famous, 1936, Depression-era photograph of Florence Thompson and her children that was part of Lange’s “Migrant Mother” series was the only photograph in an exhibit, it would diminish the meaning of the totality of Lange’s body of work. If thousands of images were included, the story would be concealed.

LEARNING FROM CURRERIANS

THE CURRERIANS AMONG US

“Using everything you’ve got” in solving for X includes learning from the writing of others. It is likely that most meaningful writing implicitly includes the elements of *currere*. Exploring examples of writing that does not explicitly use *currere* will sharpen understanding of the *currere* process for those who choose to use it.

It is not always necessary to dig deep to see *currere* in other people’s truths. The past, the future, contexts, and actions are often obvious when looking writing. Some examples of such writing were featured earlier in this paper, including my daughter’s story, lyrics in Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem” and “Hallelujah,” and Bob Dylan’s *Nobel Lecture*.

Currere is found in writing, large and small, in social media, conversations, and published work. Recent examples in social media are the related #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. The #MeToo movement includes thousands of stories of women who have experienced sexual harassment. Both individually and collectively, the stories inform the histories and patterns of their experiences—the regressive and analytical stages of *currere*. The subsequent #TimesUp movement is focused on the future (*currere*’s progressive) and action (*currere*’s synthetical), including raising money to fund legal action for those who have been harassed.

Comments, even brief ones, can tell a full *currere* story and, when public, can be impactful. As I am writing this, a political news story has broken about a comment made by President Trump in a meeting about immigration, where he:

...balked at an immigration deal that would include protections for people from Haiti and some nations in Africa, demanding to know at a White House meeting why he should accept immigrants from “shithole countries” rather than from places like Norway... (Davis, Stolberg, & Kaplan, 2018, para. 1)

Whether this event will be quickly forgotten in news cycles or not is unknown to me as I write, but I find myself flooded with questions that connect to the *currere* process. What are Trump’s past experiences that shaped his views? How will such views by a President impact the future, both related to immigration and more broadly? What was the context of the remarks?

Posters at political protests are another example of brief *currere* stories. One of my favorites, seen at many marches, including the Women’s March in November 2016 and the Science March in April 2017, was “So bad, even the introverts are here.” Seven words tell a *currere* process story.

Maya Angelou is one of my favorite writers; her life, experiences, and beliefs were thoroughly integrated in her writing. In doing research for a recent manuscript on love in education, I learned of a powerful conversation she had with Tupac Shakur. She describes the conversation in an interview with Dave Chappelle:

I walked out of my trailer that morning, and there was one young man cursing, like you could see the blue come out of his mouth, and then he and another fellow; they were at each other's throats; they had each other's clothes. So, I went up to the one young man, and I said, "Excuse me, may I speak to . . .," and he said, "I wouldn't give a . . .," and I said, "I understand that but can I speak to you," and he said, "but these mother . . .," and I said, "I've heard that before. But do you know how important you are? Do you know that our people slept—lay spoon fashion, in the filthy hatches of slave ships, in their own and in each other's excrement, and urine, and menstrual flow—so that you can live, 200 years later? Do you know that? Do you know that our people stood on auction blocks, so that you could live? . . . When's the last time anybody told you how important you are?" And he started to [motions tears with her hands] the tears started to come out. I had no Kleenex or anything so I just wiped his face with my hands and talked to him. (Berlinger, 2006)

Angelou was explicit about love, her words were strongly connected to love, so I used this and several other examples of her writing in my manuscript. As I listened to her description of the conversation, I was struck by the implicit connections to *currere*. Hers is an example of how meaningful writing is inherently *currere* writing.

Maya Angelou solved for X.

THE *CURRERIANS* WITHIN US

As noted above, students often struggle to be expansive in their thinking and writing when their past writing experiences were largely negative, being forced to use *nothing*, instead of *everything*, that they have. Humans develop coping strategies to reduce dissonance, and for students, that strategy is often to increase the emotional space between self and writing, relegating writing to a joyless, loveless process.

Undoing the writing damage done to students to unlock the *currerians* within them happens by moving the needle a bit at a time, with lots of low-risk writing and experimentation. The student whose story began this paper shared her story as a preface to talking about how her feelings about writing had changed during the semester. Step-by-step, the damage was reversed. Her account of the summer experience was more matter-of-fact reporting and surprise that she had been so worried about a class than it was emotional angst; she had become empowered.

Self-awareness can be achieved by using *currere* explicitly and by seeing how *currere* is included in the writing of others. But, empowering students to find their truth through writing can also be enhanced by them looking at their own writing and its connections to *currere*.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When I think of *currere*, I am reminded of Ouroboros, the mythical creature that renews itself by eating its tail, symbolizing infinity. *Currere* is a process, and although it is necessary to have an endpoint in writing, the thinking continues and is nurtured by the route that preceded it. The process reflects infinite and dazzling possibilities and

intersections of defining X and solving for X. What we learn from our writing is as important, or perhaps more important, than what we write; we continue to be nurtured and sustained by what we have learned, in an infinite cycle, like the Ouroboros. When I close my computer and end this writing that both uses *currere* and is about *currere*, what will I have learned, and how will it impact my learning in the future?

As a writer, this process has reaffirmed my belief that writing reveals thoughts that no other type of communication can. Writing is solitary but also a conversation with myself. Like a good conversation, I don't always know where thoughts will go or what will emerge as important or surprising.

As an educator, I have enhanced my learning about acknowledging and respecting the history of students' experiences. The importance of recognizing the "elephant in the room" that is the impact of schooling scaffolds the importance of being explicit with students about strategies for reclaiming voice in their writing and for seeing the power within them that is their inner *currerian*.

My final thoughts here are from my perspective as a parent. I told my daughter, now a young adult, that I was including her childhood story about her friend Worm in this paper. She laughed and said, "Too soon, mom. Too soon." I'm glad that, on that summer day when she was three, I didn't say to her that she needed to change "ate" to "eaten." I'm glad that she survived her writing experiences in her P-12 schooling and can, in the words of Leonard Cohen, "ring the bells that still can ring" in her ability to "code switch" from external to internal expectations in her college writing in ways that preserve her spirit and empower her to learn. With nearly 20 years of introspection on her part, I think it's time for "The Sad, Sad Story of the Worm that Got Ate by a Bird: Part 2." I'd like to know how X has changed and how she uses everything she has now. My X to be solved is in the question, "What does my young *currerian* have to say?"

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