"Getting Others' Perspectives": A Case Study of Creative Writing Environments and Mentorship

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Abstract: Giving students opportunities to interact with real readers of their work may not only motivate them to write, but also to take on new literacies and see themselves as writers in new ways. I detail two case studies of successful writing communities—a high school classroom and an extracurricular arts program—and describe adolescent writing practices in the active (and often interactive) presence of the two different collaborative audiences. I discuss structural implications for the structure of authentic writing and writing workshop environments, the role of mentors in such instructional spaces, and the importance of teaching students how to be effective, collaborative audience members and readers of each others' writing.

Introduction and Significance

In recent years, writing has become the new "basic literacy skill," as central as reading both in the workplace and in education (Brandt, 2001, 2009). Students write in many genres, both for school and for personal exploration and communication (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008; Lunsford, et al., 2008). In schools, many states have mandated writing assessments, pushing teachers to emphasize writing throughout the curriculum (e.g. United States Department of Education, 2007). Only 25% of 12th grade students in United States schools were graded as "proficient" writers on the 2007 NAEP writing assessment (NAEP, 2008), however, suggesting a disconnect among the skill of writing, its real-world importance, and the teaching of writing in secondary schools. Part of this shortfall may be a result of the typical presentation of writing in secondary schools: a way to evaluate student knowledge, rather than a useful skill or a communicative tool (Applebee, 1996; Boscolo & Hidi, 2007; Nystrand, 1997).

While creative writing, the major form of in-school communicative and expressive writing, appears often in elementary schools, it drops out of most curricula by high school (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007). I argue in this study that mentors and teachers can encourage more authentic, communicative writing practice through design: Creative, expressive writing communities can motivate students to practice their own writing, to read others' writing, and to improve their broader literacies—all skills that prepare them to be writers and communicators in school and beyond.

This study explores relationships among instructional practices, instructional spaces, authentic writing, and adolescents' engagement in and understanding of creative writing. I take up two specific research questions: (1) At a design level, how are creative writing communities structured? What are the salient participant structures in which students and mentors participate? (2) What are the roles that students and mentors play? How do the structures affect these roles, and, more importantly, students' experiences and engagement with creative writing?

Theory

In traditional classrooms, influenced by the belief that writing is more a tool for evaluation than an independent content area, most writing activity involves answering questions with a "correct" answer known by a teacher (Applebee, 1996; Nystrand, 1997). As a result, most classroom writing at the secondary level assesses content knowledge rather than students' ability to make an original argument, write cohesive narrative, or impact an authentic audience (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007; Cohen & Riel, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1980). This particular focus, reinforced by state-level assessments as well as the number of subjects taught in schools, leads to a narrow view of writing instruction: content knowledge, structure, and Standard English conventions (Hillocks, 2002).

In contrast, students' writing in various authentic "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), or "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) is a tool for communication, creativity, and expression. These communities are found informally in places like online blogs and formally in publications such as literary magazines or club newsletters (Brandt, 2001). Differently from classrooms, the writing practice and instruction in these spaces tends to be "integrated" with preparing writing for an audience (Langer, 2001). Instead of completing a school assignment for a teacher, writers here must consider the communicative context of their work (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005; Lunsford, et al., 2008).

Recent research into programs that bring authentic writing into classroom contexts has reported positive results, showing strong student engagement in the learning necessary to complete writing (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007), as well as critical thought about the audience and presentation of specific pieces of writing (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Dyson, 1997; Purcell-Gates, et al, 2007). In addition, work from writing and media studies suggests that young writers take on challenging topics and engage in key identity development when they have the opportunity to write for audiences in these ways (Dyson, 1997; Heath, 1983; Halverson, 2005; Hull, 2005).

Literacies research in secondary schools has established the writing workshop model—one that brings many features of authentic writing and affinity spaces into the classroom—as an effective practice for teachers (Alvermann, 2001; Atwell, 1998). Different from evaluative writing, workshop writing encourages students to think through ideas using writing as a tool, to read critically, and to understand classroom writing as preparation for advanced literacies (Alvermann, 2001). At the same time, both students and teachers need extensive practice with workshop techniques to be "effective responders" to each others' work (Simmons, 2003).

Methods

I collected multiple forms of data from two creative writing environments in order to build distinct *instrumental case studies* (Stake, 1995) of successful environments in which the creative process, writing process, teaching and learning methods, and available audiences for the writing are different. These case studies exemplify two settings in which young people learn to write and practice writing: a school classroom and an extracurricular arts program.

Participants, Settings, and Data Collection

The first case, a *school environment*, follows nine students (six female, three male) through a creative writing unit in an 11th grade English classroom at a K-12 suburban school. Two of the students identified as Asian exchange students, one as African-American, and six as White/Caucasian. The classroom teacher aimed for students to understand the genres of fiction and poetry better by working in small groups to write, revise, and analyze their own poems and short stories. These observations totaled approximately 15 hours over ten weeks.

The second case, an *extracurricular environment*, follows seven participants (five female, two male) at an urban creative writing camp for 9th-12th graders. Organized and staffed by local professional writers ("writing coaches"), the camp helps young people to hone their writing craft. Activities focused on daily writing, reviewing writing in small groups, and revising prose and poetry pieces for a final public reading. These observations totaled approximately 25 hours over one week.

I collected data from a variety of sources in both cases described above. In each setting, I observed and participated in one full *production cycle's* worth of work, which included the duration of creative writing instruction planned by the mentor(s). Despite the differences in each setting, the activities in which the participants engaged (e.g. writing, feedback, and revision) were comparable. Observations were captured in field notes and audio recordings. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews. I interviewed students twice, using pre- and post-interviews that were largely reflective, allowing them to speak in depth about their own writing processes, the pieces of writing that they worked on, and their experiences of class or camp. I interviewed mentors once, at the end of the writing instruction, about design choices that they made and their evaluation of the program.

Data Analysis

Especially when considering a less-researched context such as secondary-level creative writing, qualitative methodologies such as open coding (drawn from grounded theory, e.g. Charmaz, 2000) and thematic analysis (e.g. Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006) are particularly important. While I have entered the analysis with specific hypotheses, these open-ended techniques allow me to identify, describe, and understand broad patterns in adolescents' perceptions of their online writing and the effects of these experiences on their learning.

This paper presents a preliminary thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006) of these data. To conduct this analysis, I broke student interviews and classroom conversations into excerpts by question (for the interviews) or episode (for the field notes and classroom conversations). I began with open coding and refined my coding scheme in subsequent rounds of coding, highlighting central themes inductively from the data (e.g. "mentorship," "useful feedback") and deductively from the theoretical framework, (e.g. "affinity space structure," "authentic audience," and "evaluation").

Pseudonyms — Student and Mentor Numbers

In order to track students and mentors across two cases, I have devised the following numbering scheme: All students in the *school case* are labeled with an "S#": In other words, they are identified as S1, S2, etc. All students in the *extracurricular case* are labeled with an "E#": E1, E2, etc. Since there was only one *teacher* in the school case, he is labeled "T1." The four *writing coaches* in the extracurricular case are labeled with a "C#": C1, C2, etc.

Results: Major Findings

I present three themes drawn from observational data and student interviews, each examining an element of the design of the two instructional spaces and the effects of these design choices on the students. These themes are: (1) feedback structure, (2) role of mentors and teachers, and (3) how students interact with audience.

Theme 1a: Feedback Structure — School

In the school case, observations demonstrated that class members (students and teacher working together) established a loose workshop structure among themselves. Students completed a short story and a small poetry collection (the teacher suggested 4-5 poems) during the ten weeks, but were able to choose which genre to take up first. Students were expected to bring writing to class on each workshop day, although not all students did so.

Students who had prepared work formed small groups during each class, read each other's work silently, made notes, and discussed their feedback with little intervention from their teacher, who provided assistance if requested. Students who were not prepared to share written work wrote silently during the class time. As a result of this structure, students received written and verbal feedback from their peers, usually the partners with whom they worked each day. Sometimes these groups remained consistent throughout the duration of one piece—for example, one pair of students worked together six times, repeatedly reviewing one poem and one story (field notes: 3/9/09, 3/20/09, 3/27/09, 4/1/09, 4/3/09, 4/14/09)—but often, students chose different partners during each workshop.

Students could (and a few did) consult with the classroom teacher directly for additional formative feedback. For example, S2 commented on his teacher's ability to help him focus on sensory details in his poetry: "I really like to focus on the big things and... it gets harder and harder for me to focus on actually expressing those thoughts in the poem, so he really pushed me to get those, the specifics." More formal written teacher feedback came in the form of a grade and comments after students had turned in an assignment.

Theme 1b: Feedback Structure — Extracurricular

In the extracurricular case, observations demonstrated that each writing coach led a "writers' circle" of 6 students, which provided the central mechanism for students' sharing and getting feedback on their writing. The writers' circles met twice a day with consistent membership—each student received daily formative feedback from the same peers and writing coach. Some students worked on the same piece of writing throughout the week, bringing revisions or new sections to each writers' circle, while others brought several different pieces during the week.

The structure of writers' circle was proscribed and consistent throughout the week. Approximately 3 students shared their work in each writing circle. With two circles each day, each student was expected, though not forced, to share writing at least once a day. During each circle, one student read her work aloud while the others listened and made notes. After this reading, each member (including the coach), shared her feedback and passed her notes to the initial reader/writer. A short discussion occasionally followed, usually if many students gave feedback on the same aspect of a piece. For example, when two writers were struggling to resolve stories of loss and guilt., C1 began a conversation encouraging students to describe how they felt in these situations to help the writers capture these feelings realistically in their characterizations and descriptions (field notes, 8/5/09).

In the writers' circles, coaches listened and gave feedback, and students were often impressed by the details that coaches noticed: "[Coaches] have schooling and stuff on this topic... There's some things [my coach] noticed... [she saw] I was using adjective noun a lot, like that pattern. That was really good" (E6). If a student needed additional feedback, writing coaches also encouraged conferences during silent writing time (field notes, 8/5/09).

Theme 1c: Feedback Structure — Looking Across Cases

The structure of these two learning environments may be represented in the following way:

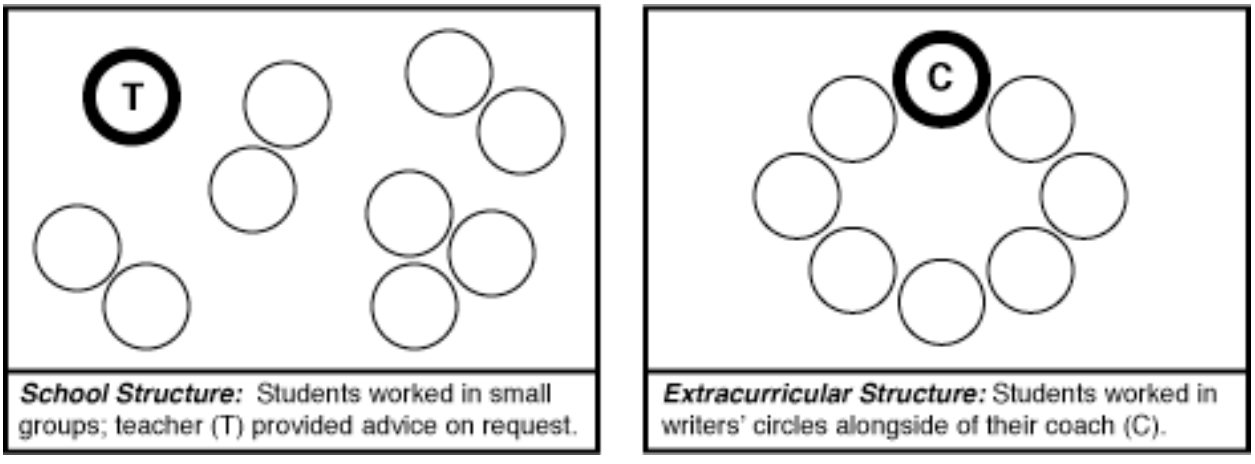

Figure 1: Structure of Learning Environments

All of the students in both cases (9/9 school, 7/7 extracurricular) recognized at least some value in getting feedback from readers (peers, mentors, or both) during the process of writing and editing, from "motivation... because I'm going to have to be sharing this" (E6), to "support... when I was scared to write poetry" (S4), to "other people's perspectives" (E5). In their interviews, students reported using the edits from the workshop groups and writers' circles—their peers and mentors—to improve their poems and short stories:

> It was helpful to see what other people understood... [One person] read this and said 'well, I'm not sure what you mean...' And then listed out potential ideas that they had... I saw what they took from it and could see... I need[ed] to emphasize these parts better (S6).

> Well, you don't have to follow [the feedback] but it's always good to know what other people thought... because if this part's not clear, or you can't see what this [character's] thinking, or it's not realistic that [a character would] feel this way after this happened, then it just opens your eyes. And then you work on it. And you get better by working (E3).

When audience members became collaborative editors, students in both of the case studies became invested in receiving criticism about the quality of and meanings behind their writings, and in working to revise with that feedback in mind.

Theme 2a: Role of Mentors — School

In the school case, likely as a result of the design of the instructional space, observations and interviews revealed that the teacher did not have a clear role in mentoring the day-to-day happenings of the creative writing workshop sessions. He gave advice to individuals or small groups and kept time (and, occasionally, order) as students workshopped their writing, but he was not directly involved in the feedback structures of his classroom's workshops. He sometimes seemed unsure of his role in the new space that he and his students had built, although he was certain that he "d[id]n't want to grade them on their creativity" (T1), and spoke in class about not interfering with their ideas or process, "as long as [they were] writing" (T1). On the first day of workshop writing, just as students had begun reading each others' work, he came over to ask me "what do I do now?" (field notes 3/9/09).

In their post-interviews, a third of the students (3/9) expressed frustration with their teacher's role, specifically because it did not allow them access to his expertise unless they sought out his advice. Students appreciated that their teacher was trying not to apply "pressure... [like] whether or not you're [writing] what the teacher wants you to get" (S8) but at the same time, noted that his "adult opinion" (S8) was valuable to them. Many were eager to hear what he had to say about their writing: "[I wanted] to hear more of what he had to say a lot of the time... I think he [didn't give more feedback] maybe for the purpose of not having any influence" (S6).

Theme 2b: Role of Mentors — Extracurricular

In the extracurricular case, the writing coaches were all familiar with the writers' circle feedback structure because they had used this design in prior writing camps (field notes, 8/3/09). Observations of and interviews with writing coaches demonstrated that all of the coaches (4/4) believed their central role to be supporting the students' writing by giving them "sacred writing time" to write and "good feedback on their work," through writers' circles. Almost all (6/7) of the students, too, connected the feedback from their coaches with improvement in their writing skills:

> [My coach gives] professional feedback. I mean, it's good across the board, the feedback [from my coach] that comes from experience, and then, from my fellow young writers, you get that feedback that just comes from the gut. [They tell me] I read this, and it kinda tripped me up. And that's kinda my audience... they will tell [me] what's right, what's good and what's not good (E7).

Students saw this feedback as vital to their development because they saw their coaches as an audience: experienced writers who knew about such difficulties as continuity, structure, and revising stories and poems for publication.

Theme 3a: Writing for an Audience — School

While all of the students in the school case recognized the *value* of getting feedback from readers (peers, mentors, or both) during the process of writing and editing, they did not necessarily enjoy sharing their writing. The workshop process was new for almost all of them; 7/9 reported never having workshopped creative writing before. In their post-interviews, only one student in the class, S1, believed that getting feedback from her peers and teacher was always welcome and always useful, because it "can help you figure out if you got your meaning [across]." 4/9 students, however, noted that while they thought that getting feedback was helpful and led to improvements in their writing, they did not enjoy it because the process was often "uncomfortable" (S4, S6) or "too emotional" (S5):

> [In the workshop sessions] I guess I was thinking, oh they're not gonna understand what I'm trying to say here... I wanted them to get the meaning I got from [the poem], but sometimes I didn't want to share that emotion so... it was kind of like I [didn't] know what to do (S5).

One student in this group, S4 only showed her writing to the teacher for the entire 10 weeks. An additional 4/9 students noted that while they generally enjoyed getting and giving feedback, it was acknowledged that this process sometimes made them feel "worried" (S3) or "sensitive" (S8), especially when sharing a new piece for the first time:

> Yes [I liked getting feedback] for certain poems... I'd have to actually really feel good about them myself. I guess it goes with just about anything, you have to feel comfortable yourself with your creation before you show it to other people (S2).

While all of the students felt as if writing for an active, communicative audience of their peers was helpful in some ways, the process of doing so was very difficult for many of them. Particularly students who chose to write about personal, emotional topics felt as if their writing could expose "too much" of themselves (S9), and potentially parts of their lives that they did not know if they wanted to share with their classmates and teacher.

Theme 3b: Writing for an Audience — Extracurricular

In the extracurricular case, students reported more positive reviews of the process of giving and receiving feedback , particularly in the context of writers' circles. This finding is unsurprising in many ways, since all of the students in this case (7/7) had been to this creative writing camp in prior years, and were therefore familiar with the process of sharing their writing with their peers and writing coach. In their post-interviews, all of the students (7/7) reported valuing the feedback that they got, while 6/7 students noted that they enjoyed sharing their writings:

> I really liked sharing in the writer's circle. I think that we had a really good group too, because they, they evaluated a lot... I dunno, they helped. They didn't just say I liked it, they were good critiquers. [T]hey gave a lotta criticism, but also praise, and... they almost talked about the idea that you had, and what they thought it was. It helped me [to see] other people's perspectives (E5).

A few (3/7) students noted some apprehension, reporting that they felt "kind of anxious" (E1), or "nervous" when sharing a new story (E2), but all of the extracurricular students tempered these feelings with stories of how peers and coaches helped them to improve their writing, or inspired them to keep going with a difficult piece of writing.

One unexpected finding was that many students (4/7) in the extracurricular case did not only talk about why they enjoyed camp, but about why they did not like sharing their writing at school. Their main complaint was the lack of constructive criticism, or, as E1 stated, "they just are like ohmigod, this is really good... how am I going to improve off of that?" The biggest condemnation of sharing outside of camp, however, came from S6, who argued that English teachers should "never" force students to read creative work aloud in school:

> [F]or school, I hate it when they have us read stuff out loud... [B]ecause all of the ideas I had that would've been perfectly fine at camp... they wouldn't be the same if they were told to all of my classmates. They would just think of the idea as really weird, instead of just appreciating it, and so then I couldn't think of anything [to write]... I knew that they were all gonna be reading me and judging me on it because you know, it's sort of a school environment where everyone judges you on what they hear...it wasn't like that at all at [camp] (S6).

Whereas sharing her writing with camp students—other writers who appreciate unusual ideas—is easy, sharing her writing at school is difficult. While the collaborative audience of her writers circle at camp would help her improve a "really weird" idea for a story, the evaluative audience of her classmates would judge her for her creativity.

Discussion and Implications

In both of these cases, the mentors made efforts to reduce the differences between themselves and their students by avoiding many evaluation structures that are typical to schools and working to create a space in which students felt free to pursue creative, productive writing. Instead of commenting summatively on students' work, mentors in both cases made themselves available to give formative feedback and allowed students to choose topics freely. While students in the school case had some limits—the necessity of exploring both prose and poetic genres, an analysis of their own work—students in the extracurricular case students explored writing as they wished. Largely, these design elements helped both of these spaces to cohere as successful writing environments. In the school case and in the

extracurricular case, students wrote several creative pieces, successfully solicited and received feedback from their peers, mentors, or both, and revised their writing to the specifications of that feedback. (All students in both cases revised at least one piece of writing: Reports on revision data are forthcoming.)

It is worthwhile to note, however, that the purpose of writing in each of these environments is quite distinct, and affords feedback and collaboration differently: As many sociocultural theorists note, context matters (e.g. Black, 2008; Dyson, 1997; Heath, 1983). Students who engage in creative writing as part of a school program are forced to do so, at least at some level. While many students did explore themselves, their emotions, and their histories as topics for their poems and prose, it was difficult for some to engage in this important identity work at school. This kind of writing exposed sensitive feelings in front of classmates and for a grade—a situation where risk-taking is understandably dangerous (Dyson, 1997; Halverson, 2005). In contrast, the students in the extracurricular case had much more freedom to explore "weird" writing at camp (as S6 noted), partly because other creative writers are tolerant of offbeat ideas, but perhaps also partly because camp is necessarily separate from everyday communities.

Combining the ideas of purpose and mentor roles in these two case studies sheds light on the importance and the difficulty of establishing *truly* collaborative audiences in a writing workshop environment. Not only must writing instructors design a space that supports purposeful, expressive writing and establishes a structure for students' collaborative interactions, but a structure for mentors' participation as well.

In the school case, the teacher required that his students write and he stood outside of the collaborative feedback structure. While the intention of this design choice was to allow greater expression within a required assignment—he spoke often of "not grading students' creativity"—this move backfired. Because he was outside of the collaboration, teacher feedback came only when students sought out his advice or had turned in an assignment, and thus was seen as summative. Despite the workshop-oriented structure of the classroom, and the students' collaborations, it was difficult for the teacher to avoid the norms that are inherent to classroom communication and evaluation (Applebee, 1996; Nystrand, 1997). In the end, it seems that the power structure of school cast him as an evaluator, although another result may have been possible if he had participated more fully in the workshop.

In contrast, writing coaches were integral to the feedback structure in the extracurricular case, acting as expert writers and representatives of a community of practice that the participating students sought to join (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Students chose to attend writing camp, many of them for several years running, because they appreciated this kind of expert instruction. Coaches modeled listening and feedback in writers' circles, and often drew connections across young writers' experiences, pointing out broad patterns in students' writing and offering ideas for how they might achieve an attempted technique. Instead of their role as leaders forcing them into evaluation, the writing coaches used their place inside of the writers' circles to encourage debate, frame students' comments, provide additional insights, and offer questions or future directions for students' writing. This was, however, no doubt easier for coaches who did not have to evaluate students in the end—this structure likely made it much easier for students to see their feedback as collaborative and formative.

One interesting reading of this difference is in the separation between the goals of the school environment and that of the extracurricular environment. In the extracurricular case, the coaches saw their role quite literally as coaches: Their job, in the week-long camp, was to help young, inexperienced writers improve as much as possible, which requires intensive modeling and guidance from listeners with writing experience (Simmons, 2003). In contrast, the teacher in the school case was not invested in modeling writing, but in his students' learning of literary devices through experimentation. He wanted his class to learn how to think about why writers make certain choices, connecting their own struggles with figures of speech (for example) with the analysis of stories and poetry written by more famous authors—common practices in secondary English classrooms (Applebee, 1996).

While the creation of workshop groups with collaborative, authentic audiences was similar across both cases, the purposes of writing and the overarching instructional structures were very different—and this difference had a profound effect on the mentors' roles and the students' experiences. Can students and mentors participating in instructional spaces serve as authentic readers and audience members for each others' writing? This preliminary analysis suggests that these kinds of interactions are possible, particularly with practice and a carefully designed structure. At the same time, the transformation from traditional classroom to authentic writing workshop is not a straightforward one for teachers or students, and should be approached with deliberation and attention.

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