"Doing Justice" for an Audience of One: Motivation to Revise When Students Write for Podcasts

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Abstract: This study centers on a podcasting unit in which high school creative writing students crafted interview-based audio narratives, or podcasts, on digital platforms. Analysis of interview, observational, and survey data indicate that students were motivated to consider whole-text meaning when revising their work, similar to "expert writers," and described doing so because of a sense of responsibility to their interviewee as their audience of one. These findings suggest that teachers may not need to design assignments with large, outside audiences to support students' motivation to revise, but that even an audience of one, and in particular a community member with whom the student has a relationship, can provide motivation for student writers.

Introduction

When students write for audiences that are meaningful to them, their work is better (Cohen & Riel, 1989), and they become better writers (Midgette, Haria & MacArthur, 2008). Research shows that audiences act as motivators for students as they write and revise (Chávez & Soep, 2005; Levine & Franzel, 2015). However, time and institutional constraints can make coordination of real-world audiences difficult, and a recent large, multi-year study noted that the majority of work students do today is still read only by their teacher, as just 11.1% of middle school and 8.2% of high school teachers report frequently providing other readers for their students (Applebee & Langer, 2011).

Keeping in mind that relatively few student pieces have audiences beyond the teacher, while revising, students tend not to engage with the increasing cognitive demands of the process of improving their own writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2013), and instead confine their focus to word- and sentence-level edits. Students avoid making more complex paragraph-level or whole-text revisions—actions that "expert writers" are said to do with frequency (Hillocks, 1986; McCutchen, Francis, & Kerr, 1997).

The results of this study suggest that teachers may not need to design assignments with large, outside audiences to support students' motivation and attention to revision. Even an audience of one, and in particular, a community member with whom the student has a relationship, can provide meaningful motivation for student writers to improve their revision processes and expand their learning.

Theoretical framing

This study draws from sociocultural theories which describe language, learning, and culture as powerfully interconnected (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Turner, 1997), as well as theories which suggest that learning and cognition are not simply in-the-head activities, but are distributed across settings (Moll, Tapia, and Whitmore, 1993). Classrooms that draw on students' unique funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) including the knowledge distributed across students' communities, create richer learning environments for all. These learning environments are said to support students' sense-making as well as identity formation and affirmation, but may also deepen students' own cognitive processes as they learn with the support of their communities (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Methods

This study took place at a scholarship-based independent day and boarding school in the San Francisco Bay Area for students who will be the first in their families to attend college. Students in the study (n = 13) were 9 - 12th graders who identified as African American and Latinx, along with an experienced creative writing teacher who identified as an Iranian-American woman. The creative writing teacher partnered with this study's researchers to co-design a six-week podcasting curriculum. The unit centered around student-conducted interviews with a chosen member of their communities and included parents, siblings, mentors, and friends. Students made audio recordings of their interviews, and along with narration and music, used them to produce a three-minute podcast.

The research team took field notes over the course of one academic year (concentrating observations around podcast production), collected pre- and post-unit surveys, and conducted semi-structured interviews with students and their teacher following the close of the podcasting unit. This analysis focuses on student responses to two interview questions: "What is one revision decision that you made in the podcasting unit that you did not make or might not have made in other units?," and "What motivated you to make that decision?" Student answers

were coded into categories around decision type (sentence-level, whole-text level), and motivator. Data were analyzed by looking at counts, comparisons, and percentages, and all findings were triangulated through theme analysis of field notes, survey data, and student and teacher interviews.

Results and implications

Evidence suggests that, when podcasting in their communities, student writers are motivated to consider whole-text meaning when making revisions, similar to "expert writers," and that students' revision decisions may be motivated by an audience of one and a sense of responsibility to "do justice" to their interviewees' stories.

In interviews, of sixty revision decisions that students described, 70% were whole-text considerations; students were 42 times more likely to discuss whole-text than word-level revision considerations. In describing motivators for those decisions, all but one student described feeling motivated to make whole-text decisions by an audience, and in particular, their interviewee. Students offered seventy-seven reasons for their revision decisions, and 42% of those motivators (comprising the largest category) were the students' interviewees. Students expressed that they revised with a sense of responsibility to do justice to their interviewee's story. For example, one student reflected on editing the story of her mother's border-crossing: "Once I started, I didn't want to stop. I wanted to keep adding things. I wanted people to *know*. I wanted my mom's story to be told as best as possible . . . and as much as you want to think, 'It's just a story,' it's something more than that at the end of the day."

These findings challenge the idea of what a meaningful audience can be and suggest that a different understanding of meaningful audiences might change students' and teachers' approaches to writing and revision. This, in turn, supports the scholarship that emphasizes the intertwined nature of language, learning, and culture and pushes us to further explore the learning impacts of leveraging communities, even one member of a students' community, in writing classrooms.

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