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"When I'm Writing I Can Feel I'm Singing in a Nice Round World": High School Seniors' Perspectives on "Writer" Identity Formation and Avant-Garde Writing Techniques

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Writing is a key skillset for academic and professional success, yet many students reject the identity of "writer", resulting in reduced motivation to improve writing. Research suggests that the "writer" identity is linked to several factors: students' sense of group/institutional belonging, students' awareness of their voice as authors, instructors' support for students' intersectional identities, and students' perception of overwhelming criticism and assessment from teachers of their developing writing technique and voice. This phenomenological action research explored students' concept of what a writer is, who is in or excluded in that category, and experiences with avant-garde techniques. Participants included an ethnically and linguistically diverse class of primarily seniors at a Midwestern urban high school. The study analyzed survey responses, illustrations and writing samples. The surveys bookended a mini-unit of avant-garde "experimental writing" sessions, using strategies that emphasize collaboration and "good mistakes."

"... student didn't learn ... students ... failed ...students confused and disengaged .. Students ... must complete ... students to do more ... students don't have the tools ... students ... struggled" (Goldstein, 2017). This is a selection of the word "students" and accompanying verbs in The New York Times article "Why Kids Can't Write" (Goldstein, 2017). The article reveals a lot about adults' expectations of students, describing teachers' ongoing wrestling matches over standards, grammar and what teachers need to do to get students to do what they need to do: write conventional, academic English.

But it does not reveal much about the "kids" it supposedly reports on – in fact, it does not include a single word from any of them (Goldstein, 2017). Thousands of reader comments similarly explore the opinions of other academics, experts and assessments (Goldstein, 2017). Author and readers alike seem unconcerned with who students are, besides defining them as "low

income" (Goldstein, 2017). But there is no separating who they are from what they do: self-efficacy and attitude are perhaps the most important factors in writing skill (Bulut, 2017). In pursuing procedural answers to "the problem," what if we suffocate the students' subjectivity?

Many students are locked in a complex relationship with writing, language, and literature; they use language to think, write and relax, yet resent it in an academic setting. "Writer" is a socially charged term. It can denote a specific, powerful and exclusive range of professions, or enthusiasm for a skill set that determines one's academic success and professional destiny. Students may sort themselves (or are sorted by "tracking") as a writer or non-writer (Schultheis, 2019). This sorting is logical – by removing themselves from that domain, they can escape the stress of high expectations and teacher scrutiny – the stress that made learning impossible in the first place (Kaufer, 2011).

Then there is the political element. "The rules of English composition encapsulate values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of other societies" (Shen, 1998, p. 124). English, as taught and policed by the state, is a political symbol, and students may make complex decisions about how to express their orientation toward the state when considering the writer identity (Pennycook & Candlin, 2017). Flaunting prescriptive grammar, especially for young adults, can symbolize flaunting the rules of their society, as well as a choice about the nature of their participation in it (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Brennan, 2018; Hemenway, 2020). Noroozisiam & Soozandehfar (2011) write that "The idea of universal transfer of English discursive and pedagogical norms is on its way of total destruction" (p. 1,243).

When students resist writing, instructors seek rubrics and scaffolding devices to cut them a clearer path. But these scaffolds can create new barriers and reduce efficacy for students, especially those with low literacy levels, giving the sense that there are so many ways to fail at a writing task (Verlaan & Verlaan, 2016, p. 96). As instructors prescribe more "digestible" techniques, are we missing a key factor that may motivate students: the pleasure of creativity? The cleavage between creativity and convention also separates the student from writing.

This phenomenological action research examined student conceptions and identification with being a "writer." This study asked: what do high school students have to say about the identity of "writer" – who it belongs to? What do they have to say about writing, the skill we ask them to practice every single day? And, finally, does an unusual experience with creative, collaborative writing strategies encourage them to see themselves as writers?

Review of Literature

Research suggests that the "writer" identity is linked to several factors: students' sense of group/institutional belonging, students' awareness of their voice as authors, instructors' support for students' intersectional identities, and students' perception of overwhelming criticism and assessment from teachers of their developing writing technique. In this literature review, I identify teachers' and researchers' strategies to address these factors, as well as promising gaps in the literature that this study explores.

Ivanic (1998) argues that writers take on the identity of a member of a discourse community, one who claims "authority" (in both senses of the word), and that systemic barriers to social authority, like gender and class, are also barriers to linguistic authority (p. 88). In two qualitative

studies of new secondary students, Pittam et al. (2009) theorized that student authorial identity is "the sense a writer has of themselves," consisting of confidence, understanding authorship and knowledge required to avoid plagiarism; they found students generally expressed little awareness of their authorial identity (p. 153). Instead, the pressures of school made them feel like intellectual scavengers: "We're just picking out what everyone else has done and trying to put it in some kind of order" (Pittam et al., 2009, p. 156). Many students do not identify as participants in a discourse.

Writing for the National Council of Teachers of English, Hasty & Hauptman (2019) say that writing instructors must see themselves through a dual lens as writers and teachers. Ings (2009) found one district's successful implementation of new writing pedagogy emphasized the teacher as writer, and the role of enjoyment in writing assignments. Teachers were encouraged to invite students into an apprentice identity: "students cannot be assumed to know what a writer is or what a writer does unless they get the chance to meet one and see what they do," (Ings, 2009, p. 21).

Effective writing instruction requires teacher and peer relationships of respect and development, not constant nitpicking. Verlaan and Verlaan (2016) argue that low-stakes writing assignments help students enter a developmental process, rather than an academic performance (p. 106). Ings (2009) described how teachers can devise assignments with stakes – but not academic stakes: after a trophy was stolen from the school, students were told to write detailed crime reports. One novel way to let students develop their voice without constant criticism is anonymity; students can use pseudonyms to encourage higher participation (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011, p. 175).

In writing, social exchange is intertwined with individual expression—but how can schools encourage students to see it this way? Several studies found that students related differently to writing when they submitted their pieces to a class publication at the end of the semester, or passed their writing samples down to the next incoming class (Skerrett, 2013; Ings, 2009). Pritchard (2015) describes one university's writing café, staffed with student mentors, and found that the relationships were conducive to students identifying as writers and belonging to a discourse community. Wagner (2016) writes that dual language learners' writer identity is shaped by peers, who help scaffold practices. Chin (2014) describes Bruneian students' increasing reflection on their identity as language learners when devising plays together.

Studies on students learning a second language can reveal assumptions we make about learning a first language. Learning to write in English is "a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity ... learning English composition would have been easier if I had realized this earlier and consciously sought to compare the two different identities..." (Shen, 1998, p. 132). Loffredo and Perteghella (2014) held workshops where students explored literary translation as a creative practice, translating an English text into their home language; focus groups then discussed how students' relationships to their languages had changed. Can translation, taught in an explicitly critical pedagogy, help disrupting the writer-as- individual-genius concept that excludes so many from identifying as writers? In a case study of one Mexican

American student in a class that produced a year-end magazine, Skerrett (2013) observed a shift in the student's writing identity and her perceptions of her family, who wrote bilingual post-its and text messages, but who she previously saw as non-writers.

Support for students' intersectional identities also means identifying writers as role models for students that help them address power structures. In a summer writing program for Black girls, students wrote against objectionable narratives, such as writing essays from the perspective of four women in a Nina Simone song (McArthur, 2019). In an action research case study on a Black student poet with cognitive disabilities, Whitney (2019) emphasizes the power of student dialogue and collaboration, as well as inviting local Black writers to share their craft. McComiskey (2000) asks students to identify the institution that impacted them most and interrogate their social function.

This study attempts to explore three gaps in the literature. While there is rich literature on teachers' pedagogical choices intended to support the elements of writer identity formation, student perspectives are still mediated through teacher observation or assessment. An understanding of what students think writing is (or writers are) seems to be too obvious a question for many people to have asked it. Second, there is an imbalance where studies tend to research elementary and college students far more than high school students. And third, more research into the effects of unorthodox writing techniques is needed. As aforementioned The New York Times article indicates, many teachers still seem to be debating between different elements of the same traditional approaches (Goldstein, 2017). If you want learning to occur, then apply rich, varied stimulus—stimulus of the senses, of higher order faculties, of emotions—and avoid stress that fogs the affective filter (Kaufer, 2011). In other words, positive, unorthodox experiences are what change people's minds.

Methodology

This action research study asked 15 students about who counts as a writer, their identification with the term "writer" and their experiences writing. As the action researcher, I taught this class as part of my student teaching responsibilities. This research took place after only a week of leading this class. These 15 upperclassmen, in a creative writing class at a Midwestern public high school, represented a diverse spectrum of students. Though the class was ostensibly an elective, many students chose it based on scheduling or just dreaded it less than music, drama and dance. This school is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse in America; these students' roots extended to Mexico, indigenous American tribes, Jordan, Palestine, Nigeria, China, and Vietnam. All participating students were multilingual.

Students completed a Writer Presurvey in Google Forms, where they took 30-50 minutes to answer open-ended questions. This was consistent with the phenomenological design and intended to stimulate critical thinking about the "writer" label (as opposed to a Likert scale, which could have created a linear and mechanical approach for students, after many lengthy school surveys). Questions were designed for students to construct multiple facets of their "writer"

concept. I asked them to explain why they identified as writers or not, and access formative memories (One memory I have of hating writing was _____). I asked them to categorize individuals ("Fill in the blank: ___ is a writer") and groups ("_____ are writers"). Questions also asked students to reflect on the writing process, ("_____ helps me write"; "I ___ writing"). Students illustrated what a writer is to produce more data and give another accessible modality.

After the pre survey, we conducted an avant-garde mini-unit. We began with an extended interpretation of the aphorism "Honor thy error as a hidden intention" from musician Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies (Eno & Schmidt, 1975/2022). Each student chose from four avant-garde writing techniques: exquisite corpse, slam poetry, Blackout/Cut-up method, Personal Dictionary. For seven lessons, students on one or more pieces, which were not graded. Most students chose the Blackout/Cut-up method; I provided them with a variety of materials to reform into new poems, including old homework and articles about Black and Latinx workers and activists. Students included a short Artist Statement reflecting on their process and their piece. To give an opportunity to reflect on the personal/political implications of these techniques, students read "Black Artists and the Avant-Garde" (Cooks, 2019), an article discussing who has been in/excluded from that label and dialogued on Google Classroom on how to apply its argument to our school. Students then read their pieces out loud in a circle. Finally, students took a Writer Postsurvey, asking them many of the same Presurvey questions about writer identity, along with a few questions on their perspective on their avant-garde experience. Student responses were analyzed through a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

This study was shaped by the lingering pandemic, which affected consent, attendance and students' emotional states. This was students' second semester of in-person learning, and the social order of the school was uneasy (Belsha, 2021). Previous years of writing instruction were virtual, meaning their discourse community was even more distant than earlier school years. This could have given the project's focus on collaboration an accentuated, special meaning for them, or, conversely, their less-developed collaborative skills made it less meaningful to them.

Of a class of 21 students, 15 students (or, in most cases, parents) consented to participate in the study. Of the 6 students who did not consent, 4 were L2 learners whose perspective would have been particularly important. This lack of informed consent/participation was not surprising given the school's social unease and general distrust toward the government (of which I appeared to be a representative), seen in popular anti-vaccine sentiments and the semester's tumultuous beginning, which included a weeklong work action and lockout. This class was also the final period of the day, and made up of seniors in their final semester, when attendance dips. This meant that some students only took the pre- survey. Finally, emotional trauma was tangible, including family deaths, domestic abuse, and heavy self-medication with marijuana.

A final note: I do not see any of these factors as impediments to the study—to do so would be to see my students as "imperfect subjects" whose lives inconvenienced my research's aims. The tumult of high schoolers' lives is only increasing in this country, and I think researchers should become more flexible, more attentive, and more curious to these factors in their research design.

Results

In this section, I include students' responses to the core question (are they writers?), noting the changes (or lack thereof) in those responses between the pre and post surveys. I then identify codes from students' responses across a range of questions about writers and writing. Finally, I include some observations from students' work and artist statements.

Of the 15 surveyed, 8 students said they were not a writer in the presurvey. After the mini-unit, four (half) of those students' answers to the same question shifted from No to Yes or Maybe. One student remained at No. Three students did not take the post survey.

Table 1

Student Responses to the Statement "I am a Writer." in Pre- and Post Surveys

Student Response	Pre-survey Number of students	Post-survey Number of students
Yes or qualified yes ("I think I am")	7	11
No	8	1*

Note: 3 students responded No in the pre-survey and did not take the post survey.

Axial coding identified five themes that students used to define who counts as a writer: career, enjoyment, improvement, expression, and everyone. Here are the codes, with examples from student responses, including instances where the students' answer changed in code from the pre to the post survey.

1. Writing is a **career**. Students defined writers as "journalists", "My teacher" and "authors." One student wrote "poets" are writers in the pre-survey but answered "students" in the post survey.

2. **Enjoyment** as definitive of who counts as a writer. Students who did not identify as writers said, "I don't really enjoy writing" and "People expect so much from us writing that constantly doing it becomes the same thing over and over again." "I feel like a writer is someone who genuinely loves to write... Unfortunately, writing isn't my passion." Some signs of positive change came from a student who "had a small hatred for writing but being put in 2 writing classes makes me start to like" – this student has very strong conventional writing skills and was the lone No in the post-survey.

3. **Improvement** needed before identifying as a writer. Two L2 students indicated that they needed to improve before being called a writer in the pre-survey, then called themselves writers in the post survey. One shifted from "No, this isn't my strongest criteria" to "Yes, we all are writers some just express themselves differently." The other shifted from "I still need time to learn more and better how to write" to "Not sure

maybe yes" in the post survey. This latter student also wrote the quote in the title of this report: "When I'm writing I can feel I'm singing in a nice round world."

4. Writing as **expression** of ideas and/or expression of identity. "Yes, because I love expressing my thoughts and opinions trough writing." "The connection I have with writing extends above the level of connection I have with my regular hobbies. Writing is not simply a hobby."

5. **Everyone**/Anyone. Almost all students who identified as writers said that anyone/everyone is a writer. "Everyone is a writer. ... There is no definite extent or standards to writing."

While students did not discuss school or teachers in most of their responses (with the exception of saying their teacher is a writer), many did evoke school when asked for a time they "hated writing": "I have to write too much," "doing AP Lang summer homework," "writing essays or having to constantly write"; "when I had a blank document opened for over 2 hours because I had no motivation or inspiration to write"; "when I got forced to write 2 essays about school." This connects school assignments to the enjoyment code.

Illustrations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Student Illustrations in Pre survey responding to the prompt: "Add an image here to show what you think a writer is OR draw an image on paper"

In student illustrations from the pre survey, several themes were consistent. First, the writer was either alone (no suggestion of readership, audience, or inspiration outside the mind)
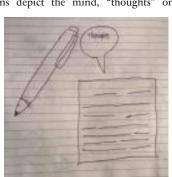

and sometimes in various states of disembodiment (faceless or physically absent). Second, the idea of individual expression or inspiration was strong – almost all illustrations depict the mind, "thoughts" or "ideas." The writers seemed to have an abundance of these ideas and are often in a post-writing state, having already transferred them onto pages.

The students' artist statements for their avant-garde poems indicate minor shifts away from this mindset, and toward social connections. One student created a cut-up poem from an article about Defund the Police activists in Minnesota, and said he was "trying to send out a message

to the audience by making them realize what's going on in the real world and having to come together to work out the problems." Another student wrote "The audience is for people who are looking for something dumb to laugh at while needing a break."

Another student wrote a slam poem about "An olive tree in Palestine. It's lived in Palestine for about 4000 years and I am using it as a symbol of the people that lived there."

Discussion

I interpret these central conclusions from the results:

- Students can change their opinions about whether they are writers or not, at least temporarily. Many believe that anyone can be a writer.
- Students who do not enjoy writing generally do not see themselves as writers. Most students do not enjoy writing essays or excessive amounts of formal academic writing.
- Students see writers as isolated individuals who express their ideas and require inspiration to fill pages.
- Some combination of the avant-garde strategies, exposure to the article, and my classroom culture had at least some inclusive effect on students' "writer" concept.

Some students shifted their definition of who counts as a writer. For example, the L2 students discussed above both said they needed improvement to call themselves writers – but only a short mini-unit shifted their answers to be more inclusive; it's very unlikely they made the improvements they wanted to in that short time, but more likely shifted their attitude about writing. Given the effect that attitude has on writing efficacy (Bulut, 2017), this seems like an important outcome.

My literature review identified four factors that inform a student's decision to call themselves a writer or not. This study shows that support for students' intersectional identities may be the easiest to address – explicitly show authors of widely varied backgrounds, communicate their stories and context, and give students opportunities to choose what parts of themselves they want to critically address, as these students did through the variety and choice built into this mini unit.

Audience, authenticity, teachers and school

There are two striking absences from students' responses. Another factor on writer identify formation was the perception of overwhelming criticism and assessment from teachers of their developing writing technique. When asked what helps them write, only a single student wrote "teacher." (Yet many students wrote "teacher" as a response to "____ is a writer.") When asked

where they like to write, no student responded with school or any location therein. This makes it clear that the discourse community we desire students to be members of is not succeeding in making them feel a sense of group/institutional belonging.

Most high school students do most of their writing for one audience member—the teacher. In the surveys, only one student mentioned any audience for their writing ("I wrote a DnD [Dungeons and Dragons] story and the players liked it."). The fact that students did not even mention this singular audience member might help us understand the students' conception of writers as disembodied vessels for ideas (see illustrations in results). Like Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold for a woman's firstborn, students are in a transactional relationship with their writing. They are captive authors, writing for a captive audience, exchanging writing products for grades ("I only write for grades" writes one student) that will shape their opportunities in the future.

Is the purpose of writing to prepare students for college writing? This purpose creates an Ouroboros: we teach students how to write essays for four years so that they can write essays for a few more years in college. We have to ask: what are more authentic writing tasks that will still teach the extended critical thinking skills that essays can help develop? Literature suggests that students may be interested in employing English for more diverse purposes, including social ones (Bandar Al-Sobhi et al., 2018).

Ideas and expression

Students – whether they saw themselves as writers or not – emphasized the individualist notion of writers as vessels for fully formed ideas in their head. In Western society, we can trace this idea back to the birth of the modern author, poetry and novels – Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Tearle, 2020). This contradicts the constructivist view of language that many contemporary academics and teachers hold. We believe our ideas are shaped by language as much as, or more than, the other way around, and that writers develop their ideas from careful observation of the world around them, borrowing and plagiarizing, reading, discussing, and meticulously developing their craft. But students are disconnected from this perspective; they stare at a "blank document opened for over 2 hours because I had no motivation or inspiration to write." This research suggests that students expect writers to be people filled with inspiration and ideas, a standard they will often find themselves falling short of because it is illusory.

Limitations

The small sample size and short duration of this study make the significance of its outcomes modest. The study would have been stronger with extended interviews with students. In my own classroom, I would incorporate these discussions explicitly into the curriculum, but as a student teacher the pressure to "get" to "the curriculum" made that seem frivolous – a perfect example of the dynamic this study sought to challenge.

How transferable were the positive changes? Did some students echo the implicit messages about inclusivity of the writer identity, but will find those sentiments be swept aside when the next challenging academic writing assignment comes their way?

Implications for Pedagogy and Future Research

What can teachers do with this information? Before jumping to that step, it is important for writing teachers to simply ask these questions to their students and show that they are listening to their answers. Creating the sense that these questions matter and that students have agency over their answers is an outcome to strive for – one that may affect curriculum design, or may not.

As the designer of this study, I was initially skeptical about the value of the avant-garde techniques. I could not see how they would contribute to a different sense of "writer" beyond that they were just different and disrupted the idea that expressing fully formed ideas in the writer's mind is the main purpose of writing. But the sensory engagement and the lack of a blank page staring at students may have had a helpful effect in the right direction – no more, no less. Perhaps all that changed is that it made the students relaxed – a key foundation for learning. I think researchers should experiment more with unusual writing assignments and students' explicit reflection on those assignments

Better, more generalizable data could be collected from a longer, wider study: what is the effect of a year, semester or full high school program that continuously asking students to reflect on what writers/writing/readers/reading is and their relationship to those terms? What is the effect of a school-wide culture with investment from teachers across disciplines? How does this approach conflict with, or support students in, the brutal, linear narratives created by standardized assessment?

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