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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Your writing, not my writing”: Discourse analysis of student talk about writing

Patrick D. Hales^{1*}

Abstract: Student voice is a difficult concept to capture in research. This study attempts to provide a vehicle for understanding student perceptions about writing and writing instruction through a case study supported by discourse analysis of student talk. The high school students in this study participated in interviews and focus groups about their experiences with writing. The findings reveal deep seeded notions about writing enculturated through their schooling. Students were not likely to take ownership of their writing, rather considering it a teacher construct, and could not typically describe the application of writing skills. Students were optimistic and provided multiple suggestions for improvements to writing instruction with an emphasis on making writing relevant. The implications of this study, while highly contextual, do reveal the significance of systemic conceptualizations born in students through the process of schooling and how language can unpack those schemas.

Subjects: Teaching & Learning - Education; Educational Research; Secondary Education

Keywords: discourse analysis; writing instruction; student voice; secondary education

1. Introduction

Conducting interviews on a Friday afternoon in US public high schools is not easy; students are ready to get their weekend underway and that feeling is palpable in the classrooms and hallways as the



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Patrick D. Hales is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at South Dakota State University. He has 10 years of experience in public school teaching as a high school English teacher and K-12 English as a Second Language specialist. He earned his PhD from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Teacher Education in 2016. His primary research interests are teacher professional development and teacher action research, educational technology, language supports in education, and authentic assessment. His research into teacher professional development coalesces all veins of his research including language, technology, and assessment. The majority of his research involves working directly with in-service or pre-service teachers to inspect their practice around developing strategies to improve student learning.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Many people, adults and youth alike, have strong perspectives on writing. Many love to do it and view it as a form of regular expression. Many others believe they “can’t write” or simply avoid it. Many of these beliefs begin in school where student write frequently. There is a decided confusion among teachers and students about the role of writing in learning. There is a difference between learning how to write and using writing to show that learning has occurred. That is where some of the negativity about writing begins; the communication of the purpose of writing breaks down in schools. Trying to understand the ways that students talk about writing in schools can help teachers to respond to those misunderstandings and negative perceptions and adapt writing instruction as a result.

final hour approaches. Ramone, a 17-year-old African-American male student, sits across from me in the empty history classroom with a relaxed posture and answers my questions eagerly, waving his hands for emphasis, despite the timing of the interview. Ramone, who has never liked writing in school, says “They always telling you what to write about. What if I don’t want to write about that? I don’t know how to write about some of that. And they don’t read it, some of them.” In contrast, Ramone loves to write, only about what he chooses. “I write some crazy stuff sometimes. It depends on what I’m reading and watching. And how I’m feeling,” he exclaims, using both hands to rap the tabletop in front him in cadence with his speaking. Additionally, he explains, “I write, like, every day or so.” When asked about teachers motivating students to write, Ramone tilts his chin to consider the question before throwing his hands up saying, “You know, I don’t think some people want to motivate.” He points his index finger on the tabletop for emphasis, “I don’t get the feeling they’re motivated sometimes, so why should I be? The best teachers [are] excited about it, too.” Before leaving the interview, Ramone shakes my hand and says, “Thanks for hearing me out. You got me thinking.”

The experiences and opinions of students like Ramone are often the untold stories of the US public school system. He has ability and he practices it, but teachers have trouble trying to harness it; all parties leave the table frustrated. How can we learn from student voices, their language and experience of schooling, to help them arrive at a fulfilling educational experience? The impetus for teachers to improve student overall literacy, particularly written expression, has only risen as new standards are put into place at the federal, state, and local levels. Research has been done on various strategies and theories of implementing writing programs targeted at improving student achievement (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Kaplan, 2008). This approach to the issue is valuable; however, less work has been done to consider a truly student-centered approach to writing instruction, particularly at the high school level. It seems useful to draw upon the opinions, language, perspectives, voices, of the students involved in the writing instruction provided to them by school systems. Their unique experiences of having taken part in typically multiple deliveries of writing instruction provide insight into the process of learning about written expression. This research explored student voices around writing at a small, rural high school by holding conversations about writing and using discourse analysis to derive understanding of student thinking. The hope is to gain a better understanding of how listening to and dissecting student language around writing might inform necessary instructional changes at this high school. Toward this end, the following research questions have been considered throughout the data collection and analysis:

- How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school?
- How do students perceive writing?
- How do students think about themselves, and how are they perceived by others, in relation to their writing?

These questions draw a connection between the language participating students use and the perceptions formed in their writing community in school. This means there is a certain level of assumption regarding the orientation of this research; namely, there is evidence that language analysis can reveal notions of self and others within social groups (Gee, 2014). Applied in this study, the language students use in regards to writing could shed light on their perspectives and relationships with writing.

2. Theoretical framework

In discussing the data collection and analysis conducted during this research, an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings used in the approach are necessary. First, as the content area of focus in this study is writing, a foundation of the current state of writing instruction in public schools is necessary to understand the larger context in which the observed writing experiences of the participants is situated. Second, in an effort to understand the interplay of student experience with student perspective, positioning theory contains useful information as to how students navigate their perceptions of writing. Lastly, the study of discourse situates the approach toward student language as it considers the linguistic and contextual underpinnings of verbal and non-verbal communication to decipher meanings and perspectives. The mingling of these theories ultimately meets the needs of addressing the key questions raised at the outset of this research.

2.1. Writing

There is a wealth of information about writing instruction and how students learn to write. Applebee and Langer (2011) conducted a four-year study of middle and high schools nationwide. In this study, they found that much had improved in the 30 years since the last national study, but that many problems remained and new issues had emerged. Of greatest issue may be that writing instruction remains largely teacher-centered with students as supporting actors; the teacher creates, via writing the prompt and creating the requirements, and the students “does” the writing, merely filling in required components rather than composing. They also found that little class time is devoted to explicit writing instruction; the teacher typically assumes writing competence and expects results based on content. The researchers emphasize that teachers ask for analysis and let the writing instruction lead toward discussions during class, yet the missing connection found in this study seems to be that the condensation of these expectations after teachers create assignments largely results in regurgitation and summarization by students.

Other research attempts to highlight what is known of effective writing and writing instruction. Writing requires the ability to transfer a number of skills and intelligences from multiple content areas to be effective. This cognitive ability to use their learning in a multiplied modality such as writing is not explicitly taught in many situations (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013; Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). Students are most successful given situations to make some choices in the writing process and learn the techniques to combine in responding to written assignments (Olson & Land, 2007; Scherff & Piazza, 2005). Effective environments and situations for student writing involve clear, individualized expectations, and outcomes; students are more motivated given a purpose and an audience (Graham et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2008). There is a disconnect between the design and expectation of school writing and that of the writing that occurs in college and the workplace; however, students tend to be more motivated when they can see connections toward these eventualities (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Kiuahara et al., 2009). Additionally, Gutierrez, Morales, and Martinez (2009) found that deficit models of teaching, a focus on all the shortcomings rather than playing to strengths of each individual student, contribute to many culturally non-majority students becoming disengaged in school writing. Students cannot see their own lives in the work they are asked to do and, thus, struggle through it. An overarching theme within the literature is the need for a more individualized consideration of students, their backgrounds, and their current abilities over their yet-to-be-acquired abilities.

2.2. Positioning

Part of this study required analysis of the ways in which students thought about themselves and other students as writers and as members in the writing community. Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) provides a means to discuss individual perspectives on their contexts and the contexts

of others. A position involves clusters of beliefs about rights and duties in and around some interaction. A position can occur at every level of interaction from personal social to global international; it expands upon the notion of humans as “actors” within interactions and suggests that people are dynamic in their lives and occupy, and are forced to occupy, multiple identities at once (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, Moghaddam, Pilkerton Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). Positioning, the verb, describes the ways in which people actively place themselves and are placed in relation to others in social interactions (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Clarke (2006), in a study of a class of fifth grade students, used positioning theory to explore social and power relations between boys and girls. The author was able to analyze and discuss the storylines of the working class with which many of the students identified. Power is an issue of access to choices and who can change that access (Foucault, 1977); this is a structure significant in positioning theory. In this study, Clarke examined the language students were using with one another to classify and “position” themselves and others around the concept of social status and working class vs. upper class. Students notably spoke about themselves as members of a certain group and indicated that other students were of a different group; these groups fell very much along socioeconomic status lines. Clarke was able to identify the power relations clearly by how students were positioning themselves and each other through language.

Positioning theory understands four basic tenets: (1) rights and duties within interactions are distributed by both willingly and forcibly, (2) there are patterns that occur among individuals as positioning acts, (3) the series of positions taken by individuals over time can be described as storylines, (4) every action has a socially constructed purpose and meaning (Harré et al., 2009). The theoretical lynchpin of positioning is that we all position ourselves and are positioned by others, a notion Davies and Harré (1990) named reflexive and interactive, respectively. For this study, positioning theory will help to provide a theoretical basis of understanding in regards to how people interact and how that can be analyzed. To put it into practical terms, positioning can help explain how students might be using language to place value among themselves, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), with writing and ability levels. Language and power are closely related (Harré et al., 2009), thus, it became an important component to consider positioning when looking at how students were using language with writing within their context.

2.3. Discourse

Freire and Macedo (1987) said, “Language should never be understood as a mere tool of communication. Language is packed with ideology” (p. 3). In this study, the theoretical approach combines positioning theory and sociocultural discourse. An examination of discourse requires an analysis of the positioning in an interaction (Fairclough, 2014). Sociocultural discourse has grown from a combined theory of anthropology, sociology, and linguistics (Schiffrin, 1994). As all social acts have meaning in positioning theory, Bakhtin (2014) contends that there are not neutral utterances. An utterance is in fact a two-part conception in discourse analysis made up of the content of the message and the social context, or position, from which it is being relayed (Wortham, 2001). Sociocultural discourse understands that the meaning, structure, and use of language is socially and culturally relative (Goffman, 2014). This means that in analyzing communication for any purpose, a deep understanding of context and social interplay is necessary. Interactional sociolinguistics, an approach to discourse, emphasizes the use of the interactions of utterances to denote both shared meaning between speakers and situated meaning for individuals (Schiffrin, 1994). In looking at discourse analysis, it is necessary to understand how people generate new knowledge together and also how individuals make meaning for themselves.

For this study, sociocultural discourse and positioning theory will be used jointly to understand both individually situated meaning as well as speech communities that are formed as they concern writing. Speech communities are identified by their shared language use (Gumperz, 1999).

Hypothesizing upon the stated research questions, several assumptions underlined this research. The first research question, *how is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school?*, belies the idea that language can reveal something about student thinking about writing. My hypothesis prior to data collection, based on sociocultural discourse, was that the language of students would allow me to understand their perceptions of writing. Language is never neutral and should reveal beliefs and understandings about the topic (Bakhtin, 2014; Goffman, 2014). Discourse analysis helps those beliefs rise to the surface in this study by dissecting the ways that students speak about writing. The second research question, *how do students perceive writing?*, focuses on the ways students talk about writing and what it says about their experiences with writing. Prior to this study, I predicted that students would have a lot to say about writing, and with the knowledge that the writing program at the research site needed improvement, my initial hypothesis was that student language about writing would be negative. To determine the accuracy of this hypothesis, I employed thorough examination of the ways in which students talk about writing via discourse analysis. The final research question, *how do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?*, asks about student relationships with writing in context. My initial hypothesis toward this question was that students could be creating a shared understanding and way of speaking about writing. This means that some of their negative perceptions of writing might lead to distanced positioning with writing. Sociocultural discourse differentiates between a general definition of a concept, such as can be found online or in dictionaries, and the situated meaning where the understanding is purely individual, constructed wholly in context, and may not be comprehensible to another except the individual (Gee, 2014). Situated meaning is revealed in language, and in this study, I hope to uncover what situated meanings of writing experiences may be occurring.

3. Research design

Stake (1995) says, "... the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (p. 12). Stake's take on qualitative case study research aligns with the theoretical framework employing positioning and discourse analysis used in this study. The idea of approaching research with the understanding that each individual constructs his own perspective and meaning fits the lens of positioning with its emphasis on individuals in interaction and discourse analysis investigating situated meanings. Stake (1995) asserts that every case is unique and should be "bounded" by definite grounds differentiating it and limiting it to that which applies to the issues at hand, particularly the people; likewise, the theoretical approach to this study assumes the complexity of the individuals and their interactions eschewing the overly generalizable notion that participants are merely actors playing one static role through its processes.

Stake (1995) describes a type of case study he calls instrumental. This means that the design of the case study research centers on understanding a larger question with the case in question as a mode of increasing that understanding; this is in contrast to what he describes as an intrinsic case study in which the case itself is the only focus. Davies and Harré (1990) emphasize the positioning theory requires the collection of data around and an analysis of the illocutionary forces at work. An instrumental case study design allows me to take the perspective of understanding the participants' experiences with writing as part of the broader picture of writing instruction experience at this school. This design takes into account during the data collection process a need to learn about the context, its interactions, and the language beyond just knowing the participants.

4. Description of case

For this case study, I have employed an instrumental case study approach to observe and interview a group of 11th grade students in one public high school at various self-reported levels of writing

ability; these levels are informal in nature as in, “I consider myself/do not consider myself a good writer.” This public high school is small at around 500 students and rurally located. It is considered innovative as all students are dual-enrolled in high school and college classes. High school classes are not separated into tracking levels (honors, standard, college practice, etc.) by design. Located on a wooded community college campus in the small county seat of an equally small county, this school, its staff, and its students perform a difficult juggling act of remaining a high school, while embedded so deeply into the workings of a community college. This school was founded only 6 years ago, yet it has developed its own community and traditions. Students meander the halls and outdoor courtyards between classes. There are school clubs, but no sports. All students are chosen to attend by lottery, and the school usually receives around three times as many applicants each year than they are able to take in. When speaking with the students and faculty about their experiences at this school, the terms “flexible” and “different” are bandied about a great deal. Needless to say, the school experiences of the participants in this study can be described as truly non-typical.

I was allowed access to 11th grade students enrolled in English classes at this school. I was previously a teacher at this school; however, none of the students involved with this study were former students. The impetus of exploring writing in particular comes at the request of the teachers and administration. They met several times and requested me to come out to conduct research with them around issues they observed with writing. We decided that we could establish a better understanding by talking to and observing a group of students. We jointly decided on 11th grade as this was an identified group with difficulties concerning writing. All 11th grade students in English during the Spring Semester were issued an assent form and had the study explained. Out of 49 students, 19 chose to take part in the study. Of these, 12 are female and 7 are male. Ten of these students self-identified as white, seven as African-American, and two as Hispanic. The school, parents, teachers, and students have agreed for me to shadow these students over the course of a semester. Thus, the study is bounded at this school, in this grade level, with these students.

5. Data collection

Bounding the case in such a way, I have interviewed students, conducted observations of their classes, and held a focus group to discuss the topic of writing. Data collection occurred over the course of one semester, with the last collection event, an observation, taking place three weeks before the last day of the semester. The interviews were conducted in a small room adjacent to the students’ classroom as well as the history classroom. Some interviews were conducted during class time after tests, while other students agreed to come after school. These students and their teacher each agreed to use class time to allow me to interview. We agreed to try to keep the interviews under 20 minutes. After welcoming each student and having them sit across from me at the small table provided, I asked nine questions designed to help the students generate meaning and think about writing toward the proposed research questions. Each question was created based off of research question key points; I asked these questions in hopes that they would generate student talk about writing. Below are the interview questions used and their corresponding research questions which informed their design.

Interview question	Research question
Do you like to write? Why or why not?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?
How would you describe how you are currently taught to write?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing in and out of school?
Is it different writing for school than writing at other times? Why or why not?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing in and out of school? How do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?
What do you think it is important to learn to write about, if anything?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing: • in and out of school? • instructional improvements?
If you were to write about something out of school, what would you write about?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing in and out of school? How do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?
What motivates your writing, in and out of school?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing in and out of school? How do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?
Has school been effective in teaching you to write? Why or why not?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing in and out of school?
What should teachers do to help students write better or like to write?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students perceive writing instructional improvements?
Does who you are affect how and what you write? Why or why not?	How is student language indicative of student perceptions of writing and learning to write in high school? How do students position themselves, and how are they positioned by others, in relation to their writing?

Observations were conducted throughout the semester with participating students' English classes as well as when those students transitioned between classes. I always positioned myself in the back of the classroom, out of the instructional path, in order to be a non-participant in the environment as much as possible. Each classroom observation I conducted lasted the entire 90 min period. I conducted six such observations, three classrooms twice each, and took extensive field notes each

time. Before and after each of these classroom observations, I made it a point to also observe the participating students in transition to and from class. This involved standing in the hallway outside of the classes as well as waiting outside the building near the entrance where many students sat and congregated. All hand-written field notes were later typed and stored digitally. These notes were encompassed all that I observed during these times, but they focused on student interactions about writing and frequency of discussion about writing.

The focus group met one day during a break period for the students for 20 min. All 19 participants were present. We used the guiding questions, “Does learning to write matter?” and “How has my writing changed over time?” The design of these questions was to collect more information toward understanding student peer interactions as they discussed writing. Additionally, students were asked to bring a writing sample they could talk about. For five minutes during the session, participants were asked to talk about their writing with another student. This session was recorded and field notes were taken. Both were later transferred to a digital format.

6. Data analysis

Data collection methods and procedures were designed with eventual data analysis within the proposed theoretical framework in mind. The interview process was key to gathering data for use in discourse analysis. Using discourse analysis, it is possible to extrapolate both student positioning and perception about writing. Language can reveal student thinking about themselves, the instruction, and other students; this study considers this language with relation to writing. Transcripts were coded and examined for indicators of grammatical and contextual discourse elements. Observation field notes were coded and held across from both the research questions and codes from the interviews. Observations were designed to help collect data toward interactions and communication between students directly whereas interview data could only divulge about the individual student and his own experiences and perspectives. The focus group added to the analysis of interactions among students and helped in the discussion around positioning. Audio transcripts were coded and interpreted using discourse analysis to look for grammatical cues toward positions and situated meanings concerning writing. Field notes for the focus group were held up against these findings additionally coded using previously generated codes to look for aligned occurrences among this group toward understanding their language use.

I have conducted analysis by coding for themes and noticing patterns among the data, and I have also conducted discourse analyses (Gee, 2014) to get at the meaning of the language students are using when talking about their own writing and process of learning to write. The unit of analysis is sentence-level utterances made by these students. Stake (1995) says, “Getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, it is what they mean that is important” (p. 66). I would argue, for the purpose of discourse analysis, the exact words are very important to consider the situated meaning of the language; thus, all strands of this study play an important role in the understanding of how these students are constructing meaning surrounding the concept of writing. It has been intriguing to follow those who consider themselves good writers, middling writers, and poor writers as well as those who like to write and those who do not. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity of participants.

7. Findings

In analyzing the various transcripts, I found 10 main features of student talk to use in categorizing utterances for analysis of how students construct knowledge and situate their understandings about writing. These features go beyond affirmation, negation, and clarification. Gee (2014) asserts that a discourse analysis requires going beyond a structural, grammatical, or nominal recognition of what is being said; inference and relevance are requirements in order to draw from the language its reflection of a perception of the reality created by speakers, or the figured worlds they create through language (Holland, Skinner, Lachiotte, & Cain, 1998). Rather than codes, discourse analysis in this

manner requires searching for features of the talk that occurred in the context of the study. As a result, I began searching for features of talk with regard to the types of language students used to discuss writing. These features derive from that search within these transcripts.

Feature of talk	Exemplar from transcripts
Storytelling: Narrative illustration of a point	Francis: I remember this one time, when I was in middle school, we would just (laughs) just come in and sit there, listening about how to write. I can't remember more than one or two things I actually wrote
Relating: Finding and demonstrating connections	Bill: It's like when (pause) you are trying to talk with someone who speaks another language and you just want to talk to them, somehow
	Patrick: So writing is like speaking to someone?
	Bill: In some ways, yeah
Positioning others: Placing individuals into a contextual, social categorization or order	Danielle: I think some kids are like, oh this is too easy. But, ya know, (pause) it really isn't for some of us. I think the teachers like to teach them, but not all of them like to teach us if we don't get it; it's too hard, I guess
Positioning self: Placing self into a contextual, social categorization or order	Jackie: I'm not a good writer, at all. I want to be, but I'm not
	Patrick: Why is that?
	Jackie: I just get confused on what I'm trying to say and what they want me to say. It comes out, ya know, (laughs) messed up. I'm not smart enough, I guess
Ownership: Taking or refusing possession	George: When I'm doing a teacher's paper, I feel like I'm usually able to get what they want out of me and get it done. So yeah, that's why I'm a good writer, I think
Re-imagining: Providing a personal vision of an idea or concept	Patrick: Well, what would you do differently?
	Simon: We should be able to write about what we want to write about. Like, what am I going to use writing for in life? I'd want to learn about that
Explaining: Response with deliberate elaboration on a question or topic	Patrick: So what do you mean by not being able to use that?
	Tyler: I just don't think I'll use research that much down the road. I'm going to be a mechanic. Not one teacher has been able to show me how I'll really use a research paper to make money
Confusing: Whether avoidance or uncertainty, noticeable difficulty responding to a question or topic	Patrick: Does who you are affect how and what you write?
	Gabby: (pause) I'm (pause) I think so? I mean, I am (pause) writing makes me smarter when I do it, so that means it changes me, but I don't really know how to answer that question. I don't write that much, ya know?
Challenging: Using language in a direct stance against an idea or other utterance	Anita: I think we are all pretty good writers here-
	Jackie: I don't think I'm a good writer. I don't think anyone would look at my stuff and think I'm good
Reflecting: Consideration of past instances to understand or trouble the present	Ramone: Ya know, I've been thinking about it, and I'm going to be talking to my teachers about writing. I didn't ever really think about bringing it up, but now I'm going to

These features have been used in the analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. They helped to reveal several themes of the language students used when speaking about writing. When discussing these findings, I have placed feature markers beside relevant parts of the transcripts. Classroom observation yielded data which add to the story and have been included in the discussion as relevant. The features of talk provided a means to group student talk and interactions and understand the ways students responded to thinking about writing. These features suggested patterns in

the perceptions of students. These patterns are the source of discussion in this study. Discourse analysis of the student language revealed themes which responded directly to the initial research questions concerning language, perception, and positioning.

7.1. Explicit writing instruction and explaining writing growth

When sitting down to talk with individual students, there was a marked confusion when discussing questions regarding the change in their writing over time. One example of this has been in student responses to the question, “How would you describe how you’ve been taught to write?”

Danielle: I, um, I guess it kind of just happened over time? [confusing] Some classes we wrote more, ya know? [reflecting] One teacher I had just, man, she had us write every day. I think that helped because we would do it over and over again. I got tired of it, and most people didn’t like her. [storytelling] But maybe it helped? [reflecting] I dunno when writing got better.

*

Francis: (laughs) I don’t know if it really (pause) has really. I, uh, I guess somewhere I must’ve picked something up. I couldn’t honestly tell you (pause) when or how I got better. I don’t write with crayons, anymore (laughs). [confusing]

*

Allen: I’m WAY better at grammar. I use commas all the time. [explaining] I used to never use them, but I think they make my writing better.

*

Ruth: We always write about stuff. All the time. I think the teachers think it’ll make us better. [positioning others] I feel like it is the same old thing, though, sometimes. Like, I don’t know if I get better doing that, ya know? [reflecting]

Students typically responded to this question with a mix of confused and reflecting features. This partially seemed to be a result of not having considered how they’ve written in classes over the years. The initial confusion with most students (15 out of 19) denotes this. About half of students ended their response with a reflective feature, signaling that they’re working through their thoughts on the way they’ve been taught to write on the fly. The frankest explanation of what may be occurring in this among the students came from Bill’s response to the question.

Bill: I don’t feel like I’ve been taught to write. I learn something, and then I write about it. Writing is an assignment (pause) not something you learn about, I think. [explaining] You’re supposed to know how to do that already. We learned how to write in elementary school. [reflecting]

This response perhaps reveals within this group of students a systemic issue; they haven’t worked with explicit writing instruction. If students don’t work on writing explicitly, then there is no wonder that they have trouble articulating their growth in it over time. Classroom observations supplement this finding. In all observations, there was never an instance of direct instruction in writing; writing continually served a function of communication of some contextual topic of literature or history rather than its own art form. This is not to say that there was no talk about writing in the classroom, but there was no observed effort to instruct about the mechanics of the process, and student talk emphasized that maybe a missing component. Additionally, student comments during the focus group supported this claim.

Patrick: Some of you didn’t feel comfortable talking about how you learned to write or how your writing has improved. Why do you think that is?

Jeff: I know I (pause) I didn’t know what to say. Writing’s always been something I didn’t feel good about and didn’t want to do; it was just another thing. [reflecting]

Lynn: I felt like I had been taught to write- (murmurs of agreement) but it (pause) isn’t something you talk about a lot, ya know? [reflecting]

- Simon: Yep. I never-
- Anita: Yeah, they taught it. [affirming]
- Simon: -had to think about it. It just happened. Writing just happens as you practice and practice. [explaining]
- Bill: I think so, too. [affirming]
- Misty: But I don't know how I was taught to write. That was the question. And I don't know how I got better. [challenging]
- Ramone: I don't get it either. There was never a list or nothing to go by. [affirming]
- Mia: My grammar got better.
- Patrick: How did it get better? In what ways?
- Mia: I don't make as many mistakes. I used to get red all over my paper in sixth grade, and now I don't. [storytelling]
- Tyler: But how did you fix it? [challenging]
- Mia: (laughs) I guess I don't really know! [reflecting]

Student language here is indicating a recognition that writing has improved and learning has occurred; the troubling aspect is that students are not able to clearly explain what has improved and how that process worked. There seems to dissent among the students on the perspective the amount of learning around writing that has occurred; this is why there is challenging taking place.

Most students (17 out of 19) reported that they get frequent practice at writing. The trouble, as we see in the excerpts above, is in students' ability to explain what they are practicing at improving other than general writing. That the students' language features confusion when questioned about their explanations supports the idea that they do not really know what areas they've grown in writing because they have not had a lot of focused writing instruction. The language reflects a repetition among students of the notion that more writing, of any kind, improves writing proficiency. Since students were mostly unable to explain the growth results of this practice, it can be inferred that students do not entirely understand their own writing developments as a result of a lack of express conversations with teachers about it. Writing development seems rather relegated to the subconscious mind.

7.2. Perspectives of purpose, value, and visibility

Classroom observations often involved watching intently as students engaged in the practice of writing; however, these observations yielded another, equally important fact. None of the observed classrooms displayed student writing. There was student work; infographics and visual literature project components abound, but no display of writing students had worked on. Probing about this during the focus group revealed that it was rare that student writing was ever shared with anyone but the teacher, barring that a few students recalled having peer edited papers a few times. This leaves student writing with a very small audience. Based on student talk from interviews and focus groups, this may have an effect on their motivation to write. Take for example a few responses to the interview question, "What motivates your writing, in and out of school?"

Danielle: I write a blog at home and on Facebook all the time. I really like to write, ya know. [storytelling] I don't know what is different. In school, I feel like, it like, isn't (pause) like it's what the teacher wants, ya know? [explaining] If I could do more of my stuff at school, I could, like, show off. [re-imagining]

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Samantha: If I get to write about what I want to write about, I do better. In school, it's always "write about this, write about this." At home, I can do whatever. More free. [explaining] It's like being told what to do or getting to do exactly what you want. [relating]

*

Tyler: I'm motivated by (pause) writing about something I care about. If I don't care about it, then I just get over it real quick. [explaining] In school, when teachers let me write about what I care about, it turns out better. [reflecting] If more writing was about stuff that mattered, I think we'd all do better, ya know? [re-imagining]

These examples are indicative of many of the student responses in the interviews. A majority of students, 13 out of 19, reported that they like to write. All students began their response to this question with an explanation of their position on being motivated to write; what is intriguing is that all students then either related or re-imagined their experience with writing motivation, either highlighting their lack of motivation in school to write or providing an alternative that would perhaps provide more incentive to want to write. Based on responses, the students seem to perceive that their in-school writing does not serve a purpose. This is highlighted through students using language to describe writing such as "stuff we care about," "what matters," and "something we can use." All student participants reported in this question that feeling like the writing had meaning to them, whether that was purpose or writing about what they wanted, would help their in-school writing motivation. The focus group transcript further illuminates this point.

Patrick: Some of you like to write and some of you don't. We talked about in the interviews what motivates you to write. A lot of you talked about wanting to write about what you wanted or something you care about. Is that the only way? Is there ever a time you could be motivated to write about something you don't care about, and do it well?

Tyler: Sure. I think what I meant (pause) was that (pause) it has to seem like it matters. [explaining] Like, if you tell me to write something for you, it's different than if I'm writing to someone in the real world. [relating] Like-

Ramone: Yes! I write for real all the time. You want to write TO someone, you got me. [explaining] If the assignments for writing were FOR a reason, there you go. We could be getting something done. [re-imagining]

Danielle: But I don't know if it is always going to be for something. I mean, sometimes it's just (pause) practice. But- [challenging]

George: But it could be practice (pause) WITH a purpose. Like if they said, THIS is who you're writing to, even if we weren't. Instead of just writing a journal to the teacher, we could be, like, writing a business letter or something, I don't know. [re-imagining]

Misty: Yeah. [affirming]

Jeff: I like that. [affirming]

Ruth: I feel like motivation doesn't (pause) always have to be something for real. Sometimes (pause) I just wanna know (pause) WHY are we doing this? [explaining] I don't know why I'm writing a lot, and that makes me not want to do it, I think, sometimes. [reflecting]

This conversation highlights a desire from students for an audience, a purpose, for their writing. Going back to a previous point, student language revealed that the students here have trouble explaining how their writing has grown. This could be a symptom of little explicit writing instruction. Additionally, since they cannot speak to their writing growth, they don't see a purposeful connection between the writing they are doing in class and improvement in their writing ability. The continuous explanation followed by re-imagining throughout emphasizes this, as the student visions for more effective writing instruction include: (1) definite audiences and visibility of writing, (2) real-world purposes for writing, and (3) learning goals toward writing growth, i.e. "why are we writing?" This means that despite the impetus of this research, teachers noticing that writing is an area of struggle for these students in practice and motivation, the students themselves have very real ideas for solutions that could assist in at least motion toward motivation. The student language is mostly one of hope.

7.3. Ownership of writing

A subtler finding from an analysis of the language used by students about writing emerged. There became an understanding from the way students spoke about writing that the work was possessed of an ambiguous ownership. Students were generally rather unwilling to lay claim to writing they did for school. Harkening back to the issue of purpose and the visibility of student work, because the writing mostly passes only from student to teacher, the students have internalized that what they produce belongs to the teacher as they always “give” it to them. Classroom observations accent this; when students finished an assignment, it went immediately to the teacher, usually in some compartment or furtive stack only accessible by the teacher. Further, this transfer of ownership is indicated throughout various portions of the interviews.

Ramone: When I’m writing a teacher’s paper, I try to give them what they asking for. [ownership] I just (pause) don’t get what they want sometimes. [explaining]

*

Francis: When I give the teacher her writing assignment, it always comes back chopped up. And I’m like, isn’t that what you wanted? [ownership]

*

Mia: You have to learn to write for the teacher you’re writing to. [ownership] That is how you get a better grade. [explaining]

*

Bill: A teacher’s writing assignment is kinda (pause) hard to figure out sometimes. [ownership] It’s like a puzzle, and either you get it or you don’t. [relating]

When discussing writing for school, it was far more common to find students using third-person possessive pronouns like his or her or their rather than first-person possessive pronouns like my or mine. In fact, third-person was used 83% of the time when talking about school writing. This seemingly subconscious use of language underscores the notion that students perceive the writing they do at school as belonging to the teacher rather than their themselves. This also emerged during focus groups.

Samantha: This is some of my English class writing from last semester that I think I did pretty well on. [explaining]

Patrick: That brings up something I want to talk about. Right there, you said, “English class writing” rather than, “my writing.” Why do you think that is?

Samantha: What do you mean? This is writing from class last semester. That is what I said. [confusion]

Patrick: I mean-

Lynn: I think what he means is (pause) why didn’t you say it was your writing? [explaining]

Samantha: I mean, it is my writing, but-I guess I didn’t think about it. [confusion]

Gabby: It isn’t really our writing, not really. [ownership]

Patrick: What do you mean?

Gabby: I wouldn’t normally write that way I write for school. So, it is the school’s writing and the teachers’ assignments. [ownership] It’s like, two different ways of thinking. [relating]

Sara: Yeah, school writing isn’t really MY writing. [ownership]

Jeff: I think that’s right. [affirming]

Ramone: But it shouldn’t be different, right? Like- [challenging]

George: Right, like writing should be writing. Getting better all the time. [relating]

Lynn: There are different types of writing. There is a difference in writing we do for fun and writing we do in school. [challenging]

Samantha: And I don't know the difference. I know there is one, but I dunno (pause) really, when to do what sometimes. [confusion]

Students here are relating a confusion in the difference between writing for school and writing outside of school. This can also be said to be a confusion in ownership of writing in school. The students here are unsure, when given the guidelines of the teacher and knowing the teacher is the primary audience, at what point their writing stops being guided by their decisions. This can be seen in Samantha's confusion at never really having voiced the difference in how she considers writing hers and writing belonging to the school. The freedom of writing at home or for leisure holds more deference in the student talk and perception than school writing, which places more restrictions on the practice. Student talk from interviews and focus groups indicate these restrictions hold a transformative property on writing which makes the product unlike writing the students would produce otherwise, thus, transferring ownership to the source of restriction.

7.4. Social order of writing success

Student talk reveals more than the relationship of individual students with writing as a task; it also indicates that students have formulated a social hierarchy based wholly on writing ability. The students position themselves and position others by their perception of their own writing, others writing, and teacher beliefs about writing.

Jackie: Like I said, I ain't a great writer. I know that. [positioning self] I see other people getting A's and the teachers telling them what a good job they're doing and all and I'm like, they just get how to do it right. [positioning others] That ain't me.

*

Lynn: Some people just don't get how to write for what the teachers want. It's like, learning how to do it for each one. It's tricky. [positioning others]

*

Allen: Writing is something (pause) for real smart people. Like some jobs just don't call for it. People that gonna be lawyers and teachers gonna write a lot. [positioning others] I don't ever write unless a teacher tells me to, and I won't ever need to. [positioning self]

*

Anna: I'm good at writing. I've just always been able to write. People have always told me I can write. [positioning self] I just don't get what's so hard about it, really. [positioning others]

*

Brandy: I like to write, and I used to want to be a writer. But I don't make good grades when I write for school, so I guess I ain't good enough. [positioning self] It kinda sucks, but I might keep working on it. There are other things I can do.

*

Misty: Writing doesn't bother me. I do what they ask me, but I don't write for fun. [positioning self] Some people just don't get writing, I guess. They hate it or they don't like the teacher or something. Other people just act like they love to write everything the teacher likes. [positioning others] I just do whatever, I guess. [reflecting]

There is a ranking implied by examples such as this from the interview transcripts. There are students who consider themselves poor writers and feel that they are considered poor writers by teachers and peers. Most of these students view all of their peers as superior writers praised by the teachers. There are others who think they have promise as a writers but believe they are not considered talented at writing by teachers and other students. This is probably the largest group of students among this group. These students seem to believe there is some "trick" they do not understand

about writing at school and position themselves as “outsiders” and others as “insiders.” The last group believes themselves to be good writers and are aware that others position them as academically superior. This is the smallest group of students, and they tend to have trouble empathizing with those who struggle with writing. This hierarchy is not actively discussed among the students, but rather understood. This led to a telling conversation during the focus group.

- Patrick: So why is writing something so controversial? You’ve all got such different thoughts about it, yet you’re going to the same school.
- Anna: Because some people just don’t get that all they have to do is write what the teachers want. [positioning others]
- Ramone: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. (pause) So you’re saying YOU get it? Like we don’t or- [challenging]
- Anna: Yeah. I make good grades. SO I must get it. [positioning self]
- Ramone: Just because you make good grades don’t mean you’re a better writer than me. I write all the time. [challenging]
- Danielle: We talked about writing at school and writing at home. Some people are just better at writing for school, right? [reflecting]
- Jackie: Some people are good at writing everything. Like, it doesn’t even matter to them what it is. It comes easy to them. [positioning others]
- Brandy: And some people just know how to do it right for teachers. They get the trick or something. [positioning others] Not me. I feel like whatever I turn in is just wrong. [positioning self]
- Lynn: You can do it. You just have to work on it. Writing is not that bad if you just-
- Ruth: It isn’t fair to call it easy. [challenging]
- Lynn: -keep working on it. [explaining]
- Ramone: Yeah. It really isn’t. Just because I don’t write a certain way doesn’t mean a thing. Not a thing. I can write, and I wanna get better at writing. [positioning self] What should stop me? [challenging]

The conversation here illustrates how students are positioning themselves and others. Anna considers herself a good writer and feels that others recognize that. She makes it clear that others just need to work harder in order to become better writers. Lynn echoes this by being seemingly encouraging to students who are struggling with school writing. This translates to some other students as suggesting they are not working hard enough. Ramone, for example, believes he is a good writer not being recognized by teachers and peers. He took offense to Anna’s positioning of him. Brandy seems to share this sentiment as she notes that students who are successful in classroom writing just seem to get the “trick.” Jackie, on the other hand, doesn’t consider herself as a competent writer. Her take on the situation is a more innate one, suggesting that perhaps people are just born as good writers to whom it simply “comes easy.” This hierarchy is constructed socially among the students, though the classroom experiences with writing have obviously fueled their notions. Positioning is typical human compulsion in groups (Davies & Harré, 1990); here it is acting as a motivator for some and the opposite for others.

8. Discussion

Analysis of student language revealed that students were using language to convey certain understandings about writing in high school. Their perspectives, derived through discourse analysis, indicated that writing was an elusive concept for them; students did not seem able to “own” writing other than through feedback given to them, and that translated into several issues related to motivation and understanding of writing as a concept such as how to write for different purposes and how their writing had improved over time. Discourse analysis of the language also provided insight into ways that students had begun to position themselves in relation to their perceived notions of

writing success. Most notably, students are keen on who can and cannot write, and they hypothesize barriers for themselves and others.

Findings from this study have several implications for the participating school. Teachers have identified writing as a high need area of growth for students. Analysis of student language has revealed several areas to target. Students were not able to articulate their own writing growth and did not always grasp the purpose of their writing, even those who consider themselves strong writers. Additionally, this perceived lack of purpose may be decreasing student motivation. To the point of a lowered motivation for school writing among students is the fact that students are using language which indicates that writing is somehow no longer theirs when it is done at school for a teacher. When teachers perceive this is a problem with students, they require the development and understanding to shift that language. How might teachers learn to foster ownership of writing with students? Students have noted the differences in those being successful and unsuccessful and created for themselves notions for this which serve to divide them. This division is lowering motivation in some students and may be creating complacency in others. Teachers often worry about ways to motivate students to write (Graham et al., 2013). Findings in this study suggest that attempts to understand student language can reveal barriers to writing success that are self- and contextually created. Teachers at this school have traditionally used writing as an assessment rather than teaching it as a skill in its own right; this is exemplified in the language used by the students when discussing writing. This is a common practice in writing instruction in high school where the assumption is that students already know how to write effectively (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham et al., 2013). Realizing this, teachers can work toward a more open, explicit teaching model for writing and communicate the difference between writing-to-learn and learning-to-write with students.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this study are intriguing and potentially useful in various educational contexts, but they are not completely generalizable. This case is unique, even within the research site, as this study focused only on the 11th grade and not the entire school. More research is needed to understand the complexities of student language use with writing across grade levels. This research is still valuable in the general conversation on writing in schools and analyzing student language to better understand student perceptions. At the research site, after discussion of findings, teachers have already devised changes to their teaching and new ideas to try out to address new knowledge, including creating a writing plan to tailor their language to support increased ownership and an understanding of growth. Other teachers might follow this example of using student language data. In addition, the issues of student ownership and understanding the role of writing in learning arose in this study as it has in other literature on writing and student discourse. Most significant to the field is the design and process of the study. This study revealed a depth of knowledge available in exploring student language; teachers and researchers can use similar approaches in gaining a perspective of student constructed meanings to help improve instruction. More research will be needed to explore the relationship between the positions students are creating and enforcing and the environment for writing which supports them in order to make for positive instructional changes.

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