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Connecting Student Writers with Online Audiences:

Lessons from the Field

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In a recent Layered Literacies column, Coleman and Hall (2019) argued that it was "high time" the practices fostered by digital writing communities "were introduced into ELA classrooms and utilized to develop students' skills as readers, writers, and restory-ers" (p. 67). However, when teachers invite authentic online audiences into their classrooms, they must navigate the layered expectations that students, schools, and online communities have about many issues related to writing products and practices. For example, decisions about whether to allow students to embrace the anonymity afforded by most online writing spaces leads to wrestling with the implications that granting anonymity can have on peer review and assessment. Thus, taking up researchers' recommendations about connecting students to online writing communities becomes a challenging endeavor.

We had the opportunity to work through some of these challenges when we taught a unit designed to support secondary students in sharing their creative writing online. We offer recommendations for ELA instruction emerging from that experience that: a) use YA characters as case studies to help young writers work through decisions about interacting with online audiences as they imagine possibilities as online authors, b) scaffold students as they analyze how to participate in online spaces, c) encourage students to create in multiple ways, and d) assist teachers in thinking through what and how to assess student writing focused on authentic online audiences.

What Researchers Recommend

Online writing communities, like those on Fanfiction.net, Wattpad.com, and other platforms, encourage writing practices valued in ELA classrooms, including close reading of texts, deep character analysis, and peer review of works-in-progress (Curwood, 2013; McWilliams, Hickey, Hines, Conner, & Bishop, 2011). When writers participate in online communities, they gain access to authentic identities as writers (Black, 2005) and can seek support from passionate, engaged audiences (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). Online audiences not only offer direct feedback on writing but also indirectly motivate authors to keep these readers in mind as they write (Magnifico, 2010). However, while online spaces can give authors access to a wider audience, there are no guarantees about the quality of the feedback available (Lammers, et al., 2012; Magnifico, Curwood, & Lammers, 2015).

In secondary schools, writing instruction typically positions teachers as the primary audience for students' writing and rarely creates opportunities for students to share their writing with online audiences (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014). However, efforts from the National Writing Project (e.g., Hicks, 2013) and the

Connected Learning Alliance (e.g., Garcia, 2014) provide models for what digital writing instruction might look like. Additionally, standards and policy statements guiding ELA classrooms increasingly advocate for attention to digital tools and audiences (e.g., Common Core State Standards and NCTE's position statement on integrating technology in ELA classrooms [NCTE, 2018]), and recommendations abound for ELA teachers to tap into online communities in their writing instruction (e.g., Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015). These recommendations include scaffolding students' analysis of online writing communities (Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Lammers & Van Alstyne, 2018) and developing their skills to critique and offer constructive feedback on others' writing (Padgett & Curwood, 2016). Yet, we recognize that connecting classrooms with online writing communities requires navigating how to align the norms and evaluation practices valued in these different environments (Magnifico, Lammers, & Fields, 2018).

What We Did

We collaborated to co-teach a three-week elective course in which we put into practice researchers' recommendations about connecting young writers to authentic online audiences. We offered the course to high school students at Judith's school, an independent nursery through 12th-grade school in western New York. During "Maymester," students end the school year by taking three concurrent courses to enrich their education. Twelve students (grades 9–12) enrolled in our course, "Fanfiction and Creative Writing: Sharing Your Work in Online Spaces." The class met three or four times each week in 90- or 180-minute blocks (990 minutes of instruction total). The term culminated in a "Maymester Fair," in which each course gathered in the school gym to display what students learned.

Before the course began, we surveyed students about their writing practices, their familiarity with various online communities, and their goals and questions about the course. Many students expressed concerns about who would read their writing, which led to the first issue we had to navigate: privacy. All of the students wanted to limit their audience, and we honored their requests by requiring neither in-class peer review nor writing submissions to us.

We started the course by asking pairs of students to follow a template we created to examine Fanfiction.net, Wattpad.com, Figment.com (which no longer exists), ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, PowerPoetry.org, and Tumblr.com. They documented: a) information about the types of writing shared on the sites, b) the process of the interactions between readers and writers, and c) the types of feedback they saw (see Lammers & Van Alstyne, 2018, for our "Online Space Exploration Template"). Based upon these analyses, students each chose the online writing community in which they wanted to participate for the course. Four students wrote fanfiction, which they shared on either Fanfiction.net or Wattpad.com; one created fanart, which she shared via Tumblr; and the others wrote original fiction or poetry they shared in other online spaces. Thus, we navigated the issue of variety by allowing students to write in a range of genres and for different audiences and purposes.

> **In each session, students were provided time to work on their drafts, read and comment on others' writing, and share their own writing in their chosen online communities.**

To support students' diverse writing pursuits, we started each class with mini-lessons focused on helping them get to know their audiences and engage in the practices of participating in an online writing community. This included helping them learn how to: a) read others' writing, b) give feedback, and c) establish an online presence. In each session, students were provided time to work on their drafts, read and comment on others' writing, and share their own writing in their chosen online communities. While we expected the online audiences to provide students with feedback, three weeks proved to be insufficient for students to cultivate their audiences.

Finally, we navigated the assessment issue by offering credit for participation and reflection, rather than assessing written products. Thus, we ended each class by having students reflect on their writing and learning through short Exit Tickets, using questions such as: *What are your thoughts about whether or not*

young people can learn to write better by sharing their writing in online spaces? and *Do you consider yourself more of an author than at the beginning of this course? Why or why not?* To showcase their learning at the Maymester Fair, students created a Google Site where their work about online writing spaces could help educate their peers and teachers.

What We Recommend

Our experience of inviting authentic online audiences into our classroom leads us to recommend that teachers take four important steps:

- *Imagine*—use YA literature to prompt students' thinking about how they want to engage with online audiences;
- *Analyze*—provide scaffolded support to help students understand audience expectations and appropriate means of participation in online writing spaces;
- *Create*—schedule time for students to participate as readers, writers, and reviewers in their chosen spaces; and
- *Assess*—design assessments that draw on the practices of online writing spaces.

We envision teachers drawing on these recommendations to design students' occasional writing in online spaces, be it as part of a year- or semester-long ELA curriculum or as a stand-alone unit, elective, or after-school club curriculum. Below we describe these four facets of our recommended approach, which need not be thought of as distinct, ordered phases.

Imagine

Providing models for how writers engage with online audiences can help students make decisions about what and how they share. We believe that characters in YA literature can serve as those models. For example, in *Eliza and Her Monsters* (Zappia, 2017), the experiences of the novel's protagonist, Eliza, serve as a cautionary tale of a teen writer who attempts to completely separate her author identity from her real life. Using her online identity of LadyConstellation, Eliza creates an incredibly popular webcomic named *Monstrous Sea*, and while her immediate family knows about her work, Eliza does not want her online life revealed to anyone else. Eliza believes that "it's so much easier to deal with people when you feel like

they can't touch you" (p. 334).

In contrast, another character in the novel, Wallace, a new boy in Eliza's high school, is open about his online identity as "rainmaker," the author of a fan-transcription of *Monstrous Sea.* Wallace regularly meets face-to-face and online with a group of other fans of *Monstrous Sea*. Even though LadyConstellation has flirted with "rainmaker" online and Eliza and Wallace are attracted to each other in real life, Eliza keeps her LadyConstellation identity a secret from Wallace. Throughout the novel, Eliza's tightly controlled universe becomes threatened in a number of ways, and both characters' creative work suffers, all of which can prompt students' examination of anonymity, identity, and trust.

Helping students imagine the consequences of choices they make when sharing creative work online could be explored through discussions about fictional characters' choices. Prompts to help students think through these issues could include: *Do you feel like you have a "writer identity" that is separate from your "real-life identity"? Are you comfortable sharing your writing online as your real self or anonymously? Are you comfortable sharing the writing you post online with anyone you know in real life?* Imagining various online writer-characters and their choices can help student writers choose who among their audiences knows their "real" identity. Other examples from YA literature include Cath from Rainbow Rowell's (2013) *Fangirl* and Claire in *Ship It* by Britta Lundin (2018).

Analyze

In the analysis stage, what matters most is that students dig into the design and practices of a given site to develop a sense of the writing products and processes encouraged in that space. We reaffirm recommendations about the importance of offering explicit scaffolding to help students analyze the affordances and designs of various online writing communities as they choose where to share their creative work. Based on our experiences with the template our students used, we offer explanations here about what students' analyses of online writing spaces might include.

First, have students generate a list of the online writing spaces they want to explore. Consider fanfiction sites (e.g., Fanfiction.net and ArchiveOfOurOwn.org), platforms that welcome both original and fan-based writing (e.g., Wattpad.com),

sites that motivate writers with contests (e.g., GetUnderlined.com and PowerPoetry.org), blogging and website creation tools (e.g., Tumblr.com and WordPress.com), and social networking sites that get repurposed for writing (e.g., Twitter and Instagram). Encourage students to explore online forums like those used by Eliza and Wallace. Given how quickly online sites evolve and change, we recommend remaining as open as possible in terms of what counts as an online writing space.

As students dig into their analyses, it helps if they document some basic orienting information about a site's membership, the types and quality of writing posted, and information about what resources are available to guide new participants. They might also examine what roles, beyond reader and writer, are available in the space. For example, students can look for whether the site encourages people to become proofreaders or "beta readers" (as they are called on Fanfiction.net) or to take on leadership or moderator roles (like those of Eliza's online friends, Max and Emmy). Students should also consider how community connections get fostered in online sites by looking at user profiles, tagging and messaging systems, the availability of groups, and any other means of facilitating interaction between and among readers and writers. They might also explore whether the site welcomes works-in-progress or expects that writers only share finished products.

To scaffold adolescent writers' understanding of an online audience's expectations, students should analyze the mechanisms readers use to evaluate and offer feedback on writing. They can, for instance, document the rating systems (e.g., likes, hearts, votes, or stars) available on the site. When analyzing feedback in an online writing space, students should evaluate the tools for giving and receiving feedback, such as reviews (as on Fanfiction.net) or comments (as on Wattpad and ArchiveOfOurOwn.org). Evaluations might also consider whether or not the site provides writers with ways to encourage more visibility for their work, either through links to share writing via social media or in-site means of promoting or highlighting certain authors and/or texts (i.e., featuring authors or texts on the home page). Students can also study the quality, content, tone, and timeliness of feedback available to writers on the site.

Create

We see the writing process in online spaces as including not only the creative acts of conceptualizing, writing, and revising one's work, but also the process of cultivating an audience and then responding to feedback. Our experience showed us that when students share their work with online writing communities for authentic feedback, a flexible timeline is essential because it takes time to build up an engaged online audience that provides any feedback at all (Lammers & Van Alstyne, 2018). Therefore, whatever timeframe a teacher is working with (whether a unit, semester, or year), we recommend introducing students early on to the practice of reading and reviewing others' writing in their online spaces as they post their own work. We then suggest offering opportunities for periodic check-ins about whether or not students are receiving feedback from their online audiences and facilitating class discussions about how students are cultivating their audiences. If students have difficulty receiving any useful feedback online, teachers can provide them with the agency and opportunities to choose other audiences, such as teachers or peers.

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Once students begin receiving reviews and comments from online readers, they will need to consider how to deal with that feedback. Teachers should be prepared to help students process negative or harsh reader responses and find value in the "thin praise" (Magnifico et al., 2015, p. 165), comments that express enthusiasm for the writing but do not offer insights about how to improve, common in online reviews. Scaffolding students' responses to feedback could happen through class discussions around receiving feedback without being defensive and the physiological effects of "likes," among other issues related to seeking attention online. The experiences of YA characters discussed earlier might serve as touchstones in these conversations. Teachers could prompt

students to model the constructive feedback they wish to receive through the reviews they write for others in their chosen online spaces.

Finally, for students who are not receiving the feedback they want from their online audiences but still desire to remain anonymous, teachers can set up a way for students to submit writing for peer and/or instructor feedback without names attached. This could be achieved by setting up a Google Form for students to submit work. The teacher could paste the sample in a Google Document visible to the whole class for feedback, and then model how to provide critiques that would be valuable.

Assess

One key challenge that teachers face when inviting authentic online audiences into an ELA classroom involves assessment. When students share their work online, they should do so with the understanding that their online readers, not their teachers, serve as the primary evaluators of their work. Teachers considering how to build this into their curriculum need to explore how to assess students' participation as readers, reviewers, and writers in ways that honor the practices of online writing spaces.

For example, students can receive credit for reading by submitting links to texts they read accompanied by reflections about how that text informs their writing and/or serves as a source of pleasure. They can receive credit for reviewing by providing screenshots of the feedback they give others. In situations where students appreciate the anonymity afforded by posting their writing online, students can document their participation as writers through reflections about the experience and screenshots of the feedback they receive on their work. Working together with students, teachers can design rubrics that focus on evaluating participation in online writing spaces.

Assessment might also involve prompting student reflection about the nature of writing for an online audience through journaling and/or class discussions. Teachers might consider asking students to compare and contrast the nature of writing for the audience of an ELA teacher with the nature of writing for their chosen online audiences. Students can demonstrate their learning by evaluating the feedback they give and receive for how well it motivates a writer to

continue and informs a writer about how to improve. They might draw in references from the YA literature examined earlier to support their claims about their experiences. Whatever assessment measure teachers consider, we encourage drawing on the practices and tools available in online writing spaces as inspiration for that assessment.

Conclusion

Successfully supporting students' explorations of writing online requires strategic preparation, precious class time, and meaningful reflection. With no guarantee that all students will find the audience they seek, the cost may not seem worth the benefit. Yet experienced young writers recognize, and express disappointment in, the discrepancies they experience between school writing and personal writing in regards to freedom, voice, and relevance (e.g., Lammers & Marsh, 2018). ELA teachers have an opportunity to foster more alignment for these writers when making space in their curricula to create for and share with online audiences.

Students who have imagined themselves as online authors and have worked to speak meaningfully to their audiences may recognize the power of that communication and care about how well they do it. As Magnifico (2010) argues, when students write online, they are "forced to think more carefully about the questions that expert writers typically take into account," and they develop "a clearer metacognitive understanding of themselves as writers and participants" (p. 180). What it means to be an expert writer, and the motivation to work at it, may be realized by bringing online writing spaces into the classroom, thereby providing unique catalysts of purpose and voice for student writers. Yes, "there are monsters in the sea" (Zappia, 2017, p. 327), but that should not deter us from diving in.

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