

Adolescent Perspectives on Authentic Writing Instruction

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Abstract

Researchers and educators support the idea of providing authentic literacy experiences to students. However, a critical misconception of the locus of authenticity exists; the focus has generally been on making tasks authentic to college, careers, or researcher-determined notions of authenticity rather than making tasks authentic to students and their funds of knowledge. After making a case for redefining authenticity in education as subjective, I then present a grounded theory of authentic writing instruction derived from interviews of a diverse body of eighth grade students over two years. Results of this study indicate the need for instruction to include a choice of valued topics, an emphasis on expression instead of conventions, and the potential for writing to impact an intended, actual audience.

Key Words: literacy experiences, authentic writing instruction, middle school students

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Currently, educational standards stress the importance of authentic literacy learning experiences. For example, English Language Arts standards contrast the reality of teachers following prescribed curriculum to the ideal of teachers creating “authentic, open-ended learning experiences” (IRA/NCTE, 1996, p. 6). In addition, a teacher’s ability to connect content to the real world is a key consideration of standards used to evaluate teachers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011; Georgia Department of Education, 2012). Furthermore, research supports authentic literacy education as an effective way to increase student engagement and achievement, particularly in teaching writing (Fisher, 2007; Freire, 1970/2007; Morrell, 2008; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Sisserson, Manning, Knepler, and Jolliffe, 2002; Winn & Johnson, 2011). In his review of 100 years of literacy research, Hillocks (2011) forcefully stated, “We know from a very wide variety of studies in English and out of it, that students who are authentically engaged with the tasks of their learning are likely to learn much more than those who are not” (p. 189).

Many voices call for authentic literacy education, but the meaning of “authentic” is unclear. Scholars often define educational authenticity as the connection of a school task to the real world (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Purcell-Gates, Anderson, Gagne, Jang, Lenters, McTavish, 2012; Seunariningsih, 2010). Yet *what* constitutes the real world and *who* decides if a school task such as an academic essay is authentic? Drawing on the work of Ashton (2010) and Splitter (2009), I define educational authenticity as a student's perception that a school task connects to his/her life. In terms of who decides, researchers often determined what counts as authentic for students, rather than asking students themselves what they need for authentic education and authentic writing instruction. In their review of motivation to write, Bruning and Horn (2000) explicitly called for research conducted in collaboration with students to understand student requirements for authentic writing, stating, “We also need to inquire of students themselves—about those purposes of writing they consider to be most meaningful and motivating. Are their conceptions consonant with ours?” (p. 31). To enact authentic writing instruction in schools, a need exists to investigate how students perceive authenticity in academic writing. Thus, the question guiding this study was: What factors contribute to student perceptions of an academic writing task as authentic? Using grounded theory methods, I asked eighth grade students what makes learning to write meaningful. By exploring middle school students’ perceptions through interviews spanning two years, I was able to derive a grounded theory of authentic writing instruction.

Conceptual Framework: Authenticity as Subjective

Undergirding this study is an understanding of authenticity as subjective. A student's judgment of the authenticity of a writing task matters above all, not some generalized correspondence between what happens in school and outside of school (Ashton, 2010; Splitter, 2009). Ashton (2010) posited “it is *the learner who chooses* whether to bring authenticity to their learning” (p. 7). Along the same lines, Splitter (2009) proposed two crucial ingredients for authenticity: “in order for their learning to count as authentic, learners should be persuaded and not just told, and that the desired correspondence is between what we want them to learn and *their own understanding of the world, not the world per se*” (p. 143). These scholars position the student as the arbiter of authenticity, a critical shift from other research utilizing researcher-constructed ideas of authenticity.

The most prevalent theme from authenticity research is that authentic work cannot only be produced for and valued in school, but must have real world relevance. A number of scholars insisted on the inclusion of “real world” activities in order to create authentic educational experiences (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Dewey, 1944; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012; Resnick, 1987). Splitter (2009), however, disagreed that school needs to mirror the “real world,” positing “the only ‘reality’ which mattered to the participants was the one in which they were actively engaged” (p. 142). Similarly, Whitney (2011) articulated, “I see the world of the classroom as just as real as the one outside. The classroom is simply a place, one place among the many in which we learn and be” (p. 58). In a similar fashion, Sisserson and colleagues (2002) stressed that “authentic” should not be interpreted to mean students engaging in an activity that mirrors a real world activity, but that the activity should *be* the real world activity.

Extending these points, I position the “real world” as dependent on students and their funds of knowledge rooted in their personal interests, family and cultural experiences, social life, and community knowledge (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, and Collazo, 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Funds of knowledge theorists argue that students acquire vast knowledge connected to their identities from living in and interacting with the world, a wealth of knowledge teachers need to activate and draw upon in schools. However, connecting to the idea that schools can be authentic (Sisserson et al., 2002; Whitney, 2011), I argue that past school experience can be a “fund of knowledge” when students perceive school activities and experiences as meaningful. Thus, educational authenticity occurs when a student can connect a school task to the “real world” of their lived experiences, including global and community, personal, and academic experiences (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2014). Because funds of knowledge vary by individual, a student is the only one who can decide if a task connects to the real world, a real world defined and lived by that particular student.

Building on the theories of Ashton (2010) and Splitter (2009), this study centers authenticity on the student, necessitating the solicitation of student perspectives. Yet, there is insufficient empirical research exploring authenticity with students. One exception is Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler’s (2002) study with adult learners in which they concluded that highly authentic literacy tasks resulted in higher achievement. In this study, teachers and adult students evaluated how “real-life” text types and purposes were in conjunction with researchers who observed classroom instruction. However, this study was one of the few studies in authentic literacy involving consultation with students. Additional empirical work suggests other factors for authentic writing beyond text type and purpose, including having a real audience (Peterson, 1996; Putnam, 2001), incorporating meaningful conversations about in-process and polished writing (Dawson, 2009), and having a compelling real-world topic (Kahn, 2009). In these examples, researchers hypothesized factors that could increase authenticity, warranting further research to explore these factors with students.

Past researchers have conducted important work delineating possible factors of authentic writing instruction. However, a critical misplacement of the locus of authenticity exists in much educational research; the push for authentic education should not be to make tasks authentic to jobs or researcher conceptions of the real world but should be to make tasks authentic to students

and their funds of knowledge (Hogg, 2011; Moll et al., 1992). In order to understand authentic writing, educators need to understand factors creating authentic writing experiences from student perspectives. The only way to resolve this issue is by asking diverse students what makes learning to write meaningful for them.

Methodology

Because the purpose of this interview study was to investigate a highly subjective construct, grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that facilitate organic growth of theory from data were employed. Glaser and Strauss (1967) presented three characteristics of grounded theory building. The first characteristic is theoretical sampling in which the researcher collects and analyzes data, and then uses the emergent theory to inform which data to collect next. The second characteristic is data analysis using the constant comparative method, defined as “comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). The final characteristic is creating core categories broadly representing the data and providing an explanation for the phenomenon under study. The data collection and analysis procedures utilized in this study adhered to these guidelines for developing grounded theory.

Participants and Setting

Over the course of two years (2010-2012), I conducted 43 student interviews: 22 initial and 21 follow-up interviews with 22 students. (One student was unable to participate in the second interview, but because the first interview’s validity was not dependent on the second, I included this student’s initial interview). I also observed approximately 100 hours of instruction in the participating teachers’ classrooms. There were nine classes involved in the study, six in the first year and three in the second year. The focal collaborating teacher, Catherine Joyner (a pseudonym), a White female teacher with nine years of experience, taught three classes in each year of the study. Another teacher who co-planned with Catherine taught the other three classes in the first year.

Using purposeful sampling from the pool of students who agreed to be interviewed, I selected 22 students to represent different genders and ethnicities, a range of interest in writing, and three class levels: General, Accelerated, and Gifted (see Table below). All names are pseudonyms chosen by students.

Student Participants

Student	Year	Class level	Ethnicity and Gender	Writing interest
Erica	1	Gifted	Multi-ethnic female	High
Charity	1	Gifted	African American female	Medium
Dinora	2	Gifted	African American female	7/10
Aya	2	Gifted	Middle Eastern female	6/10
Laurel	2	Gifted	White female	8/10
Quin	2	Gifted	White male	7/10

Shade	2	Gifted	White male	2 or 3/10 (Later revised to a 5/10)
Bernardo	1	Accelerated	Multi-ethnic male	Medium
Jacob	1	Accelerated	African American male	Low
Akira	2	Accelerated	African American female	11/10
Lynette	2	Accelerated	African American female	6/10
Ruth	2	Accelerated	Asian female	9.5/10
Bob	2	Accelerated	Asian male (Indian)	5 or 6/10
Tony	2	Accelerated	African American male	5/10 (depends on topic)
Achala	1	General	Asian female (ELL)	Low
Dahlia	1	General	White female	10/10
Xavier	2	General	African American male	School writing: 6.5/10; Home writing: 9.5/10
Evan	2	General	African male (ELL)	5/10
Fred	2	General	White male	7/10
Jason	2	General	African American male	9.5/10
Melissa	2	General	Multi-ethnic female	Typed: 8/10; Handwritten: 5/10
Mickey	2	General	African American female	7/10

Notes: Students in Year 2 of the study were asked to rate their feelings about writing in general on a scale of one to ten, where one was "hate writing" and ten was "love writing," and these ratings are included. In Year 1, asked students to rate their interest in writing from 1-6. A rating of 1-2 was labeled as "low interest," 3-4 as "medium interest," and 5-6 as "high interest." ELL refers to students classified as English Language Learners.

In the first year, six students were in the study, and in the second year, 16 different students were in the study. All students were eighth graders at the same school. I chose eighth grade students in part because of the prevalence in the United States of high-stakes writing tests focused on academic essay writing at that grade level. In addition, little research has explored authenticity in middle grades.

The study was conducted at an urban public middle school in a major Southeastern city. The school is categorized as a Title I-Targeted Assistance School and authorized as an International Baccalaureate (IB) world school. In 2010-2011, the first year of this study, 60% of the students in the school were eligible for free and reduced meals. The breakdown by ethnicity of the entire school in 2010-2011 (using the classifications available on the state website) was 12% Asian, 46% Black, 13% Hispanic, 1% Native American/Alaskan Native, 24% White, and 4% Multiracial. Many of the students were recent immigrants to the United States, and 14% were classified as Limited English Proficient. I chose this school due to the diversity of the student body in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and proficiency with English. Diversity of students was critical for increasing generalizability.

Data Collection

Three major phases of data collection occurred in each of the two years. In the first phase of data collection, I observed instruction and constructed field notes detailing the actions and words of the teacher and the students. The observations established context for the study rather than directly contributing to the development of grounded theory. By observing instruction, I was able to reference specific writing tasks and activities when interviewing students. In the second phase of data collection, I conducted individual interviews with each student and then analyzed these data to establish themes across interviews. The third phase of data collection occurred after the bulk of data analysis and consisted of continued observation of writing instruction and a second interview with all students. To increase validity, I conducted member checks by reviewing major points from the first interview with each student during their second interview. I also discussed my analysis process periodically with another literacy researcher studying writing instruction as well as a colleague specializing in qualitative methodology.

The three phases of data collection were repeated in the second year of the study. In addition to student interviews, in the second year Catherine and I engaged in two formal 45-minute interviews. Although I mostly reference student voices in this article, as a teacher with extensive knowledge of the history of the school and of her students, Catherine provided feedback that informed the development and refinement of the major findings.

In both years of the study, data collection revolved around two major writing tasks: a compare and contrast essay and a personal narrative. These genres were chosen because they represent types of writing emphasized in middle school.

Data Analysis

I coded interview data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using open coding, I first analyzed each interview response separately and created preliminary codes for every factor students identified as increasing authenticity. In the first year, I sorted preliminary codes into initial themes. Although in many student statements they discuss what they like rather than what is authentic, in the final interview I directly asked students if the aspects of writing they liked would make the writing task more connected to their lives and was able to confirm or reject factors. For example, if a student said s/he liked working in groups to revise in-process work, I then asked if this activity made writing more meaningful for him/her.

After collecting additional data in the second year, I independently coded the new data, and then sorted codes into the initial themes created in the first year of the study. However, I also developed new codes and themes and refined the original themes. I present the final themes constituting my proposed theory of authentic writing as factors in the findings section.

I acknowledge the difficulty of accessing students' sometimes underdeveloped rationales for why they liked or disliked a particular aspect of writing instruction as a limitation of this study. Additionally, because the idea of authenticity is complicated and connected to internalized funds of knowledge that students may not have explicitly examined, it was difficult to determine if all students were able to accurately evaluate the connection of past and present writing tasks to their

lives. These limitations to the methods need to be considered when interpreting the results of this study, and future research is needed to confirm, counter, or expand this initial attempt to outline a theory of authentic writing instruction for adolescent students. However, I believe these findings offer an important epistemic iteration (Engelhard & Behizadeh, 2012) regarding adolescent requirements for authentic writing.

Findings

Three major factors emerged as increasing authenticity of writing tasks: choice of a valued topic, writing for impact, and dominance of expression over conventions. Another integrated factor with these others was the students' need to share their work for it to be highly authentic. In addition to these key factors, I also found authenticity varies by student and student subgroups. This last finding is not a factor of authenticity, but is a critical consideration for developing writing tasks that help increase authenticity. In these findings, I focus primarily on student interview data but supplement with data from teacher interviews.

Choice of a Valued Topic

Being able to choose a topic for writing increases the authenticity of a writing task for the vast majority of students interviewed (21 out of 22 students). Students also discussed what makes a topic valued. When I asked Dinora if presenting her compare and contrast essay made the writing process more meaningful, she said no. I then asked her what made her essay meaningful, and she replied, "Because it was on gymnastics and gymnastics is awesome." Similarly for Fred, because he is an avid fisherman, fishing is a valued topic. When talking about why he likes to write about fishing, he explained, "Like I can think of so much to talk about fishing. Like my knowledge about fishing is just through the roof." Fred and Dinora both enjoy writing about topics in which they are interested and highly knowledgeable.

Allowing students to write about their personal interests can increase the authenticity of a writing task. However, for Tony, although the compare and contrast essay he wrote about two sports he likes was interesting, it was not highly authentic. He explained why his personal narrative was more meaningful, stating that the compare and contrast essay was an exercise in comparing two topics while the personal narrative was "something that happened to you." Tony's comments suggest more is necessary for authentic writing than solely allowing students to write about personal interests.

Additionally, ten students said writing about an important person increased authenticity. Mickey wrote her compare and contrast essay on her mother and father, and said, "That's why I enjoyed writing because it was about two people I care about." It makes sense that the task was authentic to her because when she does her own writing at home, she writes about her family. Mickey connected to her funds of knowledge when she compared her parents because she highlighted the knowledge and skills her parents possessed and the knowledge she had gained from these important social relationships. Providing another example, Ruth stated, "Well, I guess I like writing more about other people like friends and just things that are going on, like journals, journal entries." Whether the topic revolves around family or friends, these topics connect to who students are and the people around them. Echoing Tony's sentiments, Xavier explained why

a short descriptive writing assignment on his great aunt was more meaningful than the compare and contrast essay he wrote. He explained, “My aunt, my great aunt was like more than just two topics to talk about. She was like really important in my life.”

However, students do not only value a topic allowing them to write about prior knowledge on personal interests or people they care about; twelve students also discussed valuing a topic if they will learn something interesting or useful. Although this component is about acquiring new knowledge, it always starts with something students already know, bridging from prior knowledge to gaining new knowledge. Bob offered a great example. I asked him to describe his favorite writing assignment and Bob replied, “Okay, so I wrote, I did a project about Hinduism because I really wanted to know about Hinduism because it's pantheistic and I'm monotheistic.” Hinduism connected to a topic of which he had a lot of prior knowledge, and this assignment allowed him to research something he wanted to know.

One suggestion Mickey had for making writing more meaningful was for the teacher to assign “a couple of maybe research papers because it would be nice to learn new things.” She continued talking about research topics, saying, “I think it should be something that people don't really talk about and people don't really know about so we could learn more and learn new stuff instead of learning things that we already knew or heard about.” Students want to share their own funds of knowledge on personal interests and the people in their lives, but they also want to develop new knowledge.

A final way students value writing is with a topic emphasizing global or community import. Nine students discussed the importance of their work connecting to events beyond the classroom. Bob, who was born in India, told me why the compare and contrast essay he wrote about India and the United States was not as authentic as he wanted it to be:

Because people are really like that, opinions about India and America, like call me terrorist and stuff, but India was not the one that was in the war. India was separate, so they just look at my color. So, I wanted them to understand that everything that happened was in Iraq and everything.

Bob wanted to explain India's positive aspects in his compare and contrast essay so people could fix their misconceptions; however, due to what he perceived as the rigid structure of the essay, Bob felt unable to make his point. Instead, he compared superficial features of the two countries. This example illustrates the overlap between choice and impact: Bob chose to write about India so he could achieve the outcome of impacting his audience, but then the task was not highly authentic because he was unable to achieve this outcome. Finally, Bernardo explained why the global impact of his writing matters to him by saying, “I don't want to get out of college and only find rubble and ruins of this world.” He wants to have a hand in shaping the world he lives in *now*. For Bernardo, writing about topics portraying global import is not enough; he wants his writing to also have an impact on the world, a desire explored in the next section on writing for impact.

An important point to consider is that although choice increases authenticity, completely free choice does not always yield an authentic topic. In fact, half of the focal students (11/22) said

during interviews that help choosing a topic would increase authenticity. For example, when I asked Evan what teachers could do to make writing more meaningful and connected to him, he stated, “Like asking questions and help me out, like what to write.” This idea was his major suggestion for increasing authenticity. These data suggest some students may need help making meaningful choices—they may need a *structured choice* of a valued topic.

Writing for Impact

Throughout the last section, the importance of having a valued topic on which to write was firmly established as a factor of authentic writing. In addition to choosing a valued topic, most students (17/22) interviewed said sharing their final product with someone else increased the authenticity of their work. Eight students limited the need for audience by noting that certain writing is about reflection, which may not need to be shared with others to be authentic. However, for most academic writing, an intended audience other than self exists. Importantly, student comments indicated that the presence of an actual audience in and of itself was not a factor increasing authenticity; rather, having an *impact* on the actual audience increased the authenticity of writing.

A very simple yet important impact students desire to have on their audience is to let their audience know who they are. Fourteen of the twenty-two interviewed students endorsed this facet of authentic writing, including Melissa. She critiqued writing to summarize facts, such as writing a book report, stating, “There’s no point about writing about something that they already know about, and you probably know about it too.” Melissa was very aware of her potential audience and assumed they would be bored by a book report rehashing the plot. Melissa contrasted this type of writing with writing she likes: writing that allows her to share personal information. She said she stopped liking writing in the sixth grade because the purpose for writing changed from sharing information about your life to proving you read something. In another example, Ruth noted that her compare and contrast essay on herself and her sister was written for her parents. She explained, “I was mostly writing to my parents because I know they heard a lot of our bickering and our arguments, and I did show them the essay and I think they liked it. After that we just got along a lot easier.” She presented her work to an authentic audience so they could understand her perspective on the situation.

Going beyond sharing who they are with others, thirteen of the twenty-two students indicated that changing opinions or the world would increase the authenticity of a writing task. For example, when I asked Xavier what made his story about his great aunt meaningful to him, he replied,

Like the audience that was listening because like—like you have to be strong to get up there and like read the story about a passed family member. So I felt like I got to let people know that it's okay to express yourself through writing or through song or through like whatever.

Xavier helped his audience by demonstrating that it was okay to express something painful. Jacob also noted how he wants his writing to help others. After stating he likes sharing stories with others, Jacob explained that although writing the personal narrative was meaningful without

sharing, he likes “going the extra step and presenting it to people.” Jacob explained, “I think anything that will help kids get through things will be really good. So if I wrote something on that I would publish it. So they could get my point of view on what I would do if I were in that situation.” Sharing is important to Jacob in making writing authentic, but only if he thinks others can benefit from reading his writing.

In addition to helping others through writing, many students want to change other people’s opinions. Ruth discussed writing a persuasive essay and giving it to someone who can make a change, stating, “I think you should because then you get your point across and if it’s really persuasive, it might actually happen.” Dahlia explained that sharing her writing was important to her so other students could learn who she really was, but also so she could change others’ perspectives.

Very few students discussed changing laws or government systems. Fred offered one explanation for this omission. He talked about how it would not matter if he wrote a letter to the governor, “Because no governor wants to hear some 13-year-old complaining, saying, ‘This should change’ in a whiney voice. They’re not going to value it.” For this reason, he felt in-class persuasive writing without an actual intended impact is not very meaningful or authentic. Students want their work to have connections to world issues, yet few students talked about how writing can be a powerful tool for change on a systemic level.

Dominance of Expression over Conventions

The third major factor increasing authenticity for students was a hierarchy of expression over conventions during the process of writing. Over half of the students stated that being able to express themselves would increase connections between school writing and their life. Tony noted “anything that involves you and your opinion” would increase the meaningfulness of a writing assignment, while Fred stated that for writing to be authentic, “I would like to tell a little bit more about me.” Catherine noted that most students in this age group like to write about themselves. She explained, “Definitely with eighth graders, writing about themselves or anything centered around them and their experience and their feelings generates more writing.” Students become more engaged in writing when they are able to connect to their own experience.

Although a few students acknowledged the importance of mechanics for effective communication, 12 students said mechanics interfered with authenticity because a mechanical focus prevented them from expressing themselves. (These comments did not necessarily refer to their current class.) For instance, I asked Jason what would make writing more meaningful for him. He answered, “If we could write about what we wanted to and...not be penalized for misspelled words, because I spell stuff so, spell stuff wrong.” Embedded in Jason’s response is the desire for choice and a de-emphasis on conventions such as spelling. Similarly, Achala said, “Writing really frustrates me. I get a lot of mistakes. There’s a lot to do in writing.... Writing you have to remember every single punctuation and everything.” For Jason and Achala, the mechanical focus of school writing is frustrating. Dahlia expressed a similar issue with mechanics. When I asked Dahlia why worrying about the mechanics of writing (based on her earlier comments) made a writing task less authentic, she replied:

Because you're just focusing on getting all [the mechanics] in, you don't really have time to focus on the story itself and the meaning of it. And the whole reason she's doing that *you* think it's because of the meaning but it's really because she wants to see if you know how to do it.

Teachers need to evaluate whether students have mastered the mechanics of writing, but these students want their teachers to value the ideas they attempt to convey more than mechanics. This need for rebalancing mechanics and meaning does not negate the importance of mechanics, but rather suggests students will find writing more authentic when the primary purpose is to communicate, not to demonstrate proficiency. Ideally, teachers can convince students that attending to mechanics will result in more effective communication, and students will realize the benefits of learning mechanics in the service of meaning.

In addition to mechanics, students noted in interviews that a predetermined format reduces the authenticity of writing assignments. Students classified as Gifted were more likely to find that the predetermined format interfered with meaning while students classified as General were more likely to find that mechanics interfered with meaning. Laurel, Dinora, Aya, Achala, and Mickey indicated a predetermined format or structure can be helpful for making meaning, yet half of the students said a predetermined format for writing can interfere with authenticity, including Laurel and Mickey. For the compare and contrast essay, Shade wanted to write about life and death, but could not find similarities, so he chose Christmas and Thanksgiving, a far less authentic topic for him. The Venn diagram activity may have misled him because there is a specific place to list similarities, and he felt that they were required. Bob also felt that the structure of the compare and contrast essay inhibited authenticity:

I think we should have like our own way of writing sometimes to express our feelings, but she said that it has to be point by point or subject by subject. That makes more pressure because you had to write on that point, like if it's for the point, you have to write like that or you get points taken off.

Bob felt he was not able to say what he wanted due to the predetermined format for this essay. Finally, Erica also felt constrained by predetermined formats for writing:

We talk just a lot about it has to have X amount of blank, and X amount of this, which is always a way that you can grade it, which of course makes sense... Okay so it has all the components, but maybe talking about how you can be influenced by books and how reading other people's work can work into yours, and how to do that?

As Erica's quote illustrates, students want teachers to move beyond a checklist for writing and allow them the freedom to adapt or create formats suited to what they want to say.

Authenticity Varies by Student and Subgroup

A key finding affecting the implementation of the above factors is that authenticity requirements vary by individual student. As has been demonstrated, not every single student mentioned all factors as increasing authenticity. In addition, even when students agree on a factor, they may

disagree on how they define that particular factor. For example, even though most students said having audience impact was important, students differed in what they wanted the impact to be. Achala wanted to impact the audience by teaching them about herself, other students wanted to entertain the audience or show the audience how hard they had worked writing the essay, while other students like Xavier wanted to impact the community or the world. Some students noted more than one of these ways to impact an audience, and Bernardo actually noted all of these possible impacts as increasing authenticity.

Furthermore, there are possible differences among students in the Gifted, Accelerated, and General classes. For example, only three of the seven students in the Gifted class said that help choosing a topic would increase authenticity, compared to six out of the eight students in the General class. Similarly, students in the Gifted class were less likely to stress the importance of global impact for increasing authenticity in writing than students in the Accelerated and General classes. This conclusion may partially be explained by the fact that more immigrant students, who may have developed more global identities, were in the Accelerated and General classes, but further research is necessary to understand these data. Additionally, authenticity may vary by gender. In another study examining a scale I developed to measure perceived authenticity, I discovered boys and girls had statistically different levels of perceived authenticity (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2014). This finding resonates with the current study's interview data suggesting eighth grade girls may value group work with peers more while boys may be more likely to consider publication of their writing a factor in increasing authenticity.

Another important variable to consider for authentic writing is the cultural and linguistic background of students. In the same study referenced above (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2014), I found that perceptions of authenticity in writing differed significantly by ethnicity. Related to this finding, in the current study Catherine demonstrated awareness of the difficulties students face if they do not speak standard American English and noted many of her students speak "nonstandard" English at home. This disconnect between home discourse and school discourse for minority populations has been well documented as a critical issue for educators to consider when striving for social justice in education (Gee, 2001, 2012; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 2001). When attempting to create tasks that diverse students will find highly authentic, cultural differences need to be taken into account in addition to possible gender, skill level, and individual differences.

Emerging from these analyses is that student characteristics, such as ethnic background and gender, may be important factors affecting levels of perceived authenticity. These findings resonate with funds of knowledge research demonstrating how students from different cultural backgrounds bring different funds of knowledge to school. However, educators should not assume a shared cultural or gender identity means all students in that group have the *exact* same needs for authentic writing. Authenticity varies by the individual student, and each student has a unique blend of personal, cultural, global, and academic funds of knowledge informing his/her perceptions of authenticity.

Discussion

The calls for authenticity that opened this article cannot be answered without understanding factors allowing students to connect school writing to their lives. A major impetus for this work

was to clarify the term “authentic.” Instead of assuming that writing tasks students may encounter in college and careers are inherently authentic, this theory of authentic writing instruction offers specific factors for making connections between schoolwork and students’ lives: choice of a valued topic, writing for impact, and dominance of expression over conventions. Also, throughout these factors is woven the importance of sharing in-process and final work with others to increase authenticity. Choice, expression, impact, and sharing all contribute to students having a voice in their education, and this voice allows students to direct their work toward topics, processes, and outcomes they value. Allowing students to have more control of their writing conceptually aligns with the framework of subjectivity (Ashton, 2010). Of critical importance, student comments suggest authenticity can be a feature of in-school writing as long as the writing task includes certain factors, blurring the seemingly stark divide of in school and out of school literacy practices.

Additionally, there is much writing research that does not utilize the term “authentic” which this study suggests may result in higher perceptions of authenticity. The findings resonate with research regarding process writing, funds of knowledge, culturally relevant pedagogy, project-based learning, and participatory action research. In particular, a process writing approach (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1975, 1983; Elbow, 1973) will likely increase authenticity to the degree that students perceive greater choice, opportunities for expression, and potential effects of their work that extend beyond the classroom. Choice and expression are already dominant themes in the process writing movement; however, writing for impact as well as how to differentiate the writing process for culturally diverse learners could be more emphasized. Yet, the writing process movement did emphasize the highly individualized nature of writing. For example, Graves (1975) concluded in his study of seven-year-old writers that “Children write for unique reasons, employ highly individual coping strategies, and view writing in ways peculiar to their own person. In short, the writing process is as variable and unique as the individual’s personality” (p. 237). This understanding of every child as a unique individual with a different perspective on writing aligns the writing process movement with the idea of authenticity as subjective.

However, notwithstanding the connections between this grounded theory and process writing theory, the authenticity of process writing depends on its implementation; if students move through non-iterative stages in lockstep with the teacher’s agenda, such pedagogy is not reaching its highest potential. Far from prescribing a “one size fits all” model for teaching writing, a key conclusion of this study is that each student has different needs for authentic writing and authenticity may vary by certain subgroups such as gender and ethnicity. Attending to this point, the work of Winn and Johnson (2011) in integrating culturally relevant pedagogy and process writing may prove a valuable resource for implementing authentic writing in the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge authenticity is not the only goal of writing instruction. Teachers are faced with the challenging task of balancing the demands of national and state standards, high-stakes writing tests, and required curriculum—demands which are often not aligned with the factors of authenticity outlined here (Behizadeh, 2014). However, I believe authenticity should be a primary consideration when developing writing instruction. One reason to focus on authenticity even within the context of high-stakes testing is because overly structured, teacher-directed writing instruction that constrains student expression is not aligned with research on effective writing practices, which establishes a process approach as a superior method to increase

writing achievement (Dawson, 2013). Additionally, writing instruction focused on test preparation that neglects students' personal, global, and community funds of knowledge related to writing has been shown to decrease student motivation and interest in writing (Au & Gourd, 2013; Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Ketter & Pool, 2001; Watanabe, 2007). Yet, as other scholars in educational research have emphasized, students must learn the codes and language of power in order to be successful in schooling and the workforce, particularly students who speak different languages and dialects (Au & Gourd, 2013; Delpit, 1996; Gee, 2001, 2012).

Therefore, just as the findings of this study suggest that mechanics and structure should be taught in the service of expression and meaning-making, I argue that attending to both authenticity and external demands requires classrooms where students meet standards, learn the mechanics and conventions of writing, and even prepare for high-stakes testing while engaged in highly motivating and authentic writing. To meet standards and student needs for authenticity, the research community needs to support teachers in establishing authenticity as a shared goal with students, utilizing flexible pedagogies that honor students' funds of knowledge while providing choice and opportunities for expression and impact, as well as teaching the necessary conventions for effective communication. Students will then be prepared to succeed on benchmark tests acting as gatekeepers to higher education and better jobs, but more importantly, they will be prepared to write powerfully on topics they value to impact themselves, their communities, and the world.

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