Analyzing Student Language on Writing to Inform Instruction: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

To better understand those students who are taught each day, it is necessary to hold conversation with them to better understand their frames of mind. This case study of 19 students at a rural, innovative high school in the southeastern United States sought to understand through discourse analysis the perspectives, positioning, and situated meanings at play in the participants' language. Findings suggest that students at the research site had trouble denoting their own writing growth, the value of writing, and ownership of writing produced at school. Implications of this speak toward how teachers can motivate and re-value writing for students. While the results are unique to this research site, the hope of this study is to generate conversation about the nature of writing instruction in public schools.

Introduction

Conducting interviews on a Friday afternoon in U.S. 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 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 says he has never liked writing in school; "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 writes often; "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 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, and perspectives, voices, of the students involved in the writing instruction provided them by school systems. Their unique experiences of having taken part in typically multiple deliveries of writing instruction provides insight into the process. This research will explore student voices around writing at a small, rural high school by holding conversations about writing and using discourse analysis to derive situated meaning and positioning that is occurring to and amongst the students. 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 both in and out of school?
- What do students conceptualize as improvements to writing instruction?
- How do students position themselves, and are positioned by others, in relation to their writing?

Literature Review

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 has been considered in both the research design and analysis of the data. Lastly, discourse analysis pairs nicely with the collected data as it requires a keen linguistic eye to decipher student meanings and perspectives using what they have said in such brief interview and observation. The mingling of these theories ultimately meets the needs of addressing the key questions raised at the outset of this research.

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 thirty 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; Kiuhara, 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; Kiuhara et al., 2009). Additionally, Gutierrez, Zitlali Morales, & 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.

Positioning

In theorizing and analysis with positioning theory, it is necessary to understand both the verbal and nominal forms at work. 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 replaces it with the conceptualization that people are more 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 5th grade students, used positioning theory explored 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. Clarke was able to identify the power relations clearly by how students were positioning themselves and each other, verbally and nonverbally.

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 amongst 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.

Discourse Analysis

Freire and Macedo (1987) said, "Language should never be understood as a mere tool of communication. Language is packed with ideology" (p.43). In this study, I will use a combined analytical approach with positioning theory and discourse analysis. An examination of discourse requires an analysis of the positioning in an interaction (Fairclough, 2014). Discourse analysis has grown from a combined theory of anthropology, sociology, and linguistics (Schiffrin, 1994). As all social acts have meaning in positioning theory, Bakhtin (1986) 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). Discourse analysis 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 analysis, 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, discourse analysis will be used 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). Students could be creating a shared understanding and way of speaking about writing in this case. Discourse analysis 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.

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 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.

Description of the 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 local 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 local 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 six 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, twelve are female and seven 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.

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 interview 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 twenty 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. Table 1 (see Appendix A) shows interview questions used and their corresponding research questions which informed their design.

Stake (1995) said, "If possible, the interviewer should enjoy the interview but mostly be its repository." (p. 66). With this in mind, there was little exchange with the students other than clarification until the end of the interview. I used this time to pose a few extemporaneous questions tailored to each student's responses that I had jotted down while listening. I felt this was an important part of the process as I allowed them all to respond to the same questions before individualizing the process. Following this discussion, I stopped the recording and took the time to ask students what they thought of the interview. I asked if it was easy to answer or confusing. I also asked if they thought I could change anything to understand more about what students thought about writing. I did this as part of member checking and improving my own process based on the feedback. After each student exited for class, I saved the session as an individual audio recording on my tablet computer for later transcription.

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 minute 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.

The focus group met one day during a break period for the students for 20 minutes. 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.

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 student positioning and situated meaning concerning 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 amongst 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 amongst this group toward understanding their language use.

I have conducted analysis by coding for themes and noticing patterns amongst the data, and I have also conducted discourse analyses to get at the meaning of the language students are using

when talking about their own writing and process of learning to write. 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.

Findings

In analyzing the various transcripts, I found ten main features of student talk to use in categorizing utterances for analysis of how students construct knowledge and situate meaning with writing. They are storytelling, relating, positioning others, positioning self, ownership, re-imagining, explaining, confusing, challenging, and reflecting. 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, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). These features derive from that search within these transcripts. Table 2 (see Appendix A) defines the features and provides examples from transcripts as to where they were found in use.

Each identified feature has 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 will be included in the discussion as relevant.

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.
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> 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]
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> 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.
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> 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 have 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 are working through their thoughts on the way they have been taught to write on the fly. The most frank explanation of what may be occurring in this amongst 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 have not worked with explicit writing instruction. If students do not 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 not 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 that may be 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?
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> 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]
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> 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]
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> Simon: Yep. I never-
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> 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]
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> 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.
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> Patrick: How did it get better? In what ways?
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> 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 amongst the students on the perspective the amount of learning around writing that has occurred; this is why there is challenging taking place. It should be noted that this challenging leads to reflection in the students where it seems that explanation becomes difficult. Further elucidating this point are responses to the interview question, "Has school been effective in teaching you to write?"

George: Yeah. I've had some really good teachers. I've had some not so great ones, too, but the ones here are great. [reflecting] They give a lot of writing assignments. I feel like I write a lot. [explaining]

Patrick: They edit your writing and teach about a lot of different ways to write? Stuff like that? George: Not exactly. I haven't had too many teachers worry me about the way I write. Most of the time they just tell me I'm not clear or something and talk about what I wrote. [explaining]
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Ruth: I mean, yeah. I'm not such a great writer, but I don't know if that is the school's fault. I just haven't gotten it ever. [positioning self] We do it a lot, but (pause) I don't know. [confusion]

Patrick: Do you think you've gotten better? Do you think you've gotten tips on how to get better from teachers? Ruth: I don't know. I'm better than I was in middle school, I know that. [reflecting] And like I said, the teachers have us write a lot. But they don't ever (pause) It ain't like they push a WAY to write on us or anything [explaining]
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Simon: They get us to write a bunch here. That is the only way to get better. It's like training a muscle. [relating] Practice makes perfect. [explaining]

Patrick: What do you practice?

Simon: Writing about what we think.

Patrick: And how has that gotten better?

Simon: I can (pause) write more clearly, I think. [confusion] And (pause) I can write more than I could before. [explaining]

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. The student language feature confusion when questioned about their explanations supports the idea that they do not really know what areas they have grown in writing because they have not had a lot of focused writing instruction. The language reflects a repetition amongst 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.

Motivation through 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 done. 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 whatevs. More free. [explaining] It's like being told what to do or getting to do exactly what you want. [relating]
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> 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-
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> 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-imaginging]
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> 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-imaginging]
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> Misty: Yeah. [affirming]
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> Jeff: I like that. [affirming]
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> 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 do not 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.

For some students, the motivation to write and succeed in writing in school goes beyond a need of purpose. Of the seven students who reported that they do not like to write, some of their responses to "What should teachers do to help students write better or like to write? " are telling.

> Jackie: It's always like, a long list of (pause) what you don't know how to do. And I get that, but we you always getting beat down about it you just donâĂŹt wanna do it. [explaining] Sometimes you just need to hear what you doing well at, then get the other stuff. Like, let me write you something I'm gonna just kill, and tell me how to use that, ya know what I mean? [re-imagining]
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> Brandy: I'm not a good writer, and (pause) it's like every teacher already know that just seeing me. [positioning self] I don't like feeling that way, so sometimes I just don't write. Or, I don't write good because I know they ain't gonna like it anyway. [explaining] Help me feel like I can do it. Don't no one like to feel like they can't do

> something. So they can help if they make more doable for everyone. [re-imagining]
> *
> Jeff: I remember when I was in elementary school, I wrote a lot of stories and my teacher would always tell me what I good job I did. She told me (pause) "You could be an author one day" or something like that. I felt good about that. [storytelling] I don't get that now. Now, it's like, "You gotta learn to write about this if you want to go to college." And I'm like, "why? " and down about it and stuff. [reflecting] It would help me if (pause) I felt like, good about it again. Not like an author or something, just not hating to write or scared they're gonna get down on me about it. [re-imagining]

Each student in the examples above re-imagines teaching in a way that provides not only purpose, but a sense of belonging. These students who do not like to write have positioned themselves away from writing. Beyond needing a sense of purpose for writing, these students seem to need a sense of belonging and empowerment toward school writing. Whereas all student talk was indicative at some point of desiring a purpose for writing in order to place value on it, the additional challenge comes with those students who have been placed and placed themselves in such a way that writing is an intimidating or distasteful activity. Classroom observations supported this notion as the students who reported they do not like to write would often finish writing much more quickly than other students with less writing done or would not start the assignment at all, favoring other activities until teacher prompting. That said, the positive indication from these students' language is that they have ideas on how to improve that station with work, if anyone will hear them out.

Ownership of Writing

A more subtle 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 percent 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.

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 amongst 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 amongst 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 amongst the students, though the classroom experiences with writing have obviously fueled their notions. Positioning is typical human compulsion in groups; here it is acting as a motivator for some and the opposite for others.

Conclusion

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. 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 amongst 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. 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 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. Realizing this, teachers can work toward a more open, explicit teaching model for writing.

Though the findings of this study are intriguing and potentially useful in their own context, they are not generalizable. The case is too unique, and the participants ascribe to earlier assertions from research that human participants are not stage actors performing predictable processes. Additionally, as this study focused only on the 11th grade, we can only say that findings apply to that group of students and not the entire school. More research is needed to understand the complexities of student language use with writing across grade levels at this site. That is not to say that this research is not valuable in the general conversation on writing in schools. There is triangulation of data in both collection and analysis as well as member checking throughout the process. The findings are highly usable for teachers in the school and tailored to their needs. In initial 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. Most significant 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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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1. *Interview Questions as Related to Research Questions*

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 are 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 are 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 are 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 are 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 are positioned by others, in relation to their writing?

Table 2. *Features of Talk with Examples from 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.