The Significance of Reflective Conversations for Young Writers

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Abstract:

Purpose: For writing instruction, reflection has been an essential tool. Typically, educators ask students to reflect in a structured written, individual format. Less explored is the role that small and whole group reflective conversations have in fostering students' understandings about writing. The purpose of this paper is to explore several conversations from a young writers' camp to examine how three high school students engaged in four different kinds of reflective talk during the writing process. **Design/methodology/approach:** This paper draws from a larger qualitative study about how campers constructed and enacted their writer identities in a two-week young writers' camp. Five researchers observed, video/audio recorded, engaged in interviews and collected artifacts with 58 campers for ten consecutive days. Qualitative analysis was used to examine how young writers (Grades 9-12) engaged in reflective talk to develop understandings about writing. **Findings:** Data illustrated that students engaged in four types of reflective talk: prospective, reflective-in-action, introspective and retrospective. The paper provides one example for each kind of reflective conversation and provides analysis related to how those conversations shaped campers' understandings about writing. **Originality/value:** This paper illustrated how adolescent writers used prospective, reflective-in action, introspective and retrospective talk during conversations to tell their stories of learning about writing, a topic less studied in the field. This work offers insight into teaching students how to have such reflective conversations so that they are productive and supportive during writing practices.

Keywords: writing | English language arts | teaching writing | literacy teaching

Article:

On the first day of a young writers' camp at a university in the southeast, camp instructors asked a group of high school campers to collaboratively brainstorm ideas for a published piece due at the end of the week. Three campers, Jackson, Amber and Savannah (ages 15 and 16), turned their chairs towards each other and, in an attempt to brainstorm ideas, explored what it meant to develop characters in a fictive story.

Savannah: Definitely. I have a tendency to, uh, go towards psychology a lot with the characters' situations.

Jackson: I like that.

Amber: I do too. Where you actually get to know them kind of in your head. Mine talk to me. Literally. I talk to […] I just get to know them so well.

Savannah: That's fun. I wish I could do that.

Amber: It's just, like, what they want to say other than what I want them to say.

Jackson: I always base characters on people I know […] It's usually people who I don't like cause I know them so much better than the people I like.

The three campers, who just met, continued this kind of conversation, shifting between discussion about their own style of writing and sharing ideas for what they planned to write during camp. For us, (two English educators) this discussion warranted further exploration because of how the three campers used reflective talk to explore writing in meaningful ways. Specifically, we noticed how Savannah, Amber and Jackson reflected on past writing experiences to contemplate what it meant to develop characters in multiple ways ("Mine talk to me"; "I always base characters on people I know."). We see this reflective discussion as a collective space for students to think critically and strategically about what and how they write in ways that are meaningful to them. Typically, educators ask students to do this kind of reflection in a structured written, individual format, such as a letter or memo between teacher and student (Sommers, 2016). Less explored is the role that small group reflective conversations have in fostering students' understandings about writing (Yancey, 2016). To address that gap, we explore several camp conversations to examine how these three adolescent writers engaged in four different kinds of reflective talk during the writing process. We define *reflective talk* as a social process in which individuals make meaning of their values and beliefs related to knowledge and practice with other people. Those reflective discussions inform daily practices and can lead to the transformation of ideas and actions (Dewey, 1910). Thus, this work offers educators ways to foster such reflective conversations in their own writing classrooms.

Background and theory

For decades, scholars have been defining and researching reflection in connection to learning and practice. Dewey understood reflection as a broad construct that viewed reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1910, p. 6). Such a view includes not only creating connections and relationships within experiences, but also transforming experience and one's environment as a result. Reflective practice to Schön (1984), a well-known contributor to theories of reflection, occurs when individuals become aware of their values and beliefs related to knowledge and practice and use that reflection to inform their everyday actions. Schön discussed two kinds of reflection:

1. *reflection in action* (reflecting on behavior as it happens); and
2. *reflection on action* (reflecting after the event, to review, analyze and evaluate the situation).

In *Composing a Teaching Life*, Vinz (1996), a teacher educator, drew from Dewey and Schön's theories on reflection and highlighted three beneficial ways in which teachers reflected on action during inquiry groups to learn more about their teaching practice:

1. retrospective (talk about past);
2. introspective (talk about looking inward); and
3. prospective (talk about future).

She argued that these three kinds of talk encouraged conversations centered on inquiry and development.

Reflection

These theories have been put into practice in classrooms for decades. Most educators understand the significance of fostering reflective practices for students to promote learning (Yancey, 2016). Reflection expects students to synthesize material and make connections to previous knowledge and experiences (Costa and Kallick, 2000). Students are often asked to self-assess work and goals to make sense of past learning and how it connects to learning in the future. Thus, reflective activities help students make thinking visible, external and available for teaching, learning and assessment purposes (Di Stefano *et al.*, 2014; Yancey, 2016).

Reflection can also be a social event that "puts individual account, perception, inquiry, and judgment into dialogue with those of others" (Yancey, 2016, p. 189). When reflection is social, usually in the form of a discussion, students have the opportunity to make meaning of a concept with other people. Such dialogue opens opportunities for a variety of perspectives in ways that an individual reflection does not. Through this "synthesis of collective wisdom and experience", reflection can be a "process of developing a cumulative, multiselved, multivoiced identity" (Yancey, 1998, p. 200). In middle and high school, reflective conversations tend to be a rare and marginal activity (Yancey, 2016).

Reflection and writing

For writing instruction, reflection has been an essential tool for engagement and development of learning about writing to other contexts (Gallagher, 2011; Kittle, 2008; Silver, 2016; Sommers, 2016; Yancey, 2016). Specifically, teachers of writing have used reflection as a projection and retrospection tool to help writers move through the process of composing (Perl, 1980). Other teachers of writing might use reflection in the form of a portfolio or memo to illustrate the changing shape of a composition (Thelin, 1994) and/or the writer's process (Sommers, 1988). Elbow (1998) encouraged students to write at the end of the day about what worked and what needed improvement. He stated that such conscious reflective writing could be the difference between growing or standing still as a learner. It can be helpful to provide some

structure to reflection in the classroom, such as Ryan's (2014) 4Rs (reporting and responding, relating, reasoning and reconstructing), while other reflection takes place in the form of open-ended writing and/or conferences.

Yancey (1996) argues that educators need to invite students to be reflective both collaboratively and individually. She stated that, "through reflection, we tell our stories of learning […] This story-making involves our taking a given story, and our lived stories, and making them anew" (p. 60). Yancey articulates three reflective moves in learning to write. First, *reflection-in-action* takes place during a composing event and involves the process of reviewing and revising (p. 23). Second, *constructive reflection* takes place between and among composing events and involves the process of developing writing identities (p. 49). Finally, *reflection-in-presentation* is the process of "articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variables of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience" (Yancey, 2016, p. 200). These reflective moves occur during prewriting activities, such as letters or journals, to promote a self-dialogue about past, present and future writing.

While Yancey focuses on written reflection, we argue that reflective *talk* is also important. Scholars illustrate that academic conversations (Zwiers and Crawford, 2011) build a variety of literacy skills, such as academic language, communication skills, critical thinking skills, the ability to hear different perspectives and academic identity. In addition, other scholars argue that dialogic teaching, instruction that provides students the opportunity to engage in learning talk (talking to learn) consistently have seen gains in reading comprehension, literary analysis and argumentative writing (Applebee *et al.*, 2003; Juzwik *et al.*, 2013; Langer, 2001).

Because learning through talk is a productive mode of instruction, educators often ask students to verbally reflect about writing in small and large groups. To do this, students are asked to explain their writing moves, reflect on their evolving processes and share their growing understandings of writing (Johnston, 2004). Small groups are often used to brainstorm ideas, conference through the drafting process and peer revise (i.e. a workshop approach) (Calkins, 1986; Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001). This meta-discursive level of thinking helps students collaboratively reflect on their actions and their thinking (Wells, 1999). Writing groups also tend to help writers by validating composition practices, enhancing writers' self-efficacy and addressing specific writing problems (Gere, 1994; Godbee, 2012; Whitney, 2008). Peer conferencing, peer questions and comments related to specific issues and solutions about drafts, often challenge students to clarify, expand, refine meanings, build on ideas and synthesize multiple perspectives in their work (Bishop, 1993; Juzwik *et al.*, 2013). By working together, students write significantly better essays with a clear sense of audience and with supporting evidence than they do while working alone (Gere and Abbott, 1985; Graham and Perin, 2007; Sweigart, 1991). Such reflective conversation is also seen in informal writing groups, such as those in online spaces, in which writers give and receive constructive comments from other authors (Lam, 2004; Yi, 2008). In addition, reflective talk can open spaces for students to narrate writing identities (what kind of writer am I, what kind of writer do I want to be), which can help students to position themselves in new ways as writers (a non-writer to a poet), an important part of the learning process (Alvermann, 2001; Hull and Zacher, 2010; Sfard and Prusak, 2005).

Teachers can help students learn about writing through talk in small groups by using specific talk patterns related to a dialogic stance, such as the utilization of uptake questions, narration or speculation, teachers and students are more likely to learn through talk in a classroom (Applebee *et al.*, 2003; Juzwik *et al.*, 2013; Langer, 2001). Writing scholars advocate that teachers use specific talk moves that model constructive feedback, provide students with sentence starters (e.g. My favorite part was), teach students how to listen, and create charts to display the important steps of peer editing (e.g. offer specific suggestions for improvement) (Bomer, 2011; Calkins *et al.*, 2005).

With the above research, there is no doubt that talking about writing in small groups helps to engage and support students through the writing process and produce higher quality writing (Graham and Perin, 2007). Teachers, however, recognize that writing groups are not always successful at reflecting together in ways that foster learning about writing. Much of the research described above is focused on how to help students talk in productive ways to give and receive feedback, but less in known about reflective talk that helps students make sense of themselves as writers. Thus, educators would benefit from research about how high school students engage in less structured reflective conversations about writing. Do students benefit from a language of inquiry that helps them engage in reflective discussions as researchers have suggested (Vinz, 1996; Wilson, 2008; Yancey, 2016)? Despite educators attempt to put students in groups to talk about writing, is reflection occurring in ways that fosters students' understanding about writing? To explore that topic, we first describe the young writers' camp and then follow with a discussion about the four ways in which campers engaged in reflective talk that helped them to think critically and strategically about what and how they write.

Methods

This article draws from a larger qualitative study about how campers (Grades 3-12) constructed and enacted their writer identities in a two-week young writers' camp. Five researchers observed, video/audio recorded, engaged in interviews and collected artifacts with 58 campers for ten consecutive days. The central focus of this article is on adolescent writers in Grades 9-12. Specifically, we draw from qualitative analysis (Saldaña, 2015) to examine how the adolescent writers engaged in reflective talk to develop understandings about writing. Accordingly, we answer the following research questions:

> *RQ1.* In what ways did campers (grades 9-12) engage in reflective talk during the writing process?

> *RQ2.* How did that reflective talk foster students' understandings about writing?

The young writers' camp

The young writers' camp was hosted by a local university in the Southeastern USA. The camp was a collaboration between four university faculty, five teachers and five researchers (graduate students at the university). The first week of camp focused on creative writing and the second week focused on informational writing. Campers could attend one or both weeks of the camp that met Monday through Friday mornings. In all, 58 students attended the camp. The high

school room had 17 students (10 female and 7 male). Of those students, nine were White, four were Asian, three were Black and one was Latino. Three students received a scholarship based on financial need.

When students arrived in the morning, they gathered in one auditorium to interact with a local author who talked about his/her writing practices. Following the author talk, students went to the room for Grades 9-12. In the high school section, campers spent most time in the computer lab with two instructors and one researcher. Instructors (both high school English teachers) drew from a writing workshop approach that began with community building and brainstorming activities and then moved fluidly between drafting, revising and editing. Each week, students finalized a piece that they published in a printed book. Each camper received that book and another one was sent to an orphanage in Kenya in partnership with The Melon Project, a non-profit organization that offers basic education to the orphans so as to join the mainstream of other school-going children. The bound books from the camp were used to aid in the studying of the English language and American culture for the students in Kenya. On the first day of each camp, an organizer of The Melon Project shared with students the purpose of the organization so that they understood their audience.

During the second hour of camp, writing coaches worked with assigned pairs of campers. These coaches were teachers specializing in literacy who were attending graduate courses to become reading specialists. Part of the course they were taking (*The Teaching of Writing*) required that coaches put into practice some of the strategies they learned in class with the campers. During their time together, the coaches helped students work through the writing process by brainstorming ideas, facilitating revising techniques and polishing published pieces. For this paper, we highlight transcriptions with one coach who was a secondary ELA teacher. Each day he met with the group for 90 minutes to provide one-on-one support. He took a student-led approach and oftentimes situated himself as a writer and participant of the writing community at camp.

Amy and Mark are former high school English teachers who work at the university in English Education. Amy is the director of the camp who informally observed the students. Mark, a doctoral student at the time, collected all formal data. At the end of each camp day, we met with all camp researchers and instructors to debrief about both instruction and research. Such discussion impacted how we modified both facilitation of the writing process and data collection, as described below.

The campers in this article are Savannah, Jackson and Amber. Savannah and Amber identified as female, Jackson as male, and all three identified as White. We focused on these three students because they were representative of the camp population at that time and agreed to be part of the study. Savannah was a tenth-grader who identified as a writer who "loved creating characters". She struggled, however, to persist in her writing and "finish an entire story". Jackson was an eleventh-grader who described writing as the ability "to make human connection" and make accessible "complicated concepts like what happens after death and religion and that kind of stuff". When asked if he identified as a writer, he said:

Well writing is sort of like a questionable passion I have. Its something that, it's a medium I'm actually good at. Therefore I try to exploit it for all I can.

Amber was an 11th-grader who loved writing and theater. When asked what she wrote, she said, "I'm a singer songwriter and I'm also doing poetry". She described herself as the "grammar police" and frequently referred to Stephen King's *On Writing* when it came to revision ("draft two equals draft one minus ten percent").

Data collection

To understand how this group engaged in reflective talk during the writing process, we collected data from the following sources:

- field notes/observations;
- video and audio-recorded small group interactions;
- informal video and audio-recorded interviews;
- exit slips related to their experiences as writers; and
- artifacts (e.g. writing notebooks, drafts, etc.).

Field notes and observations of the writing groups (30 total hours) occurred during the camp and were comprehensive, documenting all activities observed. Notes were then expanded to focus on specific forms of talk. To enhance these notes, Amy and Mark reviewed and transcribed the audio and video recorded small-group interactions (19 total interactions; 15-45 minutes) and elaborated the field notes using the same protocol described above.

To learn more about the writing experiences (e.g. do they identify as a writer?) of the campers and their reflective interactions, Mark informally interviewed campers during the camp. During the conversations, he asked open-ended questions and probing statements such as, "Describe yourself as a writer" or "What kinds of things did you talk about in small and large groups related to writing and were those discussions helpful (or not) for your writing?" along with follow-up questions. These informal interviews occurred during camp hours that lasted approximately five to eight minutes and were video/audio-recorded. Interviews took place throughout the two weeks of camp depending on when students were available to talk.

Exit slips were handed out to each student at the end of the day. They included questions and probing statements such as, "Draw a picture that describes your experience writing today" or "If you could have written a book, what would it have been and why?" Data from the slips provided insight into the campers' backgrounds and experiences that they brought with them to the group conversations.

Artifacts were also collected that included all writing that campers completed over the two weeks. This included all aspects of the writing process, such as brainstorming (e.g. story map with Popplet), drafts (including peer/coach comments) on Google Drive and the final published draft. Other artifacts included any writing exercises they did with coaches, such as poetry written at the art museum and/or prose written about a character. Campers typically wrote one text (e.g. short story, poetry collection, script) over the two weeks and they wrote in any genre they chose.

Data analysis

Data analysis was inductive and used the constant-comparative method (Corbin *et al.*, 2014) and discourse analysis of interactional patterns during small group conversations (Gee, 2014; Hymes, 1994; Mercer, 2000). Data analysis began by reviewing all field notes and audio/video-recorded interactions (19) with two or more campers and/or coaches. To categorize the data, we started by examining individual idea units or stretches of talk (e.g. words, phrases, etc.) that represented the speaker's focal point (Chafe, 1980; Fairbanks and LaGrone, 2006). By doing this, we focused on both the content and function (e.g. share personal connections or ask questions) of the individual idea units to better understand how they contributed to students understanding of writing. Initially, we coded independently and then met to compare our codes.

During collaborative meetings, we refined analysis by collapsing the original 32 codes (i.e. brainstorming talk, exploratory talk, non-responsive talk, etc.) into the following three interrelated categories:

1. *Writing process talk* (talk moves that appear to help campers think about in the moment dilemmas related to writing, such as generating ideas);
2. *social modes of talk* (talk moves appear to help members jointly construct knowledge about writing, such as actively listening or building on previous comments); and
3. *reflective talk* (talk moves appear to help campers think about past or future moments that relate to current writing projects, such as telling stories about past writing experiences).

Once the talk was organized in those three categories, we coded for the stretches of talk that related to those aspects of students understanding of writing. At this point, we decided to focus on reflective talk because of the gap in research related to this topic. To further examine reflective talk, we drew from codes and categories developed by other scholars (Yancey, 2016; Vinz, 1996) and documented new codes that emerged through data analysis. For example, we noted instances when participants engaged in reflective talk, such as describing past writing experiences. Within that broad category, we created four sub-categories (Table I) that help to define how campers used reflective talk to understand writing. We then examined artifacts (e.g. written reflections; final publications) and interviews to confirm or disconfirm analysis. Most data discussed in this study, however, focus on transcripts of talk, as that is our main focus.

Table I. Four kinds of reflective talk about writing

Prospective talk	Reflective talk focused on both specific and broad future writing events ("What if I wrote about…")
Reflective-in-action talk	Reflective talk about a specific piece of writing ("How can I change the opening of my essay?")
Introspective talk	Reflective talk focused on the observation or examination of oneself as a writer ("I'm the kind of writer who…")
Retrospective talk	Reflective talk about past writing events (In the past, I typically write characters who…")

Source: Yancey (2016); Vinz (1996)

Findings

From our analysis, we found that students engaged in four types of reflective talk: prospective, reflective-in-action, introspective and retrospective (Table I).

Below, we give one example for each kind of reflective conversation and provide analysis related to how those conversations shaped campers' understandings about writing.

Prospective talk

Prospective talk focused on both specific and broad future writing events. The following excerpt took place on Day 1 of camp after a speaker (Tara) talked with the campers about sending their published books to students in Kenya as part of The Melon Project. In this talk, Tara showed a video of students in the orphanage and talked about what a day in the life of a Kenyan student at this school was like. The instructors in the high school room asked campers to gather in small groups of their choice and brainstorm possible ideas about what they might like to write for their creative piece. This transcript involves Savannah, Jackson and Amber who all engaged in prospective talk in regards to brainstorming a topic with the audience in mind.

Savannah: Personally I was a little overwhelmed, so instead of just listing things I started listing the general direction I might want to go and where I might not want to go with it considering the audience.

Jackson: That's reasonable enough.

Amber: That makes sense.

Savannah: Like I was thinking maybe a kind of coming of age story or characters around their age and something that's not too contemplative and dwelling on the purpose of mankind because I doubt […]

Amber: […] that's what they're thinking about.

Savannah: Yeah.

Amber: I was agreeing. Like nothing too heavy.

Savannah: I was thinking something more light and adventurous.

Amber: […] but one of the things I did put down a little like heavier was like a teen of like majority race like here which is white, Christian, whatnot, um, put somewhere that he or she is the minority…

Savannah: That's interesting.

Amber: But that was just the heavy idea I had.

Jackson: [Interrupting] I have to say, I didn't know we were going to be writing for children in Africa. This kind of changes the whole game.

Amber: Yeah, right.

Savannah: Definitely.

Above, the three campers engaged in prospective talk about future writing projects. Specifically, they reflected about possible writing ideas for their newly discovered audience (children in Africa). When thinking about a future writing project, Savannah described a brainstorming strategy of listing possible directions. She used phrases like "where I might want to go". In response, Jackson and Amber validated her thoughts by saying that her ideas made sense to them. She continued to reflect about the future writing project by using the phrase "I was thinking" to share a potential idea. Amber elaborated on Savannah's ideas by saying she also thought the ideas should not be too heavy. She then built on that idea by sharing a future writing idea that dealt with very serious topics, such as issues of race and religion ("heavy idea"). By hedging back and forth between light and heavy topics, the campers attempted to make sense of what it meant to write for this particular audience, thus reflecting about what their future writing might look like. Jackson summed up the conversation by saying that this audience was a game changer for him and the other two affirmed his statement. It is clear, then, that they are still unsure of what it meant to write for a group of kids in Kenya and that their understanding of the assigned audience seems to rest on unwarranted assumptions. However, together they engaged in prospective talk to figure out how they might approach this challenge and the possible consequences to those ideas.

Reflective-in-action talk

Reflective-In-Action Talk includes talk about a specific piece of writing. In a conversation later in the week, Jackson and Amber engaged in a revision practice suggested by the writing coach – to revise the first sentence of their story. After Jackson said that he disliked his first sentence because he thought it was cliché, he shared some of his new ideas. By doing that, he engaged the group in reflective-in-action talk about what he could write for his story in the future.

Jackson: [reads] "If you thought you were uncool, you haven't seen Duncan have you?"

Writing Coach: Very nice.

Amber: […] You said it was so cliché. Like say, you could start this like, you could always say like this could be the beginning of any bad sitcom, any bad movie…

Jackson: Well the setting is also everytown USA.

Amber: Exactly so just say, just say prepare yourself for the cliché for the bad movie, or the bad sitcom beginning, but meet Duncan.

Jackson: Yeah, I like that too. I do like that. Just put in parentheses, prepare for the most cliché opening ever.

Amber: I mean not even in parentheses, just make that like your beginning of your first sentence. Just say, prepare for, prepare for what you, like the most cliché opening ever, something you find in a bad sitcom comma, meet Duncan.

Through reflective-in-action talk, Jackson and Amber generated possible ideas for his first line. Amber used phrases, such as, "you could start" or "you could always say" followed by a specific suggestion to help Jackson achieve the purpose for his text and character without being cliché. Ultimately, this conversation shaped how Jackson wrote his final story. Jackson's first line was published as: "Meet Duncan Walsh". Although he did not end up using the term cliché, he did use a second person point of view, which was suggested in their conversation. Similarly, Amber's first line read as follows: "This is it, you think as you walk up the steps and stop at the large doors". Here, Amber used second person, just as Jackson did in his story. Thus, they made writerly decisions consistent with the suggestions made in the excerpt, suggesting that their reflective-in-action talk shaped the decision they made for the opening of their story.

Introspective talk

Introspective talk focused on the observation or examination of oneself as a writer. In a conversation during the first few days of camp, Savannah, Amber and Jackson engaged in an introspective discussion about writing. Specifically, the three debated about the appropriate way to develop characters in an effort to generate ideas for their writing.

Savannah: Some people say that characters are just a version of you.

Amber: Yeah.

Savannah: I try to avoid that. And to explore like new personalities.

Jackson: I think that's the worst thing to do because then you can elaborate too much.

Savannah: Well, it makes you so closed-minded. I mean the story is so closed-minded and narrow.

Amber: It depends, I think, I think that every part of, you can only write about what you, pretty much what you know, I mean you can literally write about anything like you can write about aliens on, in another galaxy.

Jackson: But then that's the thing, you can make up things.

Amber: Exactly. But it's still a part of you, because it's still writing what you know that you know that you're interested in.

In this discussion, the three campers made connections between what other people have said about writing (e.g. "Some people say") to their own ideas about writing characters ("you can make up things"). They engaged in theoretical discussions about if writers are able to "make things up" or if everything an author writes is still a part of him/herself. Through an exchange of

opinions about character development ("I think" phrasing), they reflected on what it meant for them (individually) to develop characters. Although not directly related to their current writing, such introspective conversations had the potential to open opportunities for them to consider new ways of writing in their current project. This discussion also enabled them to define what it meant to be a writer for them, which is an important opportunity for developing writers.

Retrospective talk

Retrospective talk is talk about past writing events. In a discussion with their writing coach, Jackson and Amber engaged in retrospective talk about their revision process. To elaborate, they discussed past writing practices. Specifically, the three group members talked about how they sometimes got stuck in the description of the setting or a character and how that practice can hold up a story.

Writing Coach: Sometimes I do that when I have great story that gets stuck in a beautiful descriptive moment. You know […] how do I get past this? I have to quit talking about this one thing and get on with the story.

Jackson: I've been trying to write like a little, like a short novel. I was doing real good I got like 12 pages in like 12 days and I I've been stuck on the same brick wall for like a month on how to do this one scene.

Writing Coach: So how do you think you can get over that hump? What are some ideas? Amber when you get stuck like that what do you do?

Amber: Well, my older sister, like I told you before, she got me into writing when I was really little […] so like I always talk to her, and like I'll explain what's going on and like everything […] Also I'll go out for a walk and I'll eavesdrop on people. I'll go people watching which is like I'll just imagine what somebody is doing when they are walking by and an argument people are having and […]

Writing Coach: I hear you saying you do collaborative and you also do sort of informal brainstorming in a way right?

Amber: That or I just keep on writing. Or when I write novels or whatever I won't write in order. I'll write pieces at a time and then I'll put them together.

Here, the three group members engaged in retrospective talk by telling stories about past writing experiences ("I've been trying to write like that […]"). Through Jackson's story, the writing coach and Amber made connections to the writerly issue of "getting stuck" in a draft. Both Amber and the writing coach shared their own past experiences ("I have to quit talking"; I'll eavesdrop on people"). By engaging in retrospective talk, Amber and the writing coach brainstormed possible solutions for Jackson to move past the brick wall in a novella he has been writing at home. This retrospective talk is significant because it helped the two campers make sense of specific writing skills that they can transfer outside of this specific context.

Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, Yancey (2016) points out that reflection is a medium for telling "stories of learning". Here, Yancey stresses the importance of inviting students to be reflective so that they have the opportunity to create personal storylines for what it means to be a writer. While Yancey illustrated how college students wrote reflections about writing in three ways (reflection-in-action, constructive reflection and reflection-in-presentation), we add to that research by highlighting how high school students engaged in reflective talk through four different, but related ways (prospective, reflective-in action, introspective and retrospective talk) during conversations to tell their stories of learning about writing. From these conversations, students learned about what it means to be a writer (how to develop characters), how to improve current writing projects (revising first sentences) and possible writing strategies to use for future work (observing individuals to work through writer's block). These conversations are important because they provide a roadmap for how to be a writer and provide opportunities to close the gap between the writer they are and the writer they want to be (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). In a classroom, we recognize the importance of teaching students *how* to have such reflective conversations so that they are productive and supportive (Juzwik *et al.*, 2013; Zwiers and Crawford, 2011). Perhaps with more reflective conversations in the classroom that open opportunities for students to see themselves as writers, students might be more willing to engage in the complex and difficult task of composing texts. With that said, this research raises more questions about how reflective conversations foster the identity work related to writing with middle and high school students. To explore this question and more, we discuss implications for practice and research based on the findings of this study.

Implications for practice

Creating a writing community in the classroom is an important part of reflective talk about writing. On one hand, reflective talk will help build that community over time because both students and teachers are creating a storyline for what writing means to them (e.g. a writer is someone who writes everyday; a writer is someone who articulates human connections). To continue to grow that community, teachers need to provide time for students to write what they choose, talk to published authors, publish their work, and talk reflectively about writing, all of which are possible in a variety of classrooms. Below, we give more detail on how teachers could foster reflective talk within their classroom.

Brainstorming with prospective talk

Students often get time in a classroom to think about future writing projects through brainstorming activities, such as outlining, mapping and/or free-writing. Sometimes, students are given the opportunity to discuss those ideas with peers (Calkins *et al.*, 2005; Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001). As with any kind of discussion, teachers need to help students learn how to have constructive discussions that utilize prospective talk. For Savannah, Jackson and Abby, prospective talk occurred after they understood their audience and had time to brainstorm ideas. With those prepared, but low stakes ideas, they discussed possible ideas with each other. When one shared, the others listened, validated and made connections. With that information, a teacher

who is interested in using reflective prospective conversations to aid in the brainstorming process could offer the following questions:

> *Q1*. What is one idea that you have based on something that happened in your life this past month?

> *Q2*. Has there been a recent conversation or song lyric that made you think about yourself or life in general?

> *Q3*. Explain. Draw a map of a neighborhood you have lived in. Are there places on that map that tell stories about your life and/or our society?

In response, students could think about how they might offer suggestions, make connections to other ideas and validate ideas that have potential. To help students understand this kind of prospective talk, teachers could model the conversation for them and continue to practice it as part of the creative process of any composing event in the classroom.

Reflective-in-action

Many classrooms already foster reflective-in-action talk by asking students to peer review each other's work. Much research urges teachers to model productive conversations for students and argues for the value of such discussions in improving writing (Gere, 1994; Godbee, 2012; Whitney, 2008). The data from this study confirms those arguments and also offers a unique insight that teachers could add to what they are already doing. Typically, peer revision asks students to review a peer's paper and do the following: talk about the strengths, make suggestions for improvement and answer any questions initiated by the writer. In our data, we see that the writing coach asked Savannah and Jackson to engage in a specific revision activity focused on the first sentence of the story. As a result, both writers engaged in the same revision activity. From there, they engaged in reflective-in-action talk about that specific revision activity that they endured together. Through that talk, Savannah and the coach were able to help Jackson improve a part of his story that he was not initially concerned with and vice versa. This kind of exercise might help with writers who are less likely to engage in the revision process. As seen with Savannah and Jackson, they both revised their final pieces based on the discussion. To foster more specific conversation about those revisions, students could think about the sentence starters: (*Instead of____, you could try ____*; *I think you should add/take away ____*; and/or *With the audience in mind, you could develop this more/less____*).Teachers might also draw from Bill Roorbach's (1998) book *Writing Life Stories* in which he offers several revision techniques to use with students. For example, he suggests asking students to find an object or place in their writing and use it a few times to take on metaphorical significance. This could be paired with his essay "Into the Woods" as a mentor text.

Theorizing through introspective discussions

In classrooms, writing time is typically spent reading model texts and engaging in the writing process. Rarely do students have the opportunity to engage in introspective discussions about what it means to be a writer, despite the importance (Johnston, 2004). From the data, we saw

Savannah, Jackson and Abby engaged in theoretical conversations that opened opportunities to consider new ways of writing and helped them define what a writer meant to them. Such a discussion inevitably shaped how they situated themselves as writers in future events. We believe introspective talk has a significant place in the classroom, especially when it comes to fostering opportunities for students to the identity work that writers need to do. To foster such conversations, educators could ask open-ended questions such as:

Q3. How would you describe a writer?

Q4. Do you identify as a writer? Why or why not?

Q5. What are your strengths and challenges as a writer?

In response, students could exchange opinions and make connections in ways that offer new insights and validate more common ways of thinking about writing. These conversations could occur after students have completed a piece of writing as a way to evaluate how they have grown as a writer since they began.

Overall, these questions would be explored best throughout a semester or year. For example, one discussion could be focused on the first question: How do you define a writer? Teachers could ask students to fill in the following sentence: A writer is […] To keep answers concise and manageable, ask students to keep the response to one sentence. Students also benefit from creating a visual that goes with their statement. From there, students could share those statements in small and large groups. Next, the class could talk about how the class collectively defines a writer and what that might mean for their personal and collective goals for writing during the year.

Solving writing dilemmas through retrospective talk

Typically when teachers ask students to reflect on past writing, it is done through a written reflection in response to a recent completed piece in class (Fisher *et al.*, 2010). From this data, we see the value in fostering retrospective talk that not only deals with recent compositions, but also any past writing event that occurred in or out of school. As seen with Savannah and Jackson, they told stories of past writing events as a way to develop possible solutions to a present writing dilemma. Through this retrospective talk about their drafting and revision process, they were able to help each other move forward in their present writings. For teachers interested in helping students engage in such retrospective talk, they could ask students to share a current writing dilemma with others. To prepare students for that discussion, they could keep a collection of end-of-the day reflections, as Elbow (1998) encouraged, in their notebook about what worked and what needed improvement about any kind of writing they did that day (i.e. emails to teachers/bosses, essays for class and/or texts to friends/classmates/coworkers). Students would then share how they dealt with that dilemma in the past, using narratives starters as a guide (*Sometimes I write that like when; When that happens to me, I; In my writing now, I'm stuck….*). Not all writers, however, will have those past writing experiences to draw from. If that is the case, then teachers could broaden the discussion by asking students to tell stories about a time

when they wrote something. How did they engage in the writing process? What was their experience? Such discussion might open new ways of writing to other involved in the discussion.

Implications for research

Reflective conversations like the one's illustrated in this paper, oftentimes occur as an afterthought in classrooms. Perhaps with more scholarship in this area, teachers would know more about the significance of such conversations and how they might foster them in their classroom. In this study, we worked with students in a young writers' camp. While that gave us some insight into this topic, more research needs to be done in secondary classrooms. First, educators would benefit from an overall understanding of the frequency in which reflective conversations occur related to writing (*RQ3*. How often do reflective conversations related to writing occur in middle and high school English classrooms). Such information could give educators a realistic picture of the time students spend doing this kind of reflection. If students do not have the opportunity to engage in reflective conversations consistently, then one place to start for educators is by providing more space for those conversations.

Second, more research needs to be done to examine how reflective conversations occur in middle and secondary ELA classrooms with a variety of students, including those who do not identify as writers (*RQ4*. In what ways do ELA students engage in reflective conversations about writing when given the opportunity?). Such information could inform teachers about how to improve those reflective discussions with students by modeling, practicing, reviewing past discussion and creating goals for future conversations.

Third, educators would benefit from a longitudinal study focused on how reflective conversations over time in a classroom shaped students' understanding of writing and students' writing identities (*RQ5*. In what ways do reflective conversations over time in a classroom shape students' understanding of writing and students' writing identities?). Perhaps then, we would have more insight into the ways in which reflective conversations shape students' writing identities over time in classrooms. With that information, educators would know more about the impact reflective conversations have on learning to write.

Overall, this research contributes to scholarship that argues for reflective talk as a powerful classroom tool that allows students to construct writing knowledge and identities with their peers, a critical practice for student motivation and success.

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