

## A writing assignment extended: An occasion for young people to construct writer identities

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### **Abstract:**

Becoming a successful writer is an important skill for the young because it predicts academic success, supports and extends learning, provides opportunities to participate in civic and community life and fulfils expectations of the workforce to create clear and concise documents. Many secondary students in the US, however, struggle to gain basic academic literacy skills that meet the demands of higher education and the workforce. This qualitative study explored how a specific writing genre, occasional papers, opened opportunities for students to situate themselves and each other as authors in an 11th-grade English classroom. The paper argues that high school students need more opportunities to construct their identities as lifelong authors, who write to make sense of themselves and the world around them and write to promote dialogue with an audience if they are to succeed at high-stakes exams and writing as a member of the workforce. Suggestions for how to integrate such writing within a standardized curriculum are discussed.

**Keywords:** writing occasional papers | finding authorial identity

### **Article:**

As an observer in Gina's English/Language Arts classroom at a high school in the US I witnessed 11th-grade students writing to explore and critique events in their lives. Intrigued by their motivation to write and share ideas, I (a researcher and teacher educator) examined how students constructed their writer identities for five months. I noticed that students walked into the classroom and eagerly asked, 'Are we doing OPs (occasional papers) today?' Gina, the teacher, nodded her head yes and checked attendance while students moved their chairs around in a circle. Students sat in the circle, some still carrying their backpacks, and waited for Gina to ask, 'Who is going to read their occasional paper today?' In one instance, Damen raised his hand and held up a typed paper, with a blue border around the edges and his title in block letters. Once everyone was ready, Damen read:

I've had to go through a lot of pain and suffering, dealing with my family, especially my mother. I'm not saying that she was a bad parent, I'm just saying that sometimes it was difficult to live. When I was young, my mother was never really there for me. From when I was about the age of two, my mother was addicted to something ... She wasn't addicted to her man. It wasn't her job. It wasn't Jerry Springer, or clubbin. No, it was one of the most harmful drugs in the world today. It was crack cocaine...

Students listened quietly as Damen read the rest of his paper. His last few lines said: 'With everything she did, my mother is still a good mother ... With everything that happened in my life, that made me a stronger and better person.' Students clapped and looked in Gina's direction. She sat in the circle with students and at first glance her youth made it hard to tell that she was the teacher. As she played with her blonde hair, she asked students if they were more forgiving of a mother than a father. Several students nodded yes. Karla responded with, 'She carried you for nine months. It don't take but a good two seconds for a father to do his part, but a mother ... they pretty much give you your first breath of air and life.'

Keisha disagreed, 'I don't think about it that way. ... At least she tried to come around. Him, I don't know his last name. You ain't helped me a day in your life. My momma come around to see me ... You are just like a nobody to me...' A few more students shared their opinions and experiences until the conversation ended. Another student volunteered to read aloud her occasional paper about a customer throwing pancakes in her face after a frustrating night at work. Another discussion followed about the battles of customer-service. After all volunteers subsided, class resumed the writing workshop on a separate assignment about persuasive letters. It was this episode and others like it that made me curious about how Gina fostered opportunities for this group of culturally and linguistically diverse students to position themselves as writers in her classroom on OP Fridays.

Gina learned about occasional papers from Bill Martin (2002), who wrote in 'A Writing Assignment: A Way of Life' that OPs are 'intended to reflect responses to life as it happens; the idea is to take advantage of an occasion for thought, to explore the occurrences of a moment that would usually be dismissed as unimportant' (52). Like Martin, Gina's stipulations for the essays were that one paper had to be written for each six weeks and that they must be read aloud to a group of their peers. Papers were not critiqued for style or syntax and were graded in terms of completion. Gina also wrote occasional papers and shared them with the class.

Martin (2002) was convinced that OPs were 'one of the most powerful and successful ways of improving student writing' (52). After observing students write and read them aloud in Gina's classroom, I was also persuaded that struggling and marginalized students were more likely to position themselves as writers when completing an OP. Although students in this classroom were eager to learn and hoped to be successful in college, outside obligations such as caring for family members or working at several jobs caused them to disengage from school. However infrequent their attendance, most of the time they managed to complete their occasional papers and expressed their enthusiasm about the chance to read them aloud. Below, I describe the literature about the young and composition in secondary schools to provide background to the current need for a shift in writing instruction for young people. That discussion is followed by a description of

learning as an identity process to describe how learning to write is about constructing a writer identity.

Becoming a successful writer is important because it predicts academic success, supports and extends learning, provides opportunities to participate in civic and community life, and fulfils expectations for the workforce to create clear and concise documents (Graham and Perin 2007; Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken 2009). Furthermore, businesses and government have increased the demand for writing that meets the needs of a global information economy. Such a demand has expanded the traditional concept of literacy to include writing practices such as digital technologies (Brandt 2004). Many young people, however, struggle to gain basic academic literacy skills that meet the demands of higher education and work (Graham and Perin 2007; Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken 2009). For example, 72% of 4th-grade students, 69% of 8th-grade students, and 77% of 12th-grade students did not meet National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing proficiency goals in 2002 in the US (Persky, Daane, and Jin 2003). Thirty-five per cent of high school graduates in college and 38% of high school graduates in the workforce feel their writing does not meet expectations for quality and success (Achieve, Inc. 2005). As a result, businesses in the US spend \$3.1 billion annually to improve workers' writing (National Commission on Writing. 2003).

Because of these issues, educators in the US are concerned that young people are not writing enough in school (Graham and Perin 2007). Studies show that US students typically write short analytic responses, summaries, reports, journals, worksheets and short answers in their high school courses (Applebee and Langer 2006; Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken 2009). Some students reported that they had never written a paper three pages or longer in their high school classroom (Applebee and Langer 2006). In order to succeed in college and the workforce, students need to write lengthy essays that involve analysis and interpretation more frequently (Applebee and Langer 2006; Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken 2009).

In order to improve instruction and learning in composition, research has highlighted several instructional strategies that scaffold the writing process and improve literacy learning for youth, such as writing workshop and a process writing approach (Graham and Perin 2007; Applebee and Langer 2006; National Writing Project 2010; Smagorinsky 2006). Despite this research, efforts to improve writing in schools are focused on high-stakes exams (Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken 2009). Au (2007) found that when high-stakes writing exams are the main focus of student success, teachers turned to a lecture-based and teacher-centred pedagogy that often left students frustrated or unmotivated. Furthermore, Hillocks (2002) stated that high-stakes writing prompts set low standards for composition and eliminate the 'need for critical thought' by relying on formulaic writing. In fact, research shows that young people are writing outside school in the form of blogs, tweets, emails, websites, and Facebook updates, but they are not excelling when it comes to academic writing (Daniels, Zemelman, and Steinke 2007). Both the National Writing Project (NWP) and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference have implemented initiatives for the young that focus on efforts to provide opportunities for students to become accomplished writers within the twenty-first century. There continues to be a need, however, to provide successful case studies for teachers of writing.

This paper views identities as multiple, fluid and dynamic ‘self understandings’ that are constructed discursively and embedded within social, cultural and historical contexts (Holland et al. 1998; Mishler 1999; Sarup 1996). Learning can be viewed as an identity process, in which students learn to take on particular behaviours and discourses associated with what they are learning (Wenger 1998). Positioning theory is a helpful framework to use when examining identity constructions because it suggests that people situate themselves within storylines associated with former experiences and ideologies. Specifically, Davies and van Langenhove (1991) argue that people position themselves (reflectively) or position others (interactively) discursively in order to negotiate meaning about themselves. For example, students enter the classroom with a narrative about how to position themselves as a writer, which might include writing in a journal, reading about favourite authors, and asking for advice on their drafts. Gina understood that in order to teach writing she needed to provide opportunities for students to take on such behaviours and discourses consistently. This is complicated, however, because often students’ past experiences shape how they situate themselves as writers. For example, if a student struggled to write a definition essay in one class, he or she might conclude that they were not a writer and resist situating themselves in that manner. Gina, however, understood that identities are constantly shifting, and that if presented with the right opportunity, students might be more likely to position themselves as writers. In order to do that, she needed to present them with a writer identity that was meaningful and purposeful in their worlds.

On OP Friday I observed students positioning themselves as writers by sharing their writing, and I observed students positioning each other as writers by engaging in conversations about the content of the shared essays. These positionings illustrate how students construct and enact their writer identities in a classroom.

There is research that has focused on how students construct their identities as writers (Finders 1997; McKinney and Giorgis 2009). Clark and Ivanic (1997) found that a writing identity is related to the cultural and linguistic capital students bring with them to the classroom. Rogers (1997) described the identity work of a student in a contemporary urban classroom with students from diverse backgrounds. The student’s writing assignment about his worst memory – of being shot at a party – expressed how an incident in his life shaped who he was and who he wanted to be in the future, while situating himself as a writer in a secondary classroom. Likewise, Jones (2003/2004) found that Cadence, a first-grader, was more likely to situate herself as a writer if her home and community identities were used as building blocks for her success. Much scholarship from the NWP provides classroom examples related to writing and identity, although identity theory is not used explicitly. Bellino (2005) situated his students as authors after having them write and publish in a school newspaper. He found that this work guided a group of English Language Learners (ELL) towards careers in writing, fostered positive feelings about their immigration experiences and improved their writing. Likewise, Lee and Matsui (2009) used digital storytelling with ELL students to help situate students as authors and celebrate their cultural and linguistic experiences.

I observed Gina’s students struggling with literary analysis papers or persuasive letters because they did not believe they were capable of writing in those formats. As a result, students rarely positioned themselves as writers when completing those assignments. On OP Fridays, however,

authorship took on a new meaning for students. It is my hope that this piece will provide a useful case study about how to facilitate writer identities in current secondary classrooms.

This paper draws from a larger research study about how students constructed literacy identities in a high school English classroom. Gina and I met during a National Writing Project Teacher Research Group in 2006. After a few conversations, we discovered our common interests and goals in providing opportunities for students to make sense out of themselves and the world around them through reading and writing, especially under the strict mandates of high-stakes testing. Gina was in her third year of teaching and was alternatively certified in English. Alternative certification for Gina meant that she had previously graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English. After discovering that she would rather teach than be a technical writer, she entered into a non-traditional certification programme at a local university that allowed her to work as an English teacher while she completed course requirements related to English Education at night and during the summer. One of her main goals this year was to provide more literacy opportunities for her students, such as a literary anthology, field trips to university English composition courses, and occasional papers. From interviews, Gina stated that her major obstacle with writing was engagement and motivation. Gina's sixth period was ideal because they were not only excited about the research topic, but also vocal about their opinions and willing to share their writing.

This 50-minute English III Honours course had 28 students from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (16 Latino/as and 12 African American). Several students were college-bound and were involved in the AVID (Advanced Via Individual Determination), a programme designed to help underachieving middle and high school students prepare for and succeed in colleges and universities. Students were aware that their Southwestern urban school was rated academically unacceptable, based on state assessment results on maths, science, social studies and language arts, and school completion rates for grades 9–12 since 2005. In 2006, 73% of students passed the English/Language Arts portion of the state assessment in 11th grade. At the time of data collection, 81% of the students were labelled economically disadvantaged and 31% of students spoke English as their second language.

During this semester, I collected student writing, field note observations and conducted teacher/student interviews to better understand how OPs shaped the writing identities of these students. After sharing initial analysis with Gina, we agreed that during OP Fridays students typically positioned themselves as writers who wrote to make sense of themselves and the world around them and to promote dialogue with a real audience. Although the themes were apparent across all data, I chose excerpts from two papers and three teacher interviews as representative examples. This allowed me to provide rich description and analysis within the two papers to illustrate how the authors, Damen and Leticia, constructed their writer identities during OP Fridays (Merriam 1997; Strauss and Corbin 1998). More information about the authors' cultural, linguistic and writing backgrounds is embedded within the episodes.

Anne Lamott (1994) has written, 'writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again' (237). When I imagine Anne Lamott writing, I see

her writing through a process; writing about the world; writing to heal; even writing to transform. Occasional papers challenged students to write in those ways and as a result situated them as authors who wrote to make sense of the world around them.

Damen was an African American working-class student who was often pulled out of school to take care of his brothers and sisters. Damen did not struggle with his writing skills, but because of his home environment a writer identity was not always a priority for him. In his OP, he situated himself as a writer who wrote to make sense of a complicated experience with a mother as a drug addict. Freire and Macedo (1987) explained that literacy should be a way for students not only to read words on a page but to read words in relation to the world around them (33). In Damen's writing he revealed that this experience forced him to be self-reliant and independent as a child and that daily life, including school, was a difficult negotiation. Rather than writing to 'practise' writing, Damen wrote for a purpose that was self-motivating. As a result, he took ownership of his work.

The topic of addiction and fatherhood is difficult, however, and not always an accepted topic in classrooms. As English teachers we are not counsellors and should not expect to try to solve the personal issues that students share through their writing. We cannot deny, however, that students' personal lives are linked to how they engage in writing. Such opportunities can situate students as writers who write about occasions, proliferate ideas, and unpack complicated experiences through dialogue. For Damen, taking on the position of a writer who wrote to make sense of his world meant that his outside school experiences were legitimized as relevant and meaningful content (Martin 2002, 54) rather than cast aside as inappropriate.

The conversation following Damen's reading illustrated how students positioned each other as writers who used these papers to make sense of themselves and the world around them. For example, Karla and Keisha critically examined multiple perspectives of fatherhood in the opening conversation, in an attempt to explore reasons why they were more likely to forgive their mothers than their fathers. As a teacher in an inner-city school, Christensen (1994) argued that young people often viewed their lives or histories as inevitable and were not typically encouraged or taught how to change it for the better in school (17). By studying problems in their lives, her students were 'able to diagnose this society, uncover inequality, and explore the reasons why it exists' (Christensen 1994, 17). These discussions engaged students not only in what Martin described as reflection on 'common' concerns, but also what proponents of critical literacy would argue as uncovering commonplace assumptions and examining sociopolitical issues related to US society and class. The readings and conversations around occasional papers not only situated students as writers, but as students of the world, who unpacked complicated issues through collaborative dialogue, a valued skill at work and college.

Other classmates chose less personal topics, but still used the essay to uncover and resolve personal and societal dilemmas. For example, Leticia struggled to make sense of society's link between material items and success in an OP she shared with the class a few weeks later. Leticia, a bilingual student, whose family was from Mexico, frequently participated in class and recently struggled to compose the literary analysis expected in Advanced Placement exams. For Leticia, OP Fridays were an opportunity for her to write philosophically. Her essay began with the following commentary about celebrities on television:

How do we become people that value inconsequential and trivial things? I'm watching shows with little 15 year-olds demanding cars and money and jewelry that cost a small fortune. ... We rank people on their look and don't even think twice about it. Although it does feel nice struttin' in this stuff and it does proclaim success, does it also place value on us? Does it reveal us and our scale of human quality?

Leticia sought to reveal the way American society defined success and human quality through images on television, especially as it related to youth and raised possibilities about alternative ways of viewing human value on a less personalized occasion (i.e., watching television). Although it would not be unusual for a school prompt to ask students to write an essay defining what success meant to them, this essay was different, because Leticia was able to discuss what she naturally pondered rather than what educators deemed important.

Toni Morrison (2009) once wrote, 'I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people – people who can't be faked, people who don't need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria' (25). Why don't we ask students to write for real audiences? Why don't we promote discussion about their writings in school? Most literacy standards state that students should learn to 'communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes' (International Reading Association & National Council for Teachers of English (IRA/NCTE) 1996, 24). For Damen, writing for a genuine audience of his peers shaped how he wrote his essay. Because he knew we were going to read it aloud he used informal language, like *clubbin'* and references to pop culture to relate to his audience and build suspense about his difficult childhood. He used rhythm in the last few sentences to hook the reader and appropriately used personal pronouns to tell his story. Damen clearly positioned himself as writer of a real audience by expressing language powerfully in order to engage his classmates in dialogue about a difficult issue. As a result, students respectfully listened and responded to his essay. Although some students disagreed with each other, they continued to share stories and make connections in an attempt to make sense of a bigger issue – fatherhood. By doing this, students positioned each other as writers by sincerely engaging in the topic of Damen's essay.

Similarly, in a discussion after Leticia's essay about materialism and success, Quinn defined success: 'Success is when you are at where you're at and you're happy. Not just satisfied, but happy ... You are proud of what you did and you made it.... When you wake up in the morning, you smile because you have one more day.' Other students pondered what success meant to them and attempted to put those definitions into words. By engaging in a dialogue based on a classmate's essay, students positioned each other as authors who were members of a writing community. Because this writing activity was treated as a social rather than an individual event, students viewed it as a way for them to gain both academic and social status. For example, Leticia gained academic status by writing and sharing an OP and she gained social status by engaging her classmates in discussion about success. Likewise, Damen positioned himself as a writer and as a survivor. In an interview, Gina commented that students 'love to share now. It's not teacher created. They get to speak their mind.' Because Leticia and Damen were able to capitalize on both their social and academic worlds by reading their essays aloud, they were more likely to situate themselves as writers.

Although several students responded positively to sharing their occasional papers with others and engaging in conversations, not everyone participated. Gina said that her quiet students ‘have brilliant things to say but they will not speak.’ She realized that sharing for some students caused anxiety and she wanted to try written discussions to involve them. Eventually, she wanted to step out of the conversation and give total ownership to the students. She realized, however, that this took time and practice, which is why every Friday was dedicated to this particular event. Over time, students became more comfortable with these events, and the group readings became an integral part of how they constructed their writing identities.

Gloria Anzaldua (2002) has written that by writing:

I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger ... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispell the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy. (55)

As teachers of writing, we should ask ourselves if this is the kind of writer identity we are fostering with our students. Often, students suffer through the kind of writing school expects them to do. It is a struggle to motivate and prepare students for success on standardized writing exams while at the same time tapping into students’ out-of-school writing experiences and personal interests. The writers we want our students to develop into become an ideal that institutional demands have made difficult. This paper suggests that students would benefit from more opportunities to construct writer identities by writing to make sense of the world and writing to promote discussion with an audience. Like the initiatives of NWP, this paper argues that writing should be taught, not assigned, and that an informed group of teachers is needed to teach the best writing strategies for their students.

This paper contributes to work about learning to write as an identity process in several ways. First, it suggests that if students are going to construct and enact writer identities in a classroom, then teachers and students must negotiate what an acceptable writer identity means for them. Often the recognized writer identity is the one who successfully writes a five-paragraph definition essay or literary analysis within a 60-minute time frame (Applebee and Langer 2006; Smagorinsky 2006). Students resist this kind of writer identity because it is not meaningful or relevant to them. Standardized tests, however, are not going away and we must find ways to help students succeed while utilizing innovative writing instruction for students so that they also become lifelong writers. Daniels, Zemelman and Steinke (2007) argue that teachers ‘shouldn’t abandon good, thoughtful writing assignments in response to pressure about standardized tests. On the contrary, they’ll not only help prepare students for writing on the tests but also help increase scores in general’ (264). Teachers may be concerned that occasional papers do not directly relate to specific standards and worry that this writing assignment will take time away from an already tight schedule. Some teachers suggest, ‘Students could pretend to be Ophelia and write an occasional paper from her point of view.’ Although a creative idea, it defeats the purpose and benefits of occasional papers from a student perspective. Students like and need to write about their lives, even if they are not always happy stories. Plus, we know that students will



become better writers if they write more often and if classes are student-driven, interactive, engaging and challenging (Graves 2002; Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka 2001; Daniels, Zemelman, and Steinke 2007).

Gina viewed occasional papers as a way to engage students in a type of reflective writing that they were expected to do on their standardized exam. She did not, however, use them as practice for the exam. Naturally, they became opportunities for Gina to make connections about how her students might transfer skills they used in the papers to essays written for prompts on standardized exams. Although this study does not provide a development perspective of how OPs improved high-stakes writing, it is worth mentioning that Gina often built a relation between the two. For example, in a lesson to review reflective writing for their state exam, she reminded them about the voice (criteria on the state's standardized exam rubric) they used during their last Friday OP reading. She reminded students about the organization of their OPs and its ability to promote thought-provoking discussion when teaching literary analysis essays for Advanced Placement compositions. She also mentioned their ability to write short essays about daily experiences, some rather quickly. Gina had high standards for the occasional papers and recognized that some students did not do them justice because they procrastinated. Gina, however, viewed these papers as opportunities for students to flex their writing muscles and become thoughtful people who can transfer their writing skills to a variety of writing assignments, including high-stakes exams. These essays were also successful ways to meet writing standards, such as employing 'a wide range of strategies' to 'participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities,' and to 'use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes' (IRA/NCTE 1996). More research would benefit from investigating how OP writing shapes the writing of standards-based curriculum.

Second, this research suggests that students are likely to position themselves as writers when they simultaneously gain status in their academic and social worlds (Finders 1997; Author et al., forthcoming). Damen and Leticia were able to make social connections via their readings in class and received praise from Gina for successfully completing and sharing a writing assignment. This extends research that suggests the importance of drawing from students' social identities in order to foster academic identities (Jones 2003/2004). More research needs to provide successful snapshots so that teachers are able to put such theories into practice. This is especially important for teachers who work with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds other than their own (Ladson-Billings 1995). Students' identities, however, will not always emerge positively, and communities will not always form cohesively. Identity work in the classroom is a dynamic and contentious process, and teachers must be aware of school policies and safeguarding issues in relation to students sharing personal experiences. Beginning with the lives of students is a place to start when situating students as writers, but if students are going to be successful we must challenge them to succeed with unfamiliar genres and topics. More research would benefit from examining the complexities of identity work in a writing classroom.

Third, this study extends research on fostering literacy identities in classrooms by using positioning theory to examine the construction and enactments of identities. The investigation of the learning process as identity work is a popular topic, and scholars argue that more studies are needed that explicitly use methods illustrating how identities are constructed over time

(Finders 1997; McCarthy and Moje 2002). This study used positioning theory to do that and suggests that if scholars draw from a poststructural notion of identity, positioning theory can be a useful tool to reveal how people situate themselves within the moment-to-moment interactions of classroom learning.

Fourth, this research challenges educators to reflect on their writer identities and how those might translate into their writing instruction (Gillespie 1985). Teacher educators or professional development specialists might ask teachers to represent metaphorically what a writer is to them. They could compare that representation with the kind of writer identity they foster through instruction with their students. Through this ‘compare and contrast’ exercise, teachers may reveal discrepancies that are causing students to resist the construction of writer identities in their classrooms. This particular study has illustrated the benefits from collaboration between teaching and research and recommends that teachers research their classroom practice to engage in reflective practice. Overall, more work needs to examine how to foster literacy classrooms that provide opportunities for students to position themselves as writers who, as Anzaldúa has stated, write to discover themselves, put order in the world, and appease ‘appetites and anger’.

### **Notes on contributor**

Amy Vetter is an assistant professor in Secondary English Education at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Her research interests include literacy and identity, English education and practitioner research.

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