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### Crafting Communities of Writers: Advice from Teens

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# Crafting Communities of Writers: Advice from Teens

*The authors interviewed teens in five states to catalog their ideas about how teachers can build communities of writers.*

**A**va, a middle schooler in Texas, says she doesn't "think [teachers] . . . see . . . the full potential of what students could really be as writers." Camden, a high school student in North Carolina, calls for writing in schools that welcomes students interacting with each other. "I feel like if [teachers] give [students] time to talk with each other about what they're [writing] it might help," he says. (All students' names are pseudonyms.) Asking young people about their writing lives prompts English language arts (ELA) educators to see students as *more*—as capable and collaborative writers who have the potential to refine and enhance their writing practices.

Teens are writing more than ever, in more modalities than ever, and using more languages than ever (Lenhart and Page). At the same time, many teens struggle to write, feeling "fear[s] of failing, humiliation, and/or disapproval within a system that focuses on grades and high-stakes exams" (Vetter et al. 115). In the midst of these paradoxes, asking teen writers about their writing lives offers us ways to harness their enthusiasm for having their voices heard, while also building their capacity for academic writing.

For the research project described in this article, eight ELA teacher educators interviewed seventy-eight teens in five states about their writing lives. Many of the young people we talked with described peers and teachers who supported their development and growth as writers, but not all did. Some spoke of writing instruction "dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are

left only to fill in missing information" (Applebee and Langer 26). So, while our profession has crafted position statements and standards that seek to value students' experiences and potential, Ava's and Camden's experiences reveal the uneven implementation of those ideals.

Basing our conclusions on the study participants' advice about teaching writing, this article offers approaches for creating classroom communities of writers. We concur with the NCTE Statement "Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing," that "everyone has the capacity to write; writing can be taught; and teachers can help students become better writers." Supporting student writers, then, becomes about turning those writing beliefs into classroom practices.

## LISTENING TO STUDENTS

Scholars have sought to understand how young people write, what they write, and how they become better writers by closely examining the kinds of literacy practices in which youth engage, often outside academic settings. Such research falls under the heading of Youth Cultures and Identities Studies (YCIS), which values adolescents' insights into their own literacy practices (Moje, "Youth Cultures"). Partially because of this research, ELA educators have found ways to honor the voices and learning needs of students during writing instruction. But the institution of schooling means those same teachers are involved "in a web of complex relationships that intersect with the distribution of authority and power within

the school,” complicating teachers’ ability to value teens’ literacy practices (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith 604).

Mandated writing curricula often focus on standardized genres that do not align with students’ interest, experience, or writerly lives. This disconnect reveals “unwelcome truths” (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith 604) that teens raise about their own educational experiences (Pedraza and Rodríguez).

**Our task as writing teachers is to create welcoming spaces by listening to students’ understandings of themselves as writers and the communities in which they write.**

When students say “I don’t know what to write,” what they often mean is “I don’t know what to write *about that*.” By embracing this honest response to writing assignments, teachers can begin the work of crafting—alongside students—a “welcoming and inclusive environment” where authority and power around writing are distributed and knowledge creation centers student experience (Emert and Rodríguez 5).

Simultaneously, it is important to avoid “romanticizing youth literacy practices in a way that overlooks the social, political, and economic importance—indeed, necessity—of developing strong academic literacy skills and practices, particularly those focused on print” (Moje, “Youth Cultures” 207). Working to improve students’ academic writing, which is necessary and important, within a community that centers student voice and experience, then, can protect against students’ genuine fear that someone will say their writing is bad. Teachers who navigate valuing youth literacies and the demands of academic literacies can create communities to support students through this work. Fahima Ife argues that “we must create classroom communities that explicitly address personal power and welcome student ideas” (65), and she has created an anthology of student writing that showcases academic writing expectations. Everardo Pedraza and R. Joseph Rodríguez have also created a classroom community that takes youth passion for institutionalized disciplinary changes in their high

school and pivots that interest into academic literacies such as writing business letters, inviting community members for input on projects, and using rhetorical strategies across genres.

Worth noting is that the interaction of a classroom community and academic literacy acquisition is not a new idea within the field of English language arts. Three decades ago, David Bloome claimed that academic literacy acquisition “must be viewed within the context of building or rebuilding the classroom community” where “reading and writing are used to accomplish both personal and community goals” (75). Lucy Calkins also built on the idea of classroom community as a space for nurturing literacy and teacher-writers, and more recently, Randy Bomer suggested that “it’s the encounter with difference that even wakes [students] up to exactly what they’re doing” as writers in community (67). Our task as writing teachers is to create welcoming spaces by listening to students’ understandings of themselves as writers and the communities in which they write.

## EXPLAINING WHAT WE ASKED AND WHY

As literacy teacher educators, we took up the call to welcome students’ truths about becoming writers. As researchers, we visited classrooms, after-school programs, and summer writing camps, asking students about their writing lives and listening carefully to their answers. We sought to “learn . . . *from* youth as they teach us about how complex literacy processes and practices develop and change” (Moje, “Re-framing Adolescent Literacy” 224–25; italics in original). Using a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, our research team of eight teacher educators conducted interviews with seventy-eight adolescents from a variety of backgrounds and from both urban and rural areas across five states throughout 2017 and 2018. The participants came from out-of-school programs, high-performing school districts, and credit recovery programs (see Table 1). Convenience sampling (Patton) dictated which teens at each site engaged in semistructured interviews. We talked with the students who were willing to talk with us,

TABLE 1.

**By the Numbers: Demographic Data about Study Participants**

<b>78</b>	<b>Participants</b> 60 female, 18 male 51% White (40) 28% African American (22) 12% Latinx (9) 5% Asian (4) 4% Multiracial (3)
<b>5</b>	<b>States</b> Kentucky, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas
<b>7</b>	<b>Settings</b> 3 urban, 2 suburban, 2 rural 3 public high schools 2 after-school middle school programs 1 public middle school 1 summer writing camp

asking them a series of twelve questions about writers and writing:

1. How do you define a writer?
2. Why do people write?
3. Would you call yourself a writer? Why or why not? If so, describe yourself as a writer.
4. Do you hope to have a career in writing? Why or why not?
5. Describe the writing you do in and out of school.
6. In what ways does your gender, race, class, or sexual orientation shape your writing?
7. Who/what influenced your writing?
8. Describe your writing process.
9. What kind, if any, of digital and social media do you use when writing?
10. Do you ever collaborate when writing? If so, how?
11. How do you give and receive feedback on your writing?
12. How and where do you publish your writing?

After we transcribed the interviews, we conducted an iterative analysis of the students' responses (as described by Srivastava and Hopwood) across datasets, which revealed a theme structured around "advice." Intensity sampling (modeled on Patton) around community—engagement with others around writing—guided our selection of the interviews of the nine young people quoted in this article.

The eight of us who conducted the interviews are White, female, and grew up in working-class and middle-class families, which may limit our understanding of the contexts of some of the youth we interviewed. While we are constrained by the lenses of our race, language, and positions of privilege, we are committed to creating space and equity for the voices of youth. Four of the eight are National Writing Project (NWP) teacher-consultants and two are deeply familiar with NWP goals and objectives. As a team, we share values around writing that include "time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines" (David and Jansky 25) to develop student voice and humanize students of all backgrounds (Paris and Winn).

## BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF WRITERS

We initially collected teens' advice for teaching writing in a short blog post for *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care* (David and Consalvo). Students' answers to our questions were thoughtful and irreverent, loquacious and terse. Their answers varied, but there were also commonalities. Summarizing briefly, their advice falls into three categories: (1) freedom to write about what matters to them; (2) constructive relationships around writing with their teachers, mentors, and peers; and (3) models of writing from peers and published authors. In this article, we look at how these themes are expressed in teens' desire to engage in the work of writing alongside others in supportive communities.

## WRITING WITHIN COMMUNITY

Many students staked claims similar to Haley's, a magnet middle school student: "I'd say a writer is a person that likes to read and enjoys writing about things and sharing what they know and just like

expressing their feelings.” For this teen, being a writer is premised on having a community of people around her interested in the work of literacy.

Similarly, for Esme, a middle school student, her friends become her community of readers. When asked if she would consider herself a writer, her response is: “I kind of would because, like, all my friends know that I love writing, and, like, I read them my writing at lunch.” But a writing community is complicated, as Esme also says: “I’m an outcast from, like, most of the . . . well, popular kids.” But she sees the work of a writer as “going against the normal code,” so her stance makes sense as she identifies with the larger community of writers and its accompanying paradoxes.

Further, young people want to be reading one another’s writing. Selena requested that teachers “have the students read other people’s work because reading . . . someone else’s work can really . . . give [students] a better example. . . of . . . what is good, what works.” In the typical writing classroom, though, “collaborative work remains less popular than teacher-led activities” (Applebee and Langer 21). But Selena sees how reading and writing work together and wants more opportunities to do this work.

Community also means investing in others’ successes and growth as writers (Dean and Warren). For example, Paige is invested in her peers becoming more skilled writers, getting “frustrated” when she reads “a good idea” in a peer’s story, but then finds that the story was “ruin[ed] with a predictable ending.” She noted that teachers should have students read “a lot of . . . other people’s stories” to become better writers. Because of her engagement in a writerly community, Paige has learned to offer peers feedback beyond comma policing or a perfunctory “good job” because she has a stake in her peers’ development as writers.

Theo, like Camden, values talking about writing. In writing camp, he shared that “talking about writing . . . and going around doing it, that’s been one of the most helpful things here. Because it’s just talking to someone about writing, about the things you’re writing, getting advice.” Youth appreciate substantive feedback, shared through talk, from teachers and each

other. Advice from fellow writers is, after all, part of a community working together to develop expertise.

### WRITING WITHOUT COMMUNITY

Not all of the young people who participated in the study saw themselves as writers or as part of a writing community. For instance, Haley had a conflicted, even wistful, view of writing in school: “We do write things. But when we write about [prescribed] things, it may not be interesting or it’s like something that we write about all the time [or that we] wrote about before and it’s never really something that you wanna write about.” While Haley’s use of “we” indicates she is referring to a group of people writing together, they are not a writing community when compared to what other students described.

Another student, Pat, when asked, “Do you consider yourself a writer?” responded, “Not normally, but . . . there are some pieces I feel I have enough pride to say, ‘yeah, I’m a writer’ because I . . . wrote that.” Knowing that not all students are confident writers or have writing communities that support them or respond to typical school writing instruction, it becomes important for teachers to develop practices that can foster the characteristics of a community of writers in the classroom.

### SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES OF WRITERS

As part of our research, we noticed that some students had a greater range of language with which to discuss their writing processes, their reading of other writers, and the work of writing. Many students quoted here were inducted into their communities of writers, and that induction included learning how to talk about writing, about the intellectual and emotional labor of being a writer, and about how to be a writer with others. Like metacognition (thinking about thinking), metalanguage around writing allows for a more textured discussion and understanding of the work of writing (Myhill and Newman). Based on our knowledge of some of these sites and the instructional practices that teachers designed, we focus on two stances in the following discussion: talking to peers and expanding the

community of writers. We offer examples of strategies that created writerly communities.

### STRATEGIES FOR TALKING TO PEERS

Sharing was central to the community building within three of the classrooms at the high-performing middle school represented in our data set. Ann, who did the interviews at this site, has worked closely with two of the teachers through the NWP network. The teachers have embraced sharing within the context of writing workshop as “an opportunity for students to have writerly conversations with one another” (Mermelstein 2).

First, if writing happened in the beginning of the class as a notebook entry, sharing usually happened via a quick debrief with a partner. Or, if writing was the focus of instruction that day, then sharing happened at the end of class, with students reading aloud what they had written. Third, during revision days, students were often in the hallways with partners, reading through a section of text and receiving feedback. To create a sharing process that was welcoming, teachers scaffolded students into peer response with strategies such as Bless, Address, Press (National Writing Project). This protocol begins with telling the writer what was good (“bless”), then noticing something that the writer could improve (“address”), and, finally, “press”ing the writer to take some kind of risk, all of which center the students’ experiences of writing and rely on extensive peer interaction and collaboration.

### STRATEGIES FOR EXPANDING THE COMMUNITY OF WRITERS

At a two-week summer writing camp in the southeast United States codirected by Amy, young people grew to understand what a community of writers can be by listening to and interacting with local authors. As invited guest speakers at the camp, poets, novelists, journalists, and cartoonists discussed the reasons they became writers and shared their daily writing process and compositions with the students. The published authors also engaged the teens in writing activities, and the youth asked the authors questions about their processes, careers, and inspiration. The teens were

engaged in an apprentice-like approach to building a writing community, posing relevant questions to professional writers, while being guided through writing practices. In many instances, campers exchanged emails with authors and continued that mentorship relationship after the camp was over.

### CHALLENGES IN BUILDING COMMUNITY

Haley and Barbara, on the other hand, shared their lack of a supportive writerly community in school. School writing was an isolating event, and to satisfy their desire to feel like part of a community of writers, they turned to social media. Haley assured the interviewer that “everyone” was on Instagram: “And they recently added where you could go live, like you could do a video and everybody could see it . . .

and that could be right now.” Barbara reported that “sometimes [on Instagram] I will post pictures of me, my friends. Sometimes, I will post pictures of the sky, [and] sometimes, I will post videos. But it really just depends on how I am feeling.” Outside of school, both young women used social media as an outlet for their composing, paying particular attention to their audiences. As evidenced by their experiences, online writing communities can be popular spaces for teen writers, providing them with opportunities to write and audiences to which they may not have access in school (Black).

Even with a community provided by social media, Haley was choosy about who could see her compositions. Barbara, too, was disinclined to share her writing widely, saying that “I feel like people really won’t be . . . A lot of stuff I write is sad.” She had a sense of responsibility to her audience, but without the strength of a community behind that responsibility, she was hesitant to share. Teen writers yearn for feedback on their writing and have a sense of what is appropriate for a given audience, but they struggle without the guidance of a trusted mentor.

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## DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

The nine young people featured in this article want teachers to see them as writers with something valuable to say. Teens also want classrooms where there is “a sense of community and personal safety . . . so that [they] are willing to write and collaborate freely and at length” (NCTE). A key way to build a safe community is to work to understand students’ “motivation[s] to read and write” (Moje, “Youth Cultures” 216), which one of the interviewees, Mai Li, states clearly: “I think you should let your students, like, write what they want.”

As teachers, we need to create more space in our curricula, classrooms, and in ourselves to better welcome student truths about writing. But inviting students into those spaces does not mean stepping back from our role in the classroom as knowledgeable experts who can grow students as writers and develop writerly communities. Instead, writing teachers can take on roles that (1) guide choices in topic selection, (2) offer multiple purposes for writing, (3) scaffold students’ acquisition of writing conventions, and (4) develop among students the social relationships that support writing (David and Jansky).

Alongside the advice and reflection offered by our project participants, it becomes clear that teens value memberships in writing communities and want to do more of the hard work required for that membership. This desire is particularly poignant given that writing can be daunting as well as exhilarating. Students’ desire to be better writers can be another “unwelcome truth” because in order to empathize with the writers in our classrooms, we really need to be writing too (Whitney et al.). Writing alongside students offers opportunities for us to grow personally, pedagogically, and professionally (Dawson). If we heed the advice of students interviewed for this study and ask their own students what they need to develop as writers, we can build and sustain writerly communities. [EJ](#)

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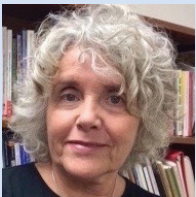
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**READWRITETHINKCONNECTION** Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

After discussing the poem “The Writer” by Richard Wilbur, students analyze their own writing habits and create an extended metaphor describing themselves as writers. <http://bit.ly/1J4TQVs>