About

Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care

A blog advocating for authentic writing instruction

This blog is organized and maintained by members of the Commission on Writing Teacher Education, a working group of the English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE), part of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).   Our purposes for this blog stem from our passion for authentic student writing in K-16 schools. We believe that writing instruction is essential for students across grade levels and content areas and that writing is a way to help students change their worlds. We are teacher educators, classroom teachers, students, parents, and community members, and we have created this blog to speak to these five audiences. Collaboratively, we hope to:

1. Spotlight and celebrate the powerful writing work that teachers and students currently do, and illustrate how that work could potentially be affected by certain educational and/or political policies.

2. Circulate information about teaching practices and policies, so that our audiences can advocate strongly for students and teachers.

3. Address how research affects writing in schools and communities, based on our experience in the field of writing instruction.

4. Strengthen the connections and community among universities, K-12 schools, teachers, parents, and students.

By working together, as well as with others who advocate for the teaching profession, our audiences can learn about writing, the teaching of writing, and the power of engaging young writers in craft and story. We will offer our informed advocacy and arguments, so that others can advocate and speak loudly as well.

Please read about the creation and development of this blog in the article "Writers Who Care: Advocacy Blogging as Teachers-Professors-Parents."

Submission Guidelines

Teachers, professors, and parents are invited to submit posts for publication. Submissions should range from 1000-1500 words and be related to our purpose. Posts should be written for an audience of parents and teachers.

Authors are required to secure necessary permissions to post student work, images of students, or school and teacher names; submission of the manuscript indicates the author has secured these permissions.

To submit a post for review, send a copy of the post to writerswhocare@gmail.com. We prefer submissions via Google Docs but will accept email attachments in Microsoft Word. The submission file should be named [Author Last Name_Title of Post]. Please include

- a title and byline
- a 1-2 sentence bio
- an image that relates to the content of the post. All images should be original to the author or include copyright permissions or the appropriate Creative Commons license. Images should be shared as .jpg via Google drive (preferably) or attached to the email as a separate file with a file name of [Author Last Name_Title of Post].

Authors retain copyright to their work, and, in fact, we encourage authors to consider their posts as single entries into extended conversations on their topics. We hope that authors will revise and expand their work and resubmit it to other publications that contribute to public discourse about writing in schools.

A Heuristic for Drafting a Submission for Writers Who Care

- Choose an engaging title that will show up in Internet browser searches

- Begin with an introduction or vignette that illustrates a problem related to authentic writing instruction

Flipping the Script on Research

drkhturner / November 15, 2016

By Danielle Filipiak, Nicole Mirra, & Antero Garcia

> Eighth grader Vaughn sits at a table with his peers, navigating between four browser windows open on his computer. He clicks on one of them and begins annotating an article about mental health issues in LGBTQ communities. He then migrates to another and reads in silence before transferring his attention to what looks like a journal. It is leather-bound and he is protective over its contents, turning his chair slightly so that his diagonal positioning makes it difficult for anyone at his table to read his jottings. Within minutes, however, he gets the attention of his group members when he spits out statistics on the suicide rate of LGBTQ youth. "Can you believe it? I mean, how can kids be so depressed so young?"
>
> His neighbor Alexis chimes in, "Yeah, I'm reading about how arts could be in school more, you know, it can be a place for us to vent and let our feelings out. I think that this connects with what you are reading, Vaughn, because maybe if kids and teenagers could create and have somewhere that adults don't judge us so much we could feel better about ourselves. You know, we know a lot more than adults think we do." A third group member, Ahmed, nods his head, "Uh-huh, we must ask about that in our research: like, if people feel like they have enough art or like stuff like that." Alexis agrees, "I'm realizing this is all connected. Mental health has to do with a lot of different things."

- Develop and contextualize the problem, and your response to it, by citing or linking to other research/resources

- Attach visuals (images, diagrams, students' writing) that complement the content and increase reader interest

The intense interest that Vaughn, Alexis, and Ahmed show here about sophisticated academic content is the stuff of parents' dreams for their children (and teachers' dreams for their classrooms). These students are engaging in **YPAR**, or Youth Participatory Action Research, a practice that fosters youth leadership and voice. YPAR invites youth to develop and direct research projects that explore personal experiences and often-silenced community perspectives. It also encourages them to share that research in a multitude of forms, tailored to a variety of audiences, for the purpose of advancing social justice (Bautista et al. 4).

Educators who facilitate YPAR take the stance that young people bear important local knowledge, and apprentice them as researchers capable of devising solutions to pressing social and educational issues. In this way, YPAR explodes traditional assumptions about who conducts research, how, and for what purposes (Mirra et al, 2015). As educators who have implemented YPAR projects in classrooms across the country, we believe YPAR is a powerful pedagogical tool. Teachers situate themselves as facilitators, creating learning environments that give *students* the reins to direct their academic and civic learning.

Council of Youth Research students interview California state officials in Sacramento, CA

- Include practical tips for writing teachers that address the problem you introduced and developed above

How to "Do" YPAR

What makes YPAR so exciting is that it does not follow prescriptive guidelines; it is dependent on context and the needs and interests of individual students. What makes YPAR challenging is that it is impossible to create a template or roadmap showing exactly how to do it. Adults and youth engage in a collective, collaborative effort that morphs based on the questions that emerge and the findings that develop. While it is an organic and messy process, we have teased it apart into some general phases as a starting point. These phases are as follows:

1. **Identify a relevant problem.** Young people ask themselves: *What is something that I would like to change in my school? Neighborhood? Community?* During this phase, adults guide exploration of social theories that help ground youth in more critical understandings of what is happening in the world around them.
2. **Research.** Students explore policy, history, and current perspectives on topics of concern. These might be found in research and magazine articles, books and newspapers, and on websites or blogs. Equipped with a basic understanding of their topic, youth then move on to develop their own research questions and determine what research methods would be best for answering these questions. Some of those most commonly practiced are interviews, surveys, focus groups, photovoice, and journaling.
3. **Create a plan to address it.** When students have collected and analyzed data, they determine how they will leverage their findings. Some students have shared their research with legislators, researchers, community leaders, parents, and teachers in the form of more formal presentations, while others have created t-shirt campaigns or community murals that bring awareness to their issues. Still others have created social media campaigns or public service announcements and published them online.
4. **Implement the plan & evaluate its impact.** This is where young people take action. After they execute their plans, participants go back and reflect on the highs and lows of their projects, document further questions for research, reflect on their experience as researchers, and gauge the effectiveness of their chosen actions/campaigns.

1. **Returning to the process as new questions about the topic emerge.** If the opportunity presents itself, youth may decide to continue their research projects as new questions emerge. The research process is iterative in that young people's research trajectories change as they learn more about their topics and the research process.

Why YPAR?

- Position the ideas alongside the goals of ELATE, NCTE, and Writers Who Care.
  - How is this approach, experience, strategy transformative for writers? What are the ethical implications? What inauthentic or oppressive practices does this trouble, illuminate?
  - So what? Why does this matter for the writers with whom we are entrusted?

Why YPAR?

We have been persuaded that schools could improve if more people listened to what young people have to say about society and their education. In particular, the products that have grown out of students' projects, including digital media productions, advocacy campaigns, and presentations to stakeholders, to name a few, have offered us fresh insight into the ways in which young people hope to not just reimagine, but also re-image the world around them.

Take Vaughn, for example, who shared that exploring mental health was important to him as a teen identifying as "queer and ostracized." Or Alexis, who sees art as necessary in school curriculums, especially for the social and emotional value that they hold for young people like her, who practice art outside of school, "but almost never in." Or Ahmed, a recent immigrant to the Bronx from Yemen, who says that he does not think kids in his school or neighborhood are happy: "I do not see happiness and I want to know why, so I can fix it." In notebooks, on computer screens, through dialogue--this group of young people is unifying around a shared research purpose that will eventually culminate in action. Through rigorous research, they are growing in their trust for one another, the teacher, and the classroom space; engaging in a multitude of literacy practices and engagements; and exploring an authentic challenge that faces their local community.

YPAR is transformative because it 1) casts youth as designers of the research process, 2) expands the kinds of information and types of voices that can be involved in producing knowledge, and 3) makes research matter for the world beyond the classroom. We have found YPAR to be a powerful inquiry model. YPAR centers youth voices, invites literacy engagements that are humanizing and collaborative, and empowers young people to study and then devise authentic solutions to social problems that impact their lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Taken together, we believe that these benefits make it a worthwhile model for those who aim to foster more equitable learning opportunities for students inside and outside of schools.

- Engage the specific audiences of this blog in considering next steps such as how this might look a year from now, five years from now. What might be needed to continue this conversation and steps to nurture the writing lives of our students.

Your Part in YPAR

A few considerations for those wishing to try YPAR:

- **Educators:** Community building is essential for any YPAR project. Brainstorm ice-breaker and team building activities that you can implement in the beginning to assist students in learning about social issues and each other. Also consider your boundaries and allowances as an adult facilitator in a youth-centered space. How will you plan for and support the YPAR process in a way that privileges your students' interests and ways of knowing? What lessons will you need to design to prepare students for this kind of interaction?

- **Administrators-** Reflect on how you can position yourself to support actions that come out of students' research. School clean-ups, dialogues with government officials, student-led workshops, and field trips are examples of activities that often times require administrative approval. Think about how you can be proactive in creating mechanisms to support students' advocacy work.

- **Parents-** Have conversations with your child about what s/he is researching. Students have shared with us that a powerful aspect of YPAR is being able to share their thoughts with adults who tend to overlook or underestimate the value of their perspective. In addition to making for rich conversation, dialoguing about their ideas prepares them for the advocacy and action that they will be engaged in at the end of the project.

- **Adult Allies in the Community:** How can you support students' explorations? Are there resources you can provide that might help them better understand their topics? How can you leverage your social networks to offer students interview subjects, sites for fieldwork, or technical assistance? Paying careful attention to the gaps in students' findings can inspire teachable moments that add complexity and context to their research.

- **Youth:** There may be times where you will have to negotiate with your peers when a disagreement surfaces. Maybe you have different ideas about what to focus on for your research or what methods you'd like to use to collect data. Try to listen to what everyone has to say and be willing to compromise. When you decide on a topic and are ready to design your study, create a timeline of all of the things that need to get done and who will be responsible for each task. Remember that you are part of a group.

There is no shortage of young people willing to co-create better futures for themselves (or for us all, for that matter). It is up to us to have courage enough to take seriously students' experiences, interests, culture, and emerging understandings of the world and of text, and YPAR might be one place that we can look for direction.

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