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Writing for a Better World: Three Snapshots of Adolescents at Work

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In *Lessons That Change Writers*, Nancie Atwell introduces a new concept, *writing territories*, by scripting her own, first-day-of-school explanation:

Maybe the most important thing for you to know about me is that I write, and I write for lots of different reasons. I call the range of things I do as a writer my *territories*. They include genres that I write in or would like to try, subjects I've written about or would like to, and real or potential audiences for my writing . . . my territories list gives me a window on who I am as a writer, citizen, woman, teacher, learner, mother, wife, daughter, and friend. It also gives me a place to go when I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to write next. It's my ideas bank. It's my big prompt, to remind myself, "Oh, yeah, I wanted to do that as a writer" (my emphasis). (3-4)

In addition to this script, Atwell provides a list of her own territories, which include provocative personal topics but also compelling local/national socio-political concerns: "the proposed Wiscasset bypass, greenhouse gas emissions, global warming, the abandonment of the Kyoto agreement, and the Bush administration's assault on reading instruction" (5). This portion of Atwell's territories is designed to inspire students—Atwell's students and, by extension, our own—to also imagine themselves as local/national citizens who write, and so my initial purpose in this essay is simply to invoke and celebrate three of my own wonderful high school students who defined themselves as writers in this special, civic-minded way. As the student portrayals later show, the students were all "going the extra step toward connecting their interests to socially

significant themes" (Bomer and Bomer 1), attempting with the written word to make their worlds, and sometimes even *the* world, a better place.

In addition to invoking and celebrating these students, I propose analyzing their writing processes and products in two ways. First, recognize the relevance. The three students were 11th and 12th graders in the mid-nineties, but their writing is timeless because it stems from extra-curricular activities, the everyday kind that exist now and forever in each public/private school and all rural, suburban, and urban communities across the nation. Second, read between the lines, especially as it relates to rhetorical freedom. We often presume an inherent relationship exists between self-motivated writing, rhetorical freedom and student ownership, but a close analysis of the students' civic writing calls into the question this basic and widespread assumption.

THREE SNAPSHOTS OF ADOLESCENTS WRITING

Taking a cue from Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's landmark *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, I interviewed the students separately and then created individual *snapshots* to demonstrate their writing processes and products. Each snapshot begins with the context for the writing and concludes with the writer's self-evaluation. The focus of each snapshot is also the same: the way each writer defined his/her rhetorical task and the strategies s/he said were useful in tackling it.

Snapshot #1: Charlie (Reducing the Negative Effects of Poverty)

Attending summer work camps was becoming a tradition for the youth group at Charlie's church. Members had worked on a Navajo reservation in Arizona, in poverty-stricken neighborhood in southwestern Georgia, and in a low-income housing project in southern Louisiana. Attending weeklong work camps, however, takes more than time and energy. It costs money: roughly \$1500 per camper. To raise the funds for the first two years, Charlie,

who was the youth group president, spearheaded two successful fund-raising campaigns that raised enough money for every work camper in the youth group.

According to Charlie, the fund-raising letter was somewhat difficult to create the first year because he could not talk about the work camps in specific terms.

We had never been to a camp before . . . [and so] part of the problem was that I didn't know exactly what I [was] talking about . . . the information that the organization gave us was actually fairly brief. I mean basically when I said that we would be fixing up dilapidated buildings, I didn't know how many houses we would be working on. I didn't know if we would be in a group. I didn't know what type of work we'd be doing, whether it would be in a community center, whether we'd paint the houses in need. I had no clue and that's why [I said only that] we're going to be fixing up dilapidated houses.

This lack of information meant Charlie had to fill in some gaps, but adding filler wasn't a big problem because, according to Charlie, he's "good at BSing." In fact, he used that strategy in two different ways in the first letter. The first strategy was to amplify the information he had regarding the work camps primarily through repetition.

[Let's say] on a test, you've read a chapter or two . . . [when you should have read four chapters or the whole book]. . . . I'm capable of playing off those things, sometimes repeating things in different sentences. To a point, that's what I've done [in the first letter].

Another way Charlie "BSed his way through the document" was by writing unoriginal sentences, a fact that didn't make him very proud. In fact, he seemed to believe some of his sentences were excellent models for what NOT to say in fund-raising letters.

I do feel like . . . a shyster when I say . . .

"Your firm won't just be helping us: it will be helping hundreds of others" [It's true,] they will be helping someone else, but it just feels like one of those generic lines that you hear on the Easter Seals Telethon. . . . It's a [cliche] I could use . . . in hundreds of thousands of different [letters].

Although the first year's letter raised enough money for group members to attend the work camp, the second year's letter was, according to Charlie, an improvement because he could rely on the group's experience at a work camp and, consequently, "eliminate the BS."

The first couple of lines are basically the same. [I said that our youth group] is going to be planning a trip. . . . It explains the work group, basically what it is and what we'd be doing, renovating dilapidated houses. Where it starts to vary . . . is that I was able to be more specific. We [had] worked on approximately 100 houses [the previous summer, but] we did not know that with the first letter.

The second year's letter was different for other reasons too. Most important, the group's fund-raising strategy had changed from soliciting funds to holding (among other activities) a celebrity auction. As a result, Charlie included a new section in the letter.

[In] the first letter, we asked for money, you know, we need donations . . . [but in the second letter,] I also described our fund raising events, like the luncheons and the car wash [and] the celebrity auction [including when and where] the auction would be.

Another new feature (one he had learned in an English class) was a revised signature block. Rather than including only his name, Charlie added both his title and organization. Though Charlie speculated that these additions might seem like

minor details, he reported they were part of an important rhetorical strategy, one providing his audience with essential information that, in turn, potentially helped to achieve his purpose in writing.

[In the first letter, the signature block and letterhead says [where] I'm from . . . and my name is [Charlie Jones]. Whoopdeedoo They have no clue that I'm a youth I could be the advisor. I could be anyone. . . . [In the second letter, though,] they know I'm a youth. . . . If they know a kid has . . . put the time and effort into [the letter], they might be more willing to give the donation.

Overall, Charlie reported he had done “a good job” writing the two fund-raising letters. Although he recognized other people might use different standards, he believed the only appropriate criterion for evaluating the documents was in terms of purpose: raising money. Because his letters had raised the money to send the youth group to work camps for two years in a row at the time of the interview, he judged the documents as successful.

If someone was grading [them], they might find problems,. . . . [Maybe they are] not specific [enough, or maybe] I don't have my supports and everything in the right place ... Considering we've made it [to work camps] for the past two years, and these letters [have raised]... \$12,000 in the last two years, I don't think anyone can complain. I think they're successful.

Snapshot #2: Dana (Garnering Support for a Recycling Program)

Dana, who was vice president of the Environmental Club, reported the student-run recycling program had been in serious trouble during the previous school year.

Last year, [a district administrator] said this program [was] horrible [and that] it [wasn't] working. There [was even] trash in the recycling bins. . . . I don't even know who [had been] taking care of [the recycling program the year] before, but then me and

[one other student, Karen,] we started doing it. We would empty all 80 bins—there are over 80 now, but at the time there were roughly 80—and we were doing it by ourselves. . . . It was way too much work for [two people.]

When Dana was elected as vice-president that spring, she decided to overhaul the school's recycling program. Over the summer, she created a complex schedule coordinating all faculty members' planning periods with Environmental Club member's study halls. Then, the week before school started, Dana wrote an ostensibly informative letter to the faculty to let them know about the new program. Months later, she sent another letter to learn how the program was working.

Although the first letter appeared to be “all about how we're going to handle the recycling program,” Dana claimed the letter had a far more important agenda: to show faculty a leadership change had taken place. Establishing that change and promoting good will were important to Dana and all the other officers because of how ineffectively the club had been organized the previous year. Dana's comments show they were committed to the recycling program and knew it would be shut down if poorly administered.

When we got elected into office, we decided that our responsibility . . . was . . . to start the year off with a new program that was going to work, and so the first letter . . . was just, you know, saying hi, we're the club, we're the new officers, and we're going to do this right this year [The subject of the letter was] the new Environmental Club.[I] need[ed] to say it was [going to be] a new type of organization with five new officers It was going to be different.

Given the purpose of the letter, Dana included each officer's name at the end of the document. Including their names was also important because the document had been planned collaboratively.

When we had our first meeting, [the officers] decided it would be neat [to write the letter] and I said I'd do it we really generally said what we wanted to write about and then—it was so long ago—but I'm sure I talked [afterward with Jan and Karen, the two other officers.] and just made a quick jot of things to say. . . . [I didn't show it afterwards to anyone, not even to Bill, the president] because . . . he's not the official type of person. He's very easy going, and he wouldn't care . . . he does stuff, but he doesn't do administrative stuff. . . . He's not the type to sit down and write a letter or make corrections to this letter. It's not bad; it's just [Bill].

Although Dana recognized the first letter was a single-authored document, she didn't take complete credit because she was writing on behalf of all the officers. In contrast, Dana perceived the second letter as entirely singular in nature.

Th[e first letter] was . . . about the five new officers. That was a general letter but in [the second letter,] I'm centering down, focusing down [to the recycling program,]

and so it's mine . . . None of the other officers knew about this [letter.] This is my work.

Although the ostensible purpose of the second letter was to determine of the program were working, it had another more important purpose. It documented that Dana was fulfilling her duties as an Environmental Club officer.

. . . [Jay] and I are co-vice, [but] I'm internal affairs and that's basically the recycling thing and so for like a few months I really wasn't doing that much [because the program was running itself] and I . . . kinda felt like I wasn't doing anything . . . [so I wrote this letter] . . . to let [people] know that I am doing stuff. You know, some officers don't do anything . . . especially in the Environmental Club. This year, [for example, the secretary] empties one bin. That's her involvement. She takes notes at the meetings, but most everyone else has some sort of project that they take on . . . like [the president] takes on everything basically and [the other vice] does a lot of outer work and [the treasurer] does all the fund raisers, and the recycling program I do.

In spite of how important the two letters were to Dana in terms of purpose, she reported spending very little time writing them. In fact, she reported that for both drafts, she wrote a quick single draft, unlike the way she reported writing for her classes.

These [two letters] . . . are things I put together real quick. Th[e first letter took] the longest, but this one [the follow-up letter] took me two seconds. . . . I could do better . . . but I needed to get [them] out . . . so I just sat down and wrote, . . . read [them] once and spell checked. . . [But for school assignments,] I have separate drafts. . . . I think you need to do that [for classes]. . . . These [letters, though,] are more informal . . . and I'm not getting graded . . . I'm a grade-oriented person, which I think [is] bad sometimes . . . I should try to do these [letters as if I were working on a school assignment] . . . but there's not as much pressure.

Being “grade oriented,” however, didn’t keep Dana from paying special attention to another rhetorical task associated with the Environmental Club.

[These letters were] . . . addressed to [club members, for example, Brian Brick], Homeroom 201, here's how you do it—and I explained how to empty a bin—here's your room, what period you do it and with who . . . They . . . were all handwritten and then xeroxed and then on each one—this is an added touch I liked—I wrote a handwritten message because that personalized it. Like I'd say, “this room isn't very . . . hard. That's why you're doing it by yourself. If you don't want to do it by yourself, come see me.” . . . Those took a long time and I was very happy with them. . . . I think [that kind of personalization helps to] make the club much closer. If [the officers the previous year] had ever done that, it would have made me feel a part of something . . .

Dana believed “personalizing” the letters was appropriate because she knew her audience members well and/or perceived them as equal in status. That’s why she felt comfortable adding a different handwritten message to each of the club members’ letters. In contrast, she said personalizing the two letters to faculty members would have been impossible.

I could have . . . maybe to . . . a few teachers that I know but I don't know very many. . . . I really don't think I would have been comfortable writing a letter to, you know, like Mr. [Banso]. Some of [the students] I didn't know, but I could personalize their letters just because they were closer to my age.

Even so, Dana must have had a sense of audience in the faculty letters because she evaluated her work by predicting how they would respond to her documents. She believed all the faculty members would value the club members’ hard work and an effective school recycling program. Consequently, she imagined that both letters built goodwill—an important criterion for Dana—among her audience members, and so they were successful.

[The first letter] was good because it was the beginning of the year. We introduced [the club], and . . . I hoped the teachers kind of looked up and said, “Oh good. They're doing something.” When teachers looked at th[e second letter,] . . . they [might have said], “They're working really hard . . . That's nice. They're doing something this year.

Snapshot #3: Fran (Promoting Participation in a Church Youth Group)

Fran reported the Lutheran Youth Organization (LYO) in her town was one of hundreds of Lutheran youth groups located across America. Each year, her local group elected a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. These officers, combined

with one of the church pastors and a youth advisory board comprised of parents and other interested adults, were the governing body of the youth group. Throughout the year, Fran's chapter of LYO kept busy with a variety of primarily social activities, everything from white water rafting to weekend retreats.

In addition to these social activities, Fran reported that LYO members played a more serious role in the church, especially for "lapsed" parish families. Fran agreed with the adults active in LYO who argue that if adolescents become active LYO members, they might inspire their parents to become active parish members again. In addition, LYO members participated in Sunday worship services as ushers, readers, and even organists. They fulfilled these responsibilities regularly as opposed to once a year or month at a "Youth Sunday" service, an option that church officials believed trivialized youth involvement.

When the LYO elected Fran as president, her responsibilities included overseeing youth advisory sessions where group activities were planned and then informing members about those plans so they would be more likely to participate. From experience in LYO, Fran knew telephoning members would be far too time consuming, so in order to carry out her responsibilities as efficiently as possible, she continued with an LYO tradition: writing monthly newsletters to club members. Fran described her rhetorical task as primarily inscription.

I attend the advisory meetings and then organize the information that was discussed. I obviously know how to write a letter and it seems logical to organize the events within the letter in chronological order. That way, people can go directly to their calendars and mark down events, month by month, straight from the letter.

In spite of her ease in organizing the documents, Fran gave special attention to the humorous tone of her writing. She was convinced her editorial side comments, typically found in parentheses throughout

the newsletters, were what made her writing so funny.

The jokes are often private ones written with specific people in mind, but I want everyone to think the letters are funny, and so after finishing each newsletter, I ask my younger sister [a new member of LYO that year,] to read it aloud. If she laughs in all the right places, I know I'm on track. If not, I revise.

Fran's comments reveal an effective revision strategy helping her to adapt for multiple audiences, even though she never used that term. Given the size of LYO during Fran's tenure as president, it is understandable she would be better friends with some members than others. Even so, she believed all her audience members, even those she didn't know well, should find humor in the newsletter. By asking her sister to read her documents, Fran had a perfect frontline audience member. As a new LYO member, Fran's younger sister wasn't part of the club's inner circle, so she wasn't "in" on any of the private jokes.

In addition to humor, Fran reported another hallmark of her newsletter was her informal, conversational style. She believed this style was perfectly suited for the newsletter because of her audience. After all, it was comprised primarily of teenagers who would think Fran "were crazy" if she used formal language. Luckily for Fran, adult audience members—Fran's mother, for example, who helped proofread the newsletter for grammar and usage, and Pastor Dain, who oversaw the copy work and distribution—found Fran's conversational style appropriate too.

Even as an adolescent, Fran considered herself a writer. That belief came, in part, from what she perceived was a successful writing course during her junior year. In addition, one of her essays, a personal narrative recreating her anxious feelings just before playing her first solo at a church service, was published in a national magazine called *The American Organist*. Of all her writing, though, Fran took greatest pleasure in her LYO newsletter:

The writing I do for LYO really matters. There are real people reading it, and so there

is a real reason for writing. It's weird, but all that makes it easier for me to write.

like an archangel, overcome us while we rest.
It's a product of activity with others. (122)

Teaching Implications

The most obvious teaching implication is to encourage students to be cognizant of and to expand their *writing territories*. If given the proper mentoring, Charlie, Dana, and Fran would have surely listed their extra-curricular roles as a territory, consequently reinforcing the importance of civic writing for themselves and serving as role models for peers, and the same powerful claim holds true for students today. At the middle school where I supervise a field experience, for example, many students write for civic and socially significant reasons. An obvious example is a 7th grade boy who organizes an annual putt putt golf tournament to benefit the local chapter of the American Red Cross. To orchestrate the event, he works together with family and friends, and he writes donation requests, colorful flyers and thank you letters. Another good example is a group of students who attend the same area church. As youth parishioners, they worked in conjunction with the church deacon to write an original version of the Prayers of People asking for, among other petitions, justice and world peace; working with another adult, they also completed the required tasks and subsequent paperwork for Read to Feed, a Heifer International program benefiting poverty-stricken families in third-world nations. As LAJM readers can see, these two examples vary in document purpose, audience, and genre, but they—together with the snapshots—all share a common thread: none of writers worked in isolation. Bomer and Bomer explain this phenomenon:

Perhaps for anyone, the idea of trying to do something to make the world a better place is scary at first. We all feel small and weak and ill informed; we are sure no one will listen. And we don't really think, sitting there on our couch, that anything is compelling enough to draw us into a struggle. . . . by taking an interest *in conjunction with others*, [however,] we become bigger, we gain a sense of efficacy. We can't wait for efficacy to visit

With this in mind, teachers should beware: To help students expand their territories, don't merely assign a brainstorm or freewrite about social issues and then immediately expect a proposal, petition, or press release. Instead, teachers should capitalize on the powerful ways that group membership inspires people to social action. Like Bomer and Bomer, teachers could create civic-minded group assignments that gradually help students in "choosing causes and building coalitions" (131), or—with the snapshots in mind—they might ask students to consider their extra-curricular activities to determine if their roles and responsibilities already do or might potentially prompt civic writing. As the snapshots of Charlie, Dana, and Fran suggest, youth groups and service organizations are especially well suited to this teaching strategy, but it's equally probable and exciting to imagine members of a ski team, pom squad, or reading club galvanized by a pressing social concern.

Even then, however, English teachers may need to "talk up" civic writing in their classrooms. As evidence, consider that none of the students from my middle school field experience—the 7th grade boy or the church group—initially recognized their civic writing as a territory, even after learning the concept. Their reactions are anecdotal, but they nonetheless suggest that even after 9/11, some students may not recognize the tremendous importance of writing for socially significant reasons. If that perception is true, English teachers have an obligation to try to change it, not only for civic-minded students, but especially for those who aren't. After all, what could be more important than helping students recognize the power of their pens in their schools, communities, countries, and beyond?

Doing so will, most obviously, expand our students' writing repertoires, but it may simultaneously and surprisingly broaden our understanding of the phrases, self-motivated writing, rhetorical freedom, and student ownership. When students claim that they possess or value ownership

over their documents, what do they mean? Most often, their talk is related to rhetorical freedom: freedom to write when, where, and what they want to write in the form, voice, and words they personally desire. Moreover, they have probably learned this definition from progressive writing teachers who wisely embrace process pedagogies. After all, how often have English teachers worried that assignment guidelines (even good guidelines) or revision suggestions (even valid suggestions) will take away ownership, lessen engagement, and even invalidate the overall writing experience? It's a fairly common set of beliefs, but it decidedly limits students' understanding of how writers behave in the real world, especially those trying to effect positive change in their communities and the world.

To clarify, let's return to the snapshots and their civic-minded documents.

First of all, could Charlie, Dana, or Fran claim total rhetorical freedom in deciding when, where, what, and how to write? In short, were their documents purely self-motivated? The answer is no, and current middle and high school students would benefit by analyzing and understanding the nuanced differences among the three writers. Let's begin with Charlie. Though he volunteered to draft the fundraising letters, Charlie didn't personally generate the idea; his youth group members did, so one could argue that the documents were less self-motivated than a poem, short story, or journal entry an adolescent might be inspired to write with total rhetorical freedom. By comparison, though, Dana had even less rhetorical freedom than Charlie. Like Charlie, she agreed to write at a brainstorming session; unlike him, she felt some obligation to write by virtue of her elected position. The difference is subtle, but it does exist. Similarly, Fran's elected position prompted her, but she was even more obligated to write than Dana because previous LYO presidents had set precedent, so she had the least rhetorical freedom of all three writers, at least in terms of deciding when, where, and what to write.

What do these degreed variations suggest, and how can understanding them help our students become stronger, more mature, and potentially civic-

minded writers? Invoking again Atwell's *Lessons That Change Writers*, we might say that the degreed variations represent a "writing principle," a fact about the craft of writing with the potential to "invite novice writers into the club" (34). In the real world of civic writing, it may be more accurate to claim that there are *degrees of self-motivation*, and so we may be oversimplifying or even misconstruing writing processes and products back in the classroom by pigeon-holing documents as **either** self-motivated **or** not self-motivated, as though the two categories were mutually exclusive (Emig). Equally important, the snapshots suggest that writers can "own" documents—just as Charlie, Dana, and Fran took ownership in their writing—without having total rhetorical freedom. We can easily introduce this principle to students by incorporating an Atwellian approach: *directly teach it* in a lesson or mini-lesson.

In lessons about principles, the group, including the teacher, collaborates in creating definitions, procedures, and techniques. In others, the teacher presents guidelines for writing well, along with relevant models of excellent writing—and sometimes weak writing too, so the differences are clear. And some lessons involve demonstrations of the teacher's writing: I draft in front of students on overhead transparencies or bring in and show them writing I crafted at home, explain what I was thinking and trying to do and answer students' questions about my choices. (34)

In this setting, teachers could showcase highly anthologized speeches, such as Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," or the current socio-political writing of, for example, Ellen Goodman or George Will, and speculate along with students about the author's degree of self-motivation and, in turn, its relationship to rhetorical freedom and/or writer ownership. If the teacher showcased student writing samples, the authors could be interviewed along the same lines.

Another option—again following Atwell’s lead—is for teachers to share samples of their own socially significant writing. Bomer and Bomer acknowledge that teachers “. . . have often taken no part in political processes . . . [and] . . . have let [them]selves get mired in today’s busyness at the expense of tomorrow’s transformations” (5); however, many English teachers play roles in socially significant causes or community organizations, so they could share their own writing in at least this way. I know an English teacher, for example, who volunteers her time for writing fundraising documents, grant applications, and website texts for a local emergency relief fund. In addition, she supported a regional teachers group by writing all the documents associated with an annual fundraiser supporting scholarships for pre-service teachers. These two organizations—the emergency relief fund and the teacher’s group—clearly represent two of the teacher’s *writing territories*, and they provide her with an opportunity to “write for a better world” in the Bomer and Bomer sense of the phrase. Especially relevant here, this teacher takes tremendous pride in her documents, even though none of them are truly self-motivated in the way the field has traditionally defined the phrase. Like Atwell, then, this teacher could share drafts or sections of her documents in class and talk about them in terms self motivation, rhetorical freedom, and ownership. Doing so may well inspire students to expand/recognize their writing territories, but it could also reinforce a valuable writing principle: that written documents need not be purely self-motivated to foster ownership.

Conclusion

In “The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year,” Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz report that “successful” first-year college students believe writing serves a larger purpose than merely completing an assignment or earning a grade; instead, they imagine writing as “a transaction, an exchange in which they can ‘give and get’” (139) and an opportunity to “speak back to the world” (129). This observation brings to mind the final

paragraphs of the three snapshots included in this essay. These paragraphs showcase the students’ actual words, and they reveal that Charlie, Dana, and Fran weren’t interested in a teacherly evaluation or a letter grade for their writing. What mattered to them was the writing, itself, and whether or not it had either directly or indirectly changed their worlds, or even *the* world. In all cases, the students saw themselves as “successful” writers because their documents had achieved their purposes.

No teacher can replicate in the classroom the authentic settings depicted in the snapshots; however, we can still try to expand our students’ writing territories in the direction of social causes and social action. As Bomer and Bomer point out, “What we have not done often enough is position our classroom work head to head with the social world outside of school. We have not concentrated enough on learning about social problems, caring about them, and trying to do something to help” (7).

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