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Making Another World: Relationships in Playwriting A Study of High School Playwriting Students

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Abstract

A study of former participants in high and middle school playwriting programs investigated students' perceptions of their experiences. After 20+ years of partnerships in a wide range of schools, Washington D.C.'s Young Playwrights' Theater examined how and why playwriting works and for whom. How does the form and process of writing plays motivate students, including some who don't like to write or struggle in English class? The results offer intriguing insights about the nature of playwriting and the impact of relationships with mentors, peers, and audiences to influence students' skills, motivation and self-perceptions as writers.

You can write about anything and you gotta be good -- well you have to be good on human behavior, right? Because you're building a character, basically. And everything that character does has to be based on a certain ethics or principles that character believes in. And that's really, really hard. You make another world, basically. Another reality in the reality -- No: that reality is based on the reality in which you live in.

William, 11th grade playwriting student, Bell Multicultural High School

William had never written a play and said he didn't usually like to write. When reflecting on his first play -- created through a Young Playwrights' Theater program in his 10th grade English class -- he identified the power of the playwriting process to create a world out of imagination and close observation of one's own life.

Young Playwrights' Theater has worked with students in Washington, D.C. area schools since 1995. Over that time, in a wide range of schools, YPT has seen playwriting's extraordinary, even life-altering impact on some students. Through their ongoing pre-post assessments they have collected strong evidence that the process of creating a short play can help students progress toward specific writing standards and can have useful applications to other writing (Young Playwrights' Theater, 2012). But they wanted to investigate more deeply how and why playwriting works and for whom. They wondered what about the form or process of writing a play -- as opposed to other types of writing -- fascinated many students including some, like William, who say they do not like to write and don't excel in English class. They also wanted to understand what aspects of their programs seemed to be most memorable and important to former students and if and how they thought it had had an impact on them in or outside of school.

These questions inspired a research project (for which I was lead investigator) involving former participants in YPT's programs. The key factors that emerged involve both the act of writing a play and the relationships with adults and peers developed through the process. The results have relevance for the teaching not only of playwriting, but of all writing.

Opportunities for creative writing in middle and high schools have decreased in many schools across the U.S. in recent years (Haddix & Williams, 2016; Addison & McGee, 2010). As the Common Core standards adopted in 42 states advise, "The overwhelming focus of writing throughout high school should be on arguments and informative/explanatory texts" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The students in the study reiterated this "overwhelming focus," most often describing their writing experiences in middle and high school as "responding to prompts" -- analytic, short answer responses and essays with a restricted range of choices of pre-determined topics. None of

the middle or high schools in this study required a single creative writing class and none of the students had written a play before. The emphasis on informational text along with the preponderance of high stakes tests to measure writing (Ravitch, 2010; Singer, 2016) may have unintended negative consequences on students' attitudes toward and motivation to write.

The voices of the student writers in this study, both those who say they previously liked to write and those who didn't, offer insights about what motivates students to write and to invest their work with creativity and care. They speak about the relationships and working environment that helped them succeed and the modes of thinking and writing they developed during the process. We hope that this study helps illuminate aspects of the process and offers models of school and community partnerships that can be adapted to other settings.

Intervention

The YPT Playwriting Process

YPT serves students in four basic ways:

1. The In-School Playwriting Program, a 12-session in-school playwriting program usually conducted in the English classroom (occasionally in theater classes) originally focused on high school, now expanded to include middle and elementary (down to 5th grade).
2. The New Play Festival, which involves adult actors, directors and technical theater specialists in the production of selected students' original plays.
3. After-school and Summer Playwriting Programs in writing and theater in which students write and perform original plays.
4. The Student Advisory Council comprised of current and former students who advise YPT staff and pursue collaborative artistic projects to promote YPT's programs.

In the 12-session In-School Playwriting Program, every student writes an original play guided by a YPT teaching artist (typically a playwright and/or director) in collaboration with the classroom teacher. Teaching artists design and lead a series of theater experiences and writing assignments to help students learn the form and structure of a play, develop ideas for their own work, and clarify grammar and syntax. During the process each student has an opportunity to meet individually with the teaching artist to discuss his or her play. The classroom teacher also works with students during the sessions and continues the process between sessions (usually weekly) through homework assignments and reminders. Students see some of their scenes acted in class and then are eligible to have their plays selected and performed by adult actors in the annual three-day New Play Festival presented at a professional theater in the Washington, D.C. area. All in-school playwriting students are invited to participate in an after-school program at YPT's studios in which they write, produce, and act in original plays. Students in the after-school program receive a stipend to offset the loss of other possible after-school income. After-school

students are also invited to take part in the Student Advisory Council, which involves discussions about the programs as well as additional collaborative play development.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions for this study were:

1. What experiences in the programs stand out most to students in retrospect?
2. How do students perceive the impact of playwriting and YPT on their lives after their direct involvement?
3. What about playwriting most interests students and draws certain people to it?

Further specific questions that arose from the data and will be explored in the findings and discussion sections include:

1. Are there basic differences in responses between the short-term and long-term cohorts?
2. Are there commonalities or differences in responses between students who say they like to write and/or enjoy English class, and those who say they do not?

Methods

Sample

Two cohorts of students participated in the study – labeled short-term (ST) (14) and long-term (LT) (16). The 14 short-term students were involved only in the 12-session in-school playwriting program at Bell Multicultural High School in Washington, D.C. during the 2012-13 school year. Bell Multicultural is a Title I public school¹. Eighty-six percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunches, and thirty-one percent are English Language Learners (ELLs). 53% of students were identified as reading below proficiency, approximately the district average. The short-term sample included eight males and six females of which eight are Latino and six African American.

The 16 long-term students (10 female, 6 male, 5 African American, 5 White, 5 Latino, 1 Asian) attended a variety of Washington, D.C. (12) and suburban (4) high schools. All had participated in the 12-session playwriting program along with other voluntary YPT activities. Six students participated in the after-school Young Playwrights' Workshop held at YPT's studio space, eleven in the New Play festival, and five in the Student Advisory Council. At the time of the study in June 2014, eight long-term students were in high school, and seven were in college (full-

¹ Title 1 provides Federal Assistance to schools with high percentages of students from low-income families.

or part-time) and one was a college graduate.

Both cohort samples must be considered purposive, though an attempt was made to select the short-term students randomly. According to the Bell Multicultural administration, students were placed randomly into the three Language Arts sections. 11th grade English teachers were enlisted to invite a range of students for interviews, not just those who excelled in the program or in English class. It is distinctly possible, however, that there were non-random factors involved in class assignments or teacher invitations. The long-term cohort is strictly purposive, nominated by YPT staff as examples of students who had been highly involved in one or more voluntary program activities.

Schools and parents granted permission for the interviews. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the study to protect the anonymity of participants.

Interview and Coding Protocol

Students were interviewed once for approximately 30 minutes each, using a semi-structured protocol. Transcripts of all interviews were coded, with a combination open and axial-coded classification system (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). Some questions (e.g. “What is your strongest memory of YPT?”) lent themselves to initial open coding (generating codes from a line-by-line analysis of the text), while responses to more specific areas of investigation (e.g. “Has the experience of playwriting helped you in other kinds of writing?”) generated a range of subcategories directly related to the topic in question. After initial codes were generated, axial coding was used to combine and simplify the codes. The codes that emerged from these data, stated as themes, applied equally well to both cohorts.

Findings

Factor analysis of the data revealed five major themes with multiple sub-categories.

Emergent Codes

Table 1.

Themes and Associated Concepts

Themes	Associated concepts
1. Personal expression	Saying something you want to say Trusting your ideas/Becoming more confident Seeing your words come alive Being acknowledged for accomplishments Making a difference

2. Writing	Inspiration and Motivation Writing techniques and challenges Applications to other writing
3. Relationships with Adult Mentors	Treated like an adult artist Work process (editing, directing) Role models Influence on identity and sense of possibilities
4. Relationships with peers	Meeting like-minded peers Working toward common goals Identity and popularity in school
5. Life lessons	Self-confidence Empathy Responsibility Creativity Aspirations

In the following section the major themes are presented with quotes selected as clear examples of a common idea.

1. Personal Expression

The most common response from both cohorts concerned personal expression. It was the “*I am somebody*” or “*I can be heard*” category. The associated concepts within this theme were particularly intertwined, linking the process and the impact of writing on self and others. Every student mentioned this theme at least once; they were excited by the invitation to create something individual and personally meaningful, and by the chance to see their words come to life theatrically. The lack of creative writing in school (particularly high school) frequently mentioned by both cohorts clearly made the opportunity for self-expression particularly memorable. This theme wove together ideas of personal choice and interests, a sense of validation in seeing one’s words acted out, and a general self-efficacy for writing and/or making a difference in the world. As Edgardo (LT) put it:

I definitely learned more about expressing myself, about how it does matter what I say. My opinion does matter, because, beforehand I wasn't much of a person to express myself in a different sense. I would express myself through words but not in a creative manner -- that wasn't how I expressed myself.

Edgardo saw himself as a verbal person but also said he did not usually enjoy English class or writing. The invitation to choose his own topic and the validation he felt for his attempts gave

him the sense that he had something creative to say and his opinion mattered.

Students contrasted the personal feelings expressed in their plays with school writing experiences which they most often described as “responding to prompts.” As Jasmine (ST) said, “In a play you are able to tell a message, and with writing [in English class] you're given a prompt so you really can't express your emotions.” The ability to inject feelings and emotions in their writing was often mentioned as a motivator to write and a key contrast with other writing in school.

Members of both cohorts, whether having a play fully produced or seeing a scene acted out in class, discussed the personal impact of hearing their words spoken in a dramatic form. As Elias (LT) put it, “It’s really encouraging when you write something and it’s performed right there in front of you. Bringing the characters to life. It’s an incredible experience.”

The 11 long-term students whose plays were produced in the New Play Festival received a kind of acknowledgement for their accomplishments that they say has had lasting impact on their identity and confidence. Nancy (LT) said,

I'll tell people, "Oh yeah, I wrote a play and it was produced" as funny as that sounds to offhandedly mention you are a published playwright.... And people will look it up on YouTube and watch it and be like "What, you wrote that?" I occasionally go back and look at it and see how young I was and see how much I've learned since then... how much stronger my voice has gotten in many ways.

The production experience for the students in the New Play Festival went far beyond the initial writing of the play. After having their plays selected, they collaborated with a dramaturge, the production team, and the actors. This entrée into the world of professional theatre amplified the impact of the experience. The produced playwrights saw the writing of the play as just a part of a whole process that motivated them and has remained a deep source of pride.

The theme of personal expression also encompassed students’ interest in social justice and their desire to make a difference in the world. Many of their plays focused on concerns about social and societal issues. Amanda (LT) put it this way,

This play was the first time that I had an issue to talk about and it was so direct, so powerful and still creative. So I think that I learned from this that I can use writing, creative writing or any type of writing, as a way to be an activist and fight for social justice in cases that I'm interested in.

The five long-term students on the Student Advisory Council had further opportunities to write and perform plays for the community. Nina said, “I was really just inspired that I was part of a

thing that did a good thing for the community. I've never really been -- I've only seen other people... be involved in the thing, so I was really inspired by that." The Advisory Council, in addition to advising the YPT staff, wrote, acted in, and produced their own plays around a central theme they developed collaboratively.

2. Writing

The students' discussions of what motivated them to write, what they struggled with and learned through writing plays, and how they have used what they have learned in other writing, comprised the writing theme. Both students who liked to write and those who said they didn't found the process challenging, referenced specific writing techniques they learned, and expressed satisfaction in accomplishing the task. 13 of the 16 long-term cohort students said they like to write and most did well in English class. In contrast, 7 of the 14 short-term cohort students said they enjoy or do well in English class and just 8 said they like to write outside of English class.

While having a choice of topics and style was a positive motivation it was also a prime source of challenge and concern for students. Even the most successful playwrights identified the biggest challenge as finding and settling on an idea for a play. The fact that the playwriting program was part of the English class and was considered in students' grades added a sense of urgency and accountability to the process. Jennifer's (LT) comment about choosing a topic and facing deadlines was typical:

For me the biggest difficulty I had was just choosing an idea and running with it. I was back and forth between a bunch of ideas all throughout the weeks I was supposed to be writing because I just couldn't stick with anything. So then, out of desperation, I had to finally just choose an idea and write it or get a bad grade and I think that was a pretty big lesson to me -- if you have an idea you should just write it all down, no matter if it's good or bad, no matter how it turns out.

As Jennifer suggests, the invitation to write something creative and personally meaningful was not in and of itself sufficient to motivate many students. They needed both encouragement and deadlines to overcome some of their hesitancy and self-doubt. The structure of the 12 session in-school program scaffolds writing assignments to help students develop their characters and ideas. Nina (LT) describes it:

I think that they were helping us initially, like, think of an idea... they were really pushing -- like, a monologue, that was their traditional structure -- just the easiest way to teach students how to do it. Start with some action between two characters. So I think that really helped me when I wasn't sure where to start.

Some, as in Jennifer's comment above, initially wrote to complete a class assignment, then received positive feedback and became more inspired. For others in both cohorts the potential to have their play produced in the New Play Festival was an inspiration in continuing to write. Jessica (ST) spoke of her strongest memory of the program:

The fact of at least being a finalist, even though I wasn't chosen that time, felt really good. I felt like, wow, out of all those people mine was chosen at least to be a finalist. I mean as a finalist I felt more inspired to want to do creative writing later on in college or something. But I'm not too sure yet. It's just an idea that I have.

Jessica's comment, like many others in both cohorts, highlights the sense of validation students felt through working with and getting feedback from the professional teaching artists. The status of the outside artist and the possibility of having one's work reach an audience outside of the classroom imbued the work with added importance and for some seemed to affect their identities as writers.

Many students commented on the acting exercises – improvisational warm up games that started most of the sessions along with more involved dialogues and scene work -- as memorable and motivating aspects of the playwriting process. Three long-term students cited acting as the inspiration to write and to get involved in the after-school program, in which they could perform their own plays. Carolina, a generally good student who gets A's and B's in all other subjects and D's in English said,

In YPT they don't judge you cause you don't know how to write. Like, "you forgot the P in the word."...They help us write stories and I love writing stories. I love the artistic way they help us...cause I need help. I can go to the YPT center right there and then they told me that I can act and that's my passion, I love acting...so that's how I start everything.

Many in the after-school program and Student Advisory Council mentioned the experience of acting in relation to writing. For some like Carolina it was a prime motivator. Others who were initially less comfortable with acting said it helped their confidence in speaking and reading their work as well as in the editing process as they heard their words spoken.

The technical challenges involved in writing a play were foremost in the minds of the short-term students. 7 of the 14 specifically cited the challenge of learning the techniques of playwriting. Jennifer (ST) described the hardest part of the process for her:

I think maybe figuring out dialogue and how to use that. I'm so used to paragraphs and doing essays and stuff like that. So creating a play and having to use all dialogue and

directions and stuff like that was a little difficult in the process.

None of the students, even those who said they liked to write, had ever written a play. Rosa (LT) recalled,

I had never written a play before. I did not know the basic structure of writing a play. It was a little hard for me to grasp the concept of the difference between writing a novel and writing a play, cause there is a completely different style of writing. It was confusing, but in the end I learned a lot from writing a play.

Finishing a short play in the 12-week program was a major challenge for many students. Students cited competing homework pressures, lack of computers at home and printing problems at school as factors. Despite these issues, YPT reports that approximately 90% of students finish their plays. The English teachers often expressed surprise that students completed the work and reported overall satisfaction in the students' writing, both of the final play and the other writing assignments given.

The students in both cohorts, whether in middle school, high school, or college found a variety of uses for the playwriting techniques they'd learned. Though many emphasized the differences between writing school papers and plays, they saw connections. Danielle (LT), a high school senior explained,

I think I've learned how to tie things together -- because in a play you can't leave very many things. I'm popping out essays for classes at a way too high rate... so that ability to conclude and draw back from the beginning and, in the case of plays, characters and plot points and that sort of thing, and in the case of essays facts or evidence and explanations and reasoning. And I think the conclusions that you built through playwriting can really help. Or they help me with essays.

Nancy (LT) also explained,

I think that what's been great about playwriting is that it helps me engage the audience from moment one, which is something that's vastly helpful in academic papers as well as in the theatre, because if you start out with some boring explanation people are going to tune out and not really care. But if you start with something that grabs people then they're more interested. That was probably the best writing techniques that I carried over into my academic career.

Nina (LT), who has aspirations as a writer said, "I guess it just makes me more open to trying

new things...And just being like a more well-rounded writer, which I feel is a more personal accomplishment.”

3. Relationships with Adult Mentors

All of YPT’s programs offer opportunities for collaboration between adult artists and student artists, focused on the students’ works of art. Students at all levels of involvement described the adult artists as central to their playwriting experience and often referred to YPT teachers as “mentors.” The New Play Festival participants spoke most distinctly about the influence of this collaboration. Assigned to work with an adult dramaturge over a period of months, they interacted with the director, actors, and technical staff. After-school program participants and Student Advisory Council members also frequently discussed the feeling of connection to the entire YPT organization through their relationships with individual artist mentors.

Students discussed both the importance of being taken seriously as an artist/writer and specific effects of the editing process. Jennifer (LT) said,

It was just so surprising to see something that I had written looked at by adults and professionals and to get feedback based on what I had written. That was a really new experience for me. It had never really happened before with my writing and that really gave me a huge boost of self-confidence when it comes to writing creatively. I think that the YPT program is pretty unique -- just the degree to which your writing is taken seriously and the feedback that you get.

The long-term cohort members frequently connected the editing process to their relationships with their teaching artist mentors. As Amanda, now in college, recalled,

My mentor was really fantastic. Michelle -- I don't remember her last name -- she's really awesome and we're still connected and send happy birthdays to each other... I had never worked with an adult that was editing my work. I'd always worked with an adult telling me like "this is what a stanza is, this is what [unintelligible] is"... And then having somebody dig deep in me like, "You know you should expand on this idea." That was really hard for me, cause no one had ever done that for me.

Some described feeling that they had become part of a community of writers. Rosa (LT) said,

I can do writing on my own. And I do it on my own. But with YPT it was more of --I'm writing to share with my family. I'm writing to share with people who are going to help me develop my writing even more. They are going to give me inspiration. They're going to be my teachers in that sense.

Short-term participants frequently described ways in which the teaching artist personally helped them through the process (though only three remembered the name of the teaching artist). They particularly recognized how the teaching artist helped them develop and trust their ideas. In recalling her strongest memory of the program Kassandra (ST) said,

I guess the support they gave us with making our plays -- cause many of us were confused or we were stumped -- but the woman didn't give up on us, she encouraged us, she supported us.

Involvement in the New Play Festival deepened the bonds, bringing participants into a fully collaborative process with adult artists. As Nancy (LT) recalls,

I think perhaps my strongest memory is of the day when they invited me into the rehearsal room and I got to see the two actors rehearsing the play and I got to give them notes and talk to the director and I felt part of the organization. I mean it made me feel very grown up in many ways but also just kind of brought me into the experience of what it's like to be in professional theater, which was very inspiring to me as a young person who wanted to do theater and still does want to do theater as a career.

4. Relationships with Peers

The collaborative aspects of playwriting stood out to students as a strong motivation and a major difference from other writing experiences. Many in both cohorts described the camaraderie developed through classroom activities. As Kassandra (ST) put it,

I just remember the YPT participants coming in and our classroom would be all happy, all jolly. We would all get excited cause we knew we were going to show them our plays we created and it was really fun.

And Charles (ST) remembered,

The most satisfying part was working with everyone that I pretty much didn't know at first, meeting new friends. It was like a good time to get know each other better... in a funny, artistic way.

Rosa (LT) remembered the process as an important bonding experience:

11th grade I was very shy. I had recently come to D.C. I lived in Texas before I came to D.C. so I didn't know anyone in class and everybody seemed to know each other. And YPT came and kind of brought the whole class together, cause we would all participate in

writing this play and we would have little activities we would do with our classmates. And that made me a little more open with my classmates. And so they just helped me come out of my shell and express myself in words.

For students who like to write but are normally surrounded by less motivated peers the playwriting process can transform the atmosphere in English class. Amanda (LT) said,

I've written poetry since I was in 2nd grade, I guess, so writing has always been something that's interested me. But I'd never seen so many other students interested in it as well. So it was really magical for me in that sense that they were able to come into a classroom where there are students from all over the place and they have different interests of all different kinds and for them to still impact all of them. For each and every one of us to get something out of it and really enjoy writing and have something of our own.

Not all classrooms enjoyed the same level of enthusiasm for the program. Jennifer (LT) said,

There was definitely a spectrum of how people experienced it. There were some people who didn't take it seriously and some who really internalized the experience and I think got more from it...There were a few other people who I think were really into it, but I think the majority kind of blew it off.

Voluntary involvement in the after-school program and advisory council deepened the peer connection. Speaking of the after-school program Amanda (LT) said, "It was so interesting that writing connected everything we did. And I had never been a part of a community in that sense."

5. Life Lessons

In response to the questions, "*What do you think you learned through the experience?*" "*Have you applied anything you learned in other areas of your life? How?*" many of the participants, particularly in the long-term cohort, reflected on attitudes, points of view, and behaviors that they attribute, at least in part, to their involvement in playwriting and YPT.

Many in the long-term cohort stressed the sense of responsibility and commitment they were expected to demonstrate as part of the voluntary after-school programs. Students were paid a stipend to attend and were treated like members of a professional company with high standards for participation and attendance. Amanda (LT) discussed her learning from that experience:

So it gave you a sense of, like, I need to be on time, I need to be punctual; I need to be responsible about managing time. So I think they worked with us on our lives in general. I remember my senior year and I was so busy applying for colleges and other programs and events, I think my stipend went from like \$200 to 30 dollars. I learned a lesson

during that. I can join and be a part of my community but I still need to put the same amount of effort into everything I do. And if I can't do that then I need to back off on some things -- manage my time wisely.

While \$200 is certainly less than a student could make in a regular after-school job it was both an important symbol of commitment on the part of the organization and the participants. It signalled a professional relationship while helping in a small way to offset transportation costs and other needs.

A prominent personal insight, discussed in detail by four long-term students, concerned increased empathy and understanding about others' points of view, a key challenge in writing an effective play. Amanda (LT) described her play and the challenge she worked through with her dramaturge:

How do I sum it up -- basically an intense interaction between a homosexual and a homophobic, and battling it out until there was justice, until both people could see both sides of the story. And at first where I was going -- this is where my mentor helped me -- I was all on the side of my protagonist, the homosexual, and I wasn't giving any credit to my antagonist, the homophobic. And she was like "This is a little uneven in how you're trying to solve something, but you're leaning, you're picking a side and you can't pick a side, you need to be a neutral person, especially as the writer." And so I was able to develop a conversation where this homophobic had a story as well. And she -- my protagonist -- needed to see that in order for them to be able to communicate together. So basically interaction between people, you need to see both sides of the story in order to settle big problems.... That was a huge piece of learning for me that she [the YPT mentor] really helped me with because I've always thought of myself as someone who is pretty active in communities and fights for justice. At that point I was always on one side like "Oh, I believe this and you're wrong cause we don't share the same views" but *I'm* the open minded person. Well I wasn't [laughs].

This challenge of making characters come alive, to make them seem real and three dimensional, was discussed by many of the playwrights. And for some, the struggle to show all sides of an issue or argument offered life lessons. As Nancy (LT) put it:

I think that really has helped me in the larger world -- to remember to be sympathetic to people, because even if I don't agree with them, I don't always know their circumstances and I can't relate to them in all ways...so just kind of be more open minded and more understanding of people's stories.

Nancy and Amanda's comments about empathy show how the creative process of exploring characters through playwriting can reveal basic human truths and self-awareness. Through the process of reading and acting, the writer is allowed to step outside of the work to experience his or her characters. The writer can use his or her imagination to explore life situations and events in a work of art. To some extent all writing allows one to step back and experience one's characters. But playwriting puts characters and relationships at the center of the story and adds physical reality to those people and situations.

Other life lessons described by students concerned collaboration and teamwork. Reflecting on his time in the after-school program and Student Advisory Council Edgardo (LT) said,

Collaborative -- I think that's what I took out a lot from YPT -- it definitely gave me a sense of community, a sense of a place I could go where I could feel comfortable expressing myself. And that I took with me, that I can use it elsewhere, like where I work right now. I work with kids, so that idea of listening to the student express themselves, you know, I don't think I would have had that if it wasn't for YPT as well as with Ola Cultura, that's the name of the non-profit [I work for]. I wouldn't have made any attempt, there wouldn't have been much interest in connecting with others, and allowing them to share their story with me so I can share with the world.

The connections Edgardo made about stories – both one's own and others' – bring together common threads in the study linking themes of personal expression with the connection to mentors, peers and other people. Many of the students' plays were personal and contained direct biographical elements. Others included wild flights of imagination and magical realism. The act of sharing one's stories and listening carefully to others' required a safe, supportive atmosphere that had to be built throughout the process -- what Edgardo called his sense of place. Both cohorts describe many specific ways that this collaborative environment was established and nurtured -- from the initial classroom theater exercises through the collaborative play production process with students from other schools and adult professionals. Many spoke of their connection to members of the group as prime motivators, supporters, and ultimately models of creative partnerships.

Discussion

While it is useful to define and analyze the five emergent themes it is clear from these data that the students recollect their experience with YPT as an inseparable whole. Writing a play was the vehicle and starting point but students' primary memories and descriptions of their involvement interweave writing with relationships and link personal expression with communication to an audience. The answers to the three research questions all connect the nature of playwriting with the contexts of the in- and out-of-school programs that YPT has created.

In answer to the first research question, three aspects of the experience stood out as most memorable and influential for students in both cohorts: 1) the collaborative nature of the process and the relationships forged with peers and adults, 2) the freedom to communicate their own ideas in their own way, and 3) the chance to see and hear their writing in dramatic form. YPT's specific program structures (including curriculum design, professional development, and assessment) directly fostered these values across all of the in-school and out-of school programs.

The consistency in these three areas between short-term and long-term cohorts was an interesting and potentially meaningful finding. While the long-term students' memories were more layered and in-depth, the short-term students had similar experiences at a more basic level. Even those short-term students who struggled and did not finish a play identified enjoyable aspects of the in-class process in terms of connections with peers, encouragement from an outside professional, and the unusual chance to write on a topic of their own choosing in school.

The second question concerning students' retrospective perceptions of the lasting impact of the experience revealed a range of interesting insights and connections. They cited areas of growth related to personal development, social interaction, and applications of learning to other endeavors. Most prominently, they mentioned increased self-confidence in generating and trusting their ideas, speaking and acting, helping others, and interacting with adults. They tied these impacts both to the successful completion of something they perceived as challenging and worthwhile as well as to the response and support they received from teaching artists, teachers, peers, and audiences.

Students offered many examples of how playwriting helped them develop thinking and communication skills, including how to grab the reader's attention, hone in on key story elements, include different viewpoints, and insert one's own opinions and emotions into a piece of writing. Their comments about deepening empathy, listening, and respecting other people's viewpoints reveal important, possibly unique, qualities of playwriting. These very specific and useful applications provide strong justification for playwriting as part of the English curriculum - even one primarily focused on essays and non-fiction.

Five long-term students spoke of pursuing writing in some form, from journalism to screenwriting. Even those without writing aspirations -- looking toward careers in health policy, teaching, aeronautical engineering, and the military -- saw the positive influence of the playwriting experience on their future lives.

The skills of effective storytelling are widely applicable to other pursuits and careers, not simply because many professions involve some kind of writing, but because of the need to define and promote oneself and one's ideas in the rapidly transforming world of work. Daniel Pink (2006, p.

103) describes this skill as “context enriched by emotion.” The ability to construct a narrative, to tell a story that connects to others is “increasingly seen as an essential business skill” (Gottschall, 2013, p.1). The long-term cohort members described what they learned in playwriting in many of the terms Pink and others (Denning, 2011; Simmons, 2006; among many others) have defined as effective storytelling -- making an emotional connection, identifying telling details, voicing different points of view, bringing characters to life, finding the essence of the story. The students provide evidence for playwriting as an effective way to develop these critical storytelling skills that offer valuable potential for future career success.

The third research question asks what is unique about playwriting and the people most drawn to it. Given the dearth of opportunities for creative writing described by the students from all of the schools in the study, it is not surprising that many of them would be excited by an opportunity for self-expression. These data suggest something more: that the interactive, verbal and physical elements of theater – the ability to see something brought to life and to continue to engage in it as a creator – make playwriting different from other types of creative writing. Moving from the two-dimensional paper to three-dimensional acting makes many aspects of good writing visible and obvious; it helps clarify why punctuation matters, how an effective story builds from a sequence of scenes, how desires and feelings can be expressed in both direct and subtle ways. After hearing their words spoken, many of the students were eager to continue the editing process, a common challenge for adolescent writers.

YPT has aligned their curriculum with the local D.C. public school and Common Core Standards, but this type of creative writing is neither a typical feature of most schools’ curricula nor an explicit requirement of the standards. Playwriting can help teach grammar rules, for example, but the playwright’s job lies more in capturing, rather than correcting characters’ speech. In a play the characters, events, point of view, central message, along with word choice, intonation, and cultural vernacular are all in the hands of the student artist. Conventions of writing serve the play rather than being learned as de-contextualized rules.

The writing process also distinguishes playwriting from other types of writing. Reading out loud, collaborative conferencing among students and with teachers, learning to use direct quotes and dialogue, may be features in some English classrooms, but the focus on characters and aural communication and the consistent process of dramatic embodiment is central to playwriting. The direct verbal and physical aspects make it more accessible and dynamic for some, including English language learners and those who don’t usually like to write.

The six short-term and two long-term students who said they struggle in English class and don’t usually like to write all said that they enjoyed the process and felt a sense of accomplishment in their work, regardless of whether they finished a play. Their descriptions of helpful activities and program supports are useful to YPT, but the sample is far too small to generalize widely from

these responses. Previously reluctant writers whose plays were recognized in some way (selected or even considered for the New Play Festival) expressed a strong motivation to continue writing and to participate in other YPT activities. The aspect of competition, or at least the potential of an audience beyond the teacher, was highly motivating for some students.

Recommendations for Partnership Projects in Writing

1. Connecting in-school and after-school programs

Extensive research documents the power of arts-based after-school programs like YPT to help students develop collaborative relationships with caring adults and peers, and build the kind of confidence and purpose that can shape identity and aspirations (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Heath & Roach, 1999, among many others). Many researchers have reported on the positive impact of professional artists working with students and teachers in schools (Fiske, 1999; Stake, Bresler & Mabry, 1991; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005, among many others). And some research attests to the impact of playwriting on thinking skills and writing skills (Chizhik, 2009) and the use of drama activities in the classroom to motivate students to write (Cremin, Gooch, Blakemore, Goff, & Macdonald, 2006; Woolland, 2008). However, an important distinguishing feature of YPT's program design is the way in which all of the program elements are connected, giving students in the in-school programs opportunities and support to become more involved in after-school activities, to engage directly with theater professionals, and to take leadership roles in and outside of school.

Regular attendance is a common challenge for after-school programs for middle and high school students. Competing after-school activities and the need to make money limits participation in many programs (Lauver, 2004). The stipend YPT offered for regular participation was one factor that helped recruit students initially and maintain attendance. In speaking of their motivation to attend, however, long-term students primarily emphasized factors other than the stipend. They discussed the bond they felt with their peers from their own and other schools and the responsibility they felt to achieve their mutual goals. They also appreciated the chance to interact and form relationships with more of the YPT staff (including the executive director and other senior staff members). Transportation difficulties and competing events however, were constant challenges. It helped that a core group of the after-school and Advisory Council students came from Bell Multicultural High School, just a few blocks away from the YPT studios.

2. Working with professional artist/mentors

Students in both cohorts emphasized the support and sense of empowerment they felt from the YPT teaching artists. They said that their work was taken seriously even when they struggled with story ideas or had mistakes in grammar or spelling. They frequently credited the teaching artist for helping them overcome their initial fear and face the difficulty of getting started on a play. The teaching artists' status as writing or theater professionals made their feedback and

support particularly meaningful for students. An outsider, freed from responsibility for testing and grading, the teaching artist can play the role of facilitator, editor, and coach.

Students in the long-term cohort tended to characterize their relationships with YPT faculty and staff as mentorships, which influence cognitive, social-emotional, and identity development (Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). These relationships are not random occurrences; they are built into the program design and structure of the organization. Students interested in continuing beyond the in-school program were offered ways to do so and became part of a company of professional artists. Working with other students and staff members -- on public performances, in fund-raising and public relations projects, and in discussions on programmatic issues -- deepened connections to each other and to the YPT organization and gave students valuable experience in collaborating and problem solving in relation to artistic creation and production. They tended to describe their experiences as accomplishments -- something to put on their resume, a source of pride and identity -- not simply activities in which they had participated.

3. Collaboration between English teachers and teaching artists

The collaborating teachers at Bell Multicultural High School and all of the participating schools worked closely with the teaching artists and were very invested in the project and impressed with their students' work, based on surveys and interviews that were part of this study. Some had gone through the process with YPT as many as five times. But they also were inundated with other priorities the rest of the week and were tasked with collecting students' playwriting work and helping get work printed (an often daunting task), in addition to addressing the rest of the required curriculum. The English teachers played a key role in the playwriting conferences and during the time between workshops. This close teacher/teaching artist collaboration has to be considered essential to producing the number of finished short plays that YPT collects in 12 sixty- to ninety-minute workshops with classes of 20 to more than 30 students.

Conclusions

The commonality of factors emerging from both short-term (non-voluntary) and long-term (voluntary) speaks to the potential of even limited exposure to YPT's playwriting programs to motivate students and develop important aspects of thinking and writing. It shows the potential impact of program models that put students in direct contact with professional artists and give them opportunities to reach an audience beyond the classroom. These data reflect a variety of settings, levels of involvement, different economic and social backgrounds, and a range of personal strengths and interests, which helps to validate and extend the potential applications of the findings.

YPT has shown over its history that students from a range of schools and different levels of writing proficiency can be drawn to the art of theater and writing. They have also demonstrated

that a playwriting program can be a productive and coherent part of the English curriculum, supporting and furthering the literacy standards in elementary through high school grades. This study helps illuminate why playwriting is so powerful for some students and how an active, collaborative writing process can build relationships that support personal and academic growth.

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