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Writing Between the Lines: Aaliyah's Dialogic Strategies for Overcoming Academic Writing Disengagement

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Abstract

This case study report uses the conceptual framework of Bakhtinian notions of dialogism to explore how a highly motivated 10th grade English student, Aaliyah, developed strategies for combating her disengagement in academic writing. Aaliyah's anxiety and boredom stemmed from multiple factors relating to the distance between her home and school literacy: a desire for dialogic exchange with a partner within her Discourse community, writing topics and modalities that conflicted with her notion of what constitutes purposeful writing, and lack of knowledge of disciplinary writing conventions. Findings revealed that Aaliyah's strategy of infusing her compositional practices with opportunities for dialogical exchange with, about, and beyond the text, helped her successfully navigate feelings of boredom and anxiety.

Key words: engagement, academic writing, dialogic strategies

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Everything goes in one ear and out the other and I don't get what they're saying and I'm just doze, just daydreaming, and I don't feel like being there and I don't do the work right. Even though I have an A. But I could do better. (Aaliyah, 10th Grade Student)

Aaliyah (all names are pseudonyms) is, by many measures, an academic success story. She is an honor roll student with no discipline infractions who labels herself the "good girl" that her parents expect her to be. Certainly, this description was my impression of Aaliyah when I first met her as a freshman in my writing class. She was disciplined, cooperative, and ambitious—a student I felt confident had mastered the art of doing school. However, as her quote above indicates, there was more going on with Aaliyah's school engagement than surface measures like grades might indicate. And she knew it; she had a sense that somehow, despite earning A's, her learning was not what she wanted it to be. I recruited her as part of a larger research study on adolescent disengagement, conducted during her sophomore year, because I was interested in the contradictions she embodied: between her high achievement and her stated antipathy towards school in general and writing in particular; between her strong motivation to succeed and her lack of engagement in her classwork; between the honor-roll grades that she earned and the skills and knowledge that she nevertheless struggled to master.

Aaliyah occupied a fraught space in which she had to negotiate among multiple expectations and demands. Aaliyah's parents are Muslims who immigrated to America from India shortly before she was born, and most of her extended family now lives in and around New Jersey. On the one hand, the culture of her close-knit family underscored the importance of exemplary grades for future professional success. When Aaliyah discussed the expectations of her parents, she said, "If I don't get good grades then I'm not going to have a job. And I've got a lot of pressure to be a doctor or something with money-making." On the other hand, her family often returns to India for month-long stays during the school year, which creates challenges for Aaliyah who might miss several weeks of instruction. While she worked diligently at school assignments, she felt her teachers did not provide the kind of scaffolding she needed. Ultimately what she found most frustrating, even painful, was the demand of the writing itself. She often did not possess the knowledge of genre conventions or the facility for formal academic style that her teachers, adhering to the standards of the Common Core, required.

Framing the Study

Much has been written about the instructional strategies that teachers can and do adopt to support increased writing motivation. A few examples of strategies that have proven to be effective at increasing writing engagement include (1) incorporating new modes of writing in the classroom (Anderson, 2008; Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Clark, 2009; Doering, Beach & O'Brien, 2007; Smith, 2008), (2) designing more authentic writing tasks and contexts (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Fairbanks, 1996; Lam & Law, 2006; Potter, McCormick & Busching, 2001), and (3) encouraging peer-interaction through writing (Bintz & Shelton, 2004; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Liu & Tsai, 2008). Researchers have paid less attention to understanding what strategies students have adopted to confront negative feelings about writing. Benson (2010) found that one disengaged adolescent writer coped with writing anxiety through an avoidance strategy, leaving the classroom whenever possible. Aaliyah, however, made her writing process more interactive as a strategy to increase her engagement in academic writing tasks. Because the

Common Core State Standards call for a renewed emphasis on traditional modes of academic writing (see secondary student writing samples available in Appendix C: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_C.pdf), it is more important than ever to understand what engagement strategies adolescents bring to the classroom and how we might build on those resources.

Research Questions

In order to understand what strategies Aaliyah used to combat disengagement, I first had to establish the nature of her disengagement. What were the demands of academic writing that caused her anxiety and in what ways did they conflict with her home literacy? As the study progressed, I became increasingly interested in learning more about the strategies Aaliyah adopted to make schooled writing feel more like her out-of-school writing and to what extent these strategies alleviated her feelings of boredom and anxiety.

Academic Writing (Dis)Engagement: Understanding Obstacles to Flow

Bruning and Horn (2000) have asserted that there is a complex relationship between an individual writer's motivation and successful engagement in a writing task. They define writing engagement as an extended period of concentration in which writers "marshal all of their cognitive, motivational, and linguistic resources" (p. 28). In his newly expanded writing framework, Hayes (2004) theorized that these motivational resources include a writer's goals, predispositions, beliefs and attitudes, and cost-benefit analysis. It is difficult to establish the exact nature of the relationship between motivational resources and writing outcomes due to the dearth of empirical studies on this topic (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). As Bruning and Horn (2000) have argued, "Although there is a wealth of practical knowledge about writing instruction, there is still relatively little in the way of scientific analysis aimed at the motivational factors critical to writing development" (p. 26). While there is clear evidence of the benefits of positive motivation and sustained engagement for reading development (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2013; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012), there is less research focused specifically on writing. However, there are some indications from the growing body of research into new literacy practices that greater engagement in writing leads to positive learning outcomes (Bowers-Campbell, 2008; Luce-Kapler, 2007; Zawilinski, 2009). Furthermore, Boscolo and Gelati (2007) found that students were more willing to engage in writing when they possess motivational resources such as a belief about their own competence as writers. Still, more research is needed to better understand the complex interplay of social and affective factors that shape the writing experience.

The premise of the current study is that engagement in writing is an essential factor in the process of becoming a more skilled writer. Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) has asserted that a state of total absorption in a task, what he calls *flow*, is a necessary condition for learning and growth. Flow is necessary not only to develop the skills required to complete the task at hand, but also meta-skills such as the ability to overcome challenges and the stamina to sustain concentration. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) posited that when the challenge of the task does not align with the skill of the writer, the result is a state of anxiety or boredom, both of which block the writer from entering a state of flow.

Ultimately, the writer's motivation is perhaps the most important key to engagement; Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that to become engaged in any activity, one must be intrinsically motivated. In other words, the reward must be inherent to the activity itself. For example, extrinsic rewards such as grades and the approval of parents and teachers convinced Aaliyah to comply with the writing assignments her teachers required, but the rewards of academic writing did not intrinsically motivate her. Therefore, she struggled through the writing without ever experiencing a state of flow. Studies have found that many adolescents feel similar disengagement during the writing process (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011; Wolsey, Lapp, & Fisher, 2012). One factor that contributes to adolescents' feelings of disengagement is that traditional writing assignments, such as essays and research papers, adhere to the "logic of the page" (Kress, 2003) that privileges conventionalized, linear discursive practices; these practices create distance from the kinds of dialogic, multimodal practices that teenagers are avidly engaging in outside of school.

Writing as Dialogic Exchange

The kinds of writing that Aaliyah does find intrinsically motivating and therefore engaging occurred primarily through social media and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Like most of her peers, Aaliyah texted, posted, and commented almost all day long. One recent study found that older girls wrote an average of 100 text messages per day (Lenhart, 2012). Indeed, researchers who adopt a sociocultural view of literacy have affirmed the notion that technologies, and digital communication technology in particular, have specific affordances that feed adolescent writers' intrinsic motivation by satisfying their individual beliefs, values, and goals. These affordances include opportunities for multimodal design, remixing, and challenging conventional writing (Jacobs, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Rowsell & Kendrick, 2013) and a connection to an affinity group (Black, 2009; Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers, 2013). In other words, teenagers writing in interactive digital spaces have greater agency to enact their own Discourses. Gee (2008) defined the concept of Discourse:

> A Discourse with a capital "D" is composed of distinctive ways of speaking /listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities. (p. 155)

Aaliyah, for example, enacts her Discourse as a member of an adolescent social group through her texting practices; whenever she sends a text, she adds several extra letters to the ends of certain words in a way that makes her social identity recognizable to her friends. She told me that if she wrote the word *Saturday* instead of *Saturdayyyy* her friends would "think it was someone else."

Aaliyah's rejection of conventional spelling when texting is an example of a strategy she used to express her identity through writing in out-of-school contexts. In academic contexts, however, that strategy was not available to her. Instead, her schooled writing became suffused with what Bakhtin (1986) refers to as *dialogue*, a concept that was instrumental in framing my

understanding of Aaliyah's writing strategies. According to Bakhtin (1986), all writing, all language, is inherently dialogic; meaning is determined by the social context and the political, cultural, and individual connotations imbued by both the speaker and listener. Bakhtin argued that every complete text (what he calls an *utterance*, which can be written or spoken) is drafted in response to a prior text and in anticipation of the text to follow. All of the utterances that surround a text contribute to its construction. The interaction between the speaker and listener or between the reader and writer may include "response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so on" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 690) from others or from one's own self.

The traditional essays and research papers Aaliyah wrote in English are theoretically a link in the "chain of utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986) between the student and the teacher. Often though, the active response of the teacher takes days or even weeks to grade the work, thereby creating distance. Furthermore, standardized scoring guides or academic jargon that some students, such as Aaliyah, find inscrutable might mask the teacher's response to the text. In comparison, writing in social media sites such as Facebook or through digital platforms such as instant messaging, visually reify the chain of utterances. At one point in our interviews, Aaliyah even took out her new phone to show me how the color-coding of text messages in chronological order down the screen made it easy for her to trace the flow of ideas back and forth between her and her writing partner. She mentioned how much she felt engaged by writing in discussion threads because she could "see what other people thought." Aaliyah did not feel that her academic writing assignments provided that same sense of instantaneous, authentic response.

In explicitly dialogic writing such as texting or discussion threads, Aaliyah can instantly see and make meaning from the agreement, rejection, or sympathy that surround her utterance and contribute to her construction of a response. The writers argue, debate, grapple, and compromise (all of those modes of responsive understanding mentioned by Bakhtin) through immediate written exchanges. Through these modes of dialogic exchange that are fundamentally embedded in social media and CMC, students not only feel connected with a Discourse community, but also receive the kinds of immediate feedback and sense of purpose that are essential for total absorption in a task (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). It has been well-established that awareness of the reader is a key to writing improvement (Graham & Perin, 2007) and that interactive writing strategies such as dialogue journals can be an effective scaffolding tool for this awareness (Bintz & Shelton, 2004; Hallman, 2009; Morgan & Beaumont, 2004). Aaliyah's story adds to this body of knowledge by demonstrating that even when she is composing traditional essays that are not interactive, she boosts her own engagement by infusing the compositional process with various modes of dialogue, as will be demonstrated in the Findings portion of the present article.

Research Methodology

In order to better understand how an adolescent student employs strategies for overcoming disengagement, I conducted a qualitative case study analysis of Aaliyah, drawn from a multicase study that included five individual student participants from the same English classroom. The following section outlines the methods that I employed to generate Aaliyah's case record.

Context of the Study

The data were collected during the spring semester of 2011 in a medium-sized (approximately 1,000 students), socio-economically diverse suburban school in New Jersey, Smithfield High School, where I was an English teacher at the time. The school operated using a block schedule (meaning that each class meets daily for an extended class period lasting 76 minutes, but for only one 20 week semester), giving me the chance to observe extended periods of writing.

I selected students for the larger case study from an inclusive 10th grade English class taught by Mr. Donovan (regular education teacher) and Mrs. Klein (special education inclusion teacher).I purposefully selected Aaliyah as one of the five case studies based on maximum variation sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) because I wanted to explore how different individual experiences among adolescents shaped their engagement in writing. Aaliyah is a 16-year-old Muslim American whose parents immigrated to the US from India when she was a baby; English is her primary language. In addition, I had met Aaliyah the prior year when she was a student in my basic skills English class; I hoped that our relationship would help to strengthen our rapport (Seidman, 1988) during the interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected the data over the course of the entire class duration, from the initial class meeting in February 2011, through its conclusion in June, through observation, interviews, and extensive document collection of background records and writing artifacts. I observed Aaliyah writing approximately once every week when the class visited the computer lab for independent writing sessions. Using an interview guide approach (Patton, 1990), I also interviewed Aaliyah four times throughout the semester about her life history, experiences of writing both in and out of school, and her perceptions of how her writing for English II engaged or disengaged her. In addition, I documented several informal conversations (Patton, 1990) that took place in the hallway between classes and in my classroom at the end of the school day. Aaliyah sought me out several times over the course of the semester to discuss her feelings about the English class or other details about her day.

I analyzed the data by immersing myself in the documents and identifying sensitizing questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) through marginal remarks. I organized the case record (Patton, 2002), around the sensitizing concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that emerged through the data analysis. The concepts included the following: the participant's background and identity, perceptions of writing, engagement in writing in both home and school contexts, and the role of dialogue in engaging the writer.

Findings

Analysis of the case record revealed patterns linking Aaliyah's perception of her Discourse community and her engagement in academic writing. The following section identifies these relationships as well as the strategies Aaliyah employed to manage her writing disengagement.

The Distance to Aaliyah

Despite the close-knit network of relatives who surround her, Aaliyah struggles with an unstable home-life. During our interviews, she described witnessing the fall-out from an alcoholic parent:

fierce, violent arguments between adults, unemployment, and even a drunk-driving arrest. Although her home life is chaotic, she feels enormous pressure to keep her school life on track for success. She works very hard not to become a target of her parents' anger by maintaining the high grades that they expect. She reported, "I would get whupped if I don't get good grades….If I get an 89 they're like 'You could've got a 90.'" Although Aaliyah earns primarily A's in her regular English classes, she is required to take basic skills composition classes because she earned a partially proficient score on the state standardized literacy assessment. This discrepancy between her assessed ability (developing writer) and her scholastic achievement (honors student) is just one example of the many dualities that tend to polarize her perspective.

Aaliyah is also a deeply reserved girl who keeps most of the upheaval in her family life hidden from her school-based social world. She is friendly and well-liked among her acquaintances, but with the exception of her one good friend Fiona, she has not told anyone about the struggles her family is going through. She does not talk about her trips to India or her life there with anyone in school. In fact, she seemed uncomfortable during our interviews discussing any topics connected to issues of race, culture, or religion, whether her own or within the context of the school community. Aaliyah told me that Fiona, whose family is from Guyana, is the only person who understands what it is like to have a home identity that is so distanced from one's school identity.

Just as there is a distance between her home and school life, Aaliyah also perceives an enormous distance between adolescent and adult worlds. She appreciates the authority of teachers, but does not feel they can connect to her. She explained, "The teachers are there, but when you're trying to ask something, they don't get what you're trying to ask. And they don't answer your question." She believes that dialogue with teachers breaks down because they do not "get" what students are saying; they do not share a common language that would make the exchange of meaning possible. For example, in one literature-response essay, Aaliyah had used paraphrased examples to support her thesis. She had not cited the examples, however, because she believed only a direct quote required a citation. Mr. Donovan circled the example on her paper and wrote a comment directing her to include a citation, so she asked him about it. She described the exchange, saying, "I'm like why do I have to cite it? And he wouldn't tell me…He wasn't getting what I was saying. Cause [the directions] just said example. So, like, that could be anything. It doesn't mean quote." Aaliyah and Mr. Donovan were operating from different understandings of fundamental word meanings that restricted their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue either in written or spoken modes.

Aaliyah does feel that she can exchange meaning through writing with her social group. She explained that she works more diligently to make sure that she has written something accurate when she is writing to a peer rather than the teacher: "The answer has to be right when they're reading it so they're like, so they're not 'Oh, this is a dumb answer.'…I make sure they understand what I am trying to tell them." She believes that an adolescent writer who cannot effectively communicate an idea with a reader from her own social group loses social currency and stigmatized as "dumb." Writing that occurs between peers who share a common Discourse is not just a vehicle for exchanging meaning dialogically, but also a means for attaining status.

On the other hand, when a teacher is the sole reader, Aaliyah explained that any inaccuracies in the content or weaknesses in the style of the writing are the fault of the teacher. She described

how she felt about the errors her teacher had pointed out on one of her essays: "And the teachers reading [my writing], they should know that's what they should be teaching us, because we don't know what to do on the thing." In essence, what she seems to be saying here is that because teachers in general have a separate Discourse, teachers cannot expect her to anticipate their needs as readers. They have expectations, knowledge, and values about writing that are unknowable to her unless they make them explicit. Bakhtin (1984) made it clear that anticipation of the subsequent utterance is an essential link in the chain of dialogue. Because Aaliyah perceives teachers' Discourses as distant, at times even unknowable, she cannot forge chains of dialogue with teachers in the same way that she can with her peers.

Shifting Notions of Good Writing

The polarization that marks Aaliyah's perception of her place within the world of school and adults influences her understanding of the nature and purpose of writing. What counts as good writing in her out-of-school life is very different from her in-school life. The following section will explore the way Aaliyah's notions of good writing shift based on the various social spaces that she inhabits.

Good writing is what is true. Although Aaliyah insisted that she is not a good writer, it became clear throughout our interviews that she has a strong sense of what good writing should be. In one example, I asked her why she posted the following lyric, written by her favorite hip-hop artist, Drake (2009), as her status update after a rumor about prostitution occurring at Smithfield spread across Facebook: "Everybody talks and everybody listens, but somehow the truth always come up missing." Aaliyah responded, "Because it's true, but it's in poetic form. Cause everybody talks and everybody listens just like that rumor. But nobody knows the truth." For Aaliyah, good writing gives form to truth. It explores what is real rather than what can be imagined, and the real is what is located within one's self. All of the examples she identified as good writing over the course of the semester involved authors exploring difficult, painful events that actually occurred to them—from Anne Frank's diary, to a friend who wrote a poem about having cancer, to a hypothetical student who might write an essay about the consequences of drunk driving (an experience with which Aaliyah is painfully familiar).

Aaliyah argued that writers should write about the truth, ideas that they have first-hand knowledge of, rather than topics she must invent or imagine. "Good writing is when it makes sense….When it makes sense, it sounds good, and the author or whatever, the writer knows what they're talking about." She emphasized the role of the reader with her use of the word *sounds*, implying that the way that the reader hears or receives the writing is the gauge of the quality of the writing. It must make sense; in other words, the writer must have conveyed it in such a way that it is understandable to the reader. In fact, she used the word "pointless" to describe writing that will not be published or shared in some way. Once again, dialogue is foundational to her ability to become engaged in writing because, for Aaliyah, the dialogic exchange of meaning between writer and reader is the whole purpose of writing.

Good schooled writing is what is correct. Aaliyah changed her definition when I asked her about what constitutes good writing for a school assignment. "It meets all the requirements and there's no errors, like grammar, and all that." In addition, she explained that good school writing

must accurately capture an experience that is located outside of one's self and one's own life, such as describing the Civil War or summarizing the plot of a fictional novel. She believes that academic discourse is more concerned with what is absent from the writing (unconventional grammar and spelling) than what is present (truth). Aaliyah shared with me one particularly illustrative analogy for what constitutes good schooled writing that a former teacher had taught her:

> He opened up an umbrella in school, and it was not raining. And he was like, all your stuff that you talk about, has to be under this umbrella. Like you can't talk about cars and then go talking about helicopters. Wait, that makes no sense. You can't talk about cars and then talk about soda, or something totally different.

The image of the umbrella used on a dry day stayed with Aaliyah so clearly, perhaps, because it crystalized the artificiality of the boundaries placed around academic writing. Cars or helicopters? Helicopters or soda? Aaliyah could not quite figure out how such arbitrary and decontextualized distinctions in subject matter constitute cohesion in academic writing. In school, the interaction between reader and writer is not about true dialogic meaning making; for Aaliyah it felt more like a sorting activity to determine what belongs neatly under the umbrella and what should be left out in the rain.

Good schooled writing is hard work. When I questioned Aaliyah about why she thinks she earned As if she believes she is a "bad" writer, she responded:

> Cause it's mostly like you just do the work, and then you like--you just do the work and get the grade you get. It's not really like the quality, like, well, it is. But it doesn't have to-- they don't expect you to be the author of like *Twilight*.

The purpose is not to connect with real readers in a way that is engaging, entertaining, or community-forming—all qualities of a popular book such as *Twilight* (Meyers, 2005). The purpose of school writing, as she understands it, is simply to document the totality of work that went into its composition. In addition, she must adhere to the proscribed format and content requirements articulated by the teachers (for example, getting 2 extra credit points for using the week's vocabulary words or making sure to include a specified number of quotes and paragraphs). Achieving this goal requires effort, but not necessarily skill or inventiveness. In order to sustain that effort, Aaliyah must first overcome the obstacles of boredom and anxiety.

Dialogue: A strategy for Coping with Anxiety and Boredom

Aaliyah's lack of facility with academic writing conventions made it difficult for her to meet the challenge of formal literary analysis or research papers, creating a frequent experience of anxiety. She faced boredom as well because Aaliyah craves dialogue. It is inherent to her definition of the purpose of writing, but it was almost entirely absent from the writing curriculum. While in the computer lab for English class, she drafted, downloaded, and uploaded texts using various digital programs; these included PowerPoint, virtual museum templates, and wiki sites. However, teachers never asked or allowed her to use any of the dialogical features of the digital tools, such as comment functions, that facilitate dialogue with the peers from her

Discourse community. So, she created opportunities for dialogue through, about and beyond the essays, narratives, and other academic texts she was composing in ways that sometimes subverted the teachers' agendas and their instructions to "remain silent and work alone." Most often, the dialogue acted to ameliorate her sense of boredom and anxiety.

Dialoguing through the text: Writing in between the lines. Aaliyah created a dialogue within text, such as a persuasive essay, by reacting to her own writing. At moments when the flow of her writing stopped, she went back to an earlier section of what she had written, digitally highlighted it, read it, and then re-wrote that section. After reacting to her own writing as the reader, she then returned to the section where she left off and began drafting anew. She later described this process as "writing in between the lines." She reproduced the rhythm of dialogue in a linear text by bouncing around the space and inserting herself in between the lines.

When Aaliyah was composing a PowerPoint for a presentation, she and her friend Julia used a mechanical and gestural dialogue to debate a line of text. Julia pointed to the line by touching the screen, Aaliyah highlighted it with the mouse, Aaliyah shrugged, and Julia rewrote it on the keyboard. All of this activity occurred with no verbal conversation and therefore below the teachers' radars. The pair dialogued through the text by manipulating mechanical tools and beyond the text through gestural signs, ultimately bringing the text into greater alignment with the demands of the assignment.

Dialoguing about the text. The types of writing activities that created the strongest anxiety for Aaliyah were those that required her to match the writing style and formatting of a pre-ordained set of conventions, especially when those conventions fell outside what she perceived to be her discourse-style. Some of the anxiety-inducing tasks that Aaliyah discusses in detail include:

- formatting citations correctly
- placing a topic sentence in the correct location
- following the teacher-mandated order of ideas for a persuasive essay

She tackled this challenge by consulting the assignment sheet, the rubric, or her own notes. She maintained a complex tangle of dialogue with the draft, the mentor texts, the on-line resources, and the teachers. She kept her binder opened on her lap and multiple windows opened on the screen. She typed on the keyboard by extending her arms over the pile of papers in her lap and around the textbook propped open against the computer. Her visual attention cycled back and forth from papers to book to screen. This scattered dialogic strategy helped her to navigate through her anxiety about matching the surface requirements of the writing assignment and produce a text that satisfied the teachers' expectations.

One of the main challenges of the writing assignments that led to Aaliyah's anxiety was imagining an experience that she was not able to locate within her own memory—a task that conflicted with her notions of what constitutes good writing. For example, the first persuasive essay asked students to take a position on parents who snoop in their child's room. Aaliyah told me, "It was hard at times because I needed three details, but I couldn't find them. Because my parents don't snoop around my room, so it was hard." She described idea-generation as a physical act of finding, as if she looks inside herself to locate a memory that will fulfill the writing task.

When she could not find a correlating memory, the challenge became too great and therefore anxiety-inducing. She told me that she invented a teenager in her mind who had experienced parental snooping. She conducted an imaginary conversation with that peer in order to "find" the details that she could not locate internally. Once again, dialogue, even with an imagined other, helped her to navigate through the anxiety in order to complete the assignment successfully.

Dialogue beyond the text. Woven among her dialogue through and about the text was a running dialogue beyond the text that sometimes interrupted her writing progress and sometimes occurred simultaneously with the writing. Music-sharing was a huge part of this meta-dialogue. While writing, Aaliyah kept up a discussion about music by listening to a song on her iPod with one earbud, while a friend, usually Julia, shared the other earbud; their heads would be leaning inwards toward each other with their hands stretched out sideways toward their individual keyboards. When the song ended, one selected a new song, passed the iPod to the other who either approved the choice by pressing play or dismissed the choice and selected a different song. They might pass the iPod back and forth several times, in a pantomimic representation of the interaction of a verbal debate, before they nonverbally agreed on a final selection. The meta-dialogue did not appear to have any overt influence on the written text that they generated simultaneously, but Aaliyah later explained to me that it offered her enough relief from the boredom and anxiety that she was able to continue composing.

Of course, sometimes the dialogue was more overtly verbal; Aaliyah and Julia might lean toward each other across several students' desks to share opinions about a new song or comment on their music technology. While the conversation interrupted the writing, it did not seem to impede it; Aaliyah darted in and out of the conversation, typing a few more lines after each pause in her back-and-forth with Julia. If anything, the dialogue seemed to support her writing stamina by offering frequent mental breaks from anxiety and boredom.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand how and why the demands of academic writing caused a motivated student like Aaliyah to feel bored and anxious. Furthermore, I wanted to explore the kinds of strategies Aaliyah adopted to cope with her writing disengagement. The findings revealed the central role that dialogue plays in writing engagement. Dialogue through, about, and beyond an academic text can facilitate engagement by allowing solitary writing tasks to feel more interactive. Obstacles to dialogue, such as an inability to exchange meaning across different Discourses, can lead to writing disengagement. The following section will discuss the significance and implications of Aaliyah's writing experience.

Understanding the Nature of Aaliyah's Disengagement

Clearly, there is a strong connection between Aaliyah's understanding of the purpose of writing and her ability to feel engaged by school writing assignments. She believes that purposeful writing reflects the truth of a lived experience. Boredom occurs, particularly for a student like Aaliyah, when the topics emerge from academic books or even from the teacher. These distanced adult and scholastic worlds cannot reflect her truth. The constraints of academic writing assignments do not allow Aaliyah to enact her Discourse in meaningful ways that connect her

with her peer group. This difficulty holds true whether the writing task is a more traditional print-based assignment such as a persuasive essay or whether the writing utilizes a digital program such as PowerPoint. When cut off from writing that is an expression of her sense of self, the function of writing shifts from meaningful dialogue with the reader to simply an accountability document. In these situations, she draws on her coping resources by engaging in dialogue in lieu of authentic engagement in writing that expresses her Discourse.

Another barrier to engagement and cause of boredom is her limited access to a true dialogic partner. Aaliyah strongly believes that without the active response of a reader, writing is not a meaning-making activity; instead, it is a "pointless" act of transcription. For her, writing becomes meaningful, and therefore engaging, when the utterance links her to a reader who can agree, dispute, sympathize, or even be impressed by her composition. In almost all of her classroom experiences, however, the sole reader of her academic writing is the teacher. Aaliyah does not believe she shares a common language or value-system with her teachers; they do not share a Discourse. Writing is only meaningful when it is perceived by the reader, but the teacher cannot perceive her, so the writing is empty, hollow. Her desire to overcome her disengagement and connect with a reader often led her to become her own dialogic partner, in what she called reading and writing "between the lines" to gain the experience of responsive understanding. Alternatively, she dialogued through or about her textual compositions with a trusted peer like Julia. The strategies she uses to make the writing feel more interactive help her push past the boredom and anxiety by creating opportunities for more authentic meaning-making.

Perhaps the most difficult barrier to engagement for Aaliyah is the anxiety that arises when the teacher becomes the selector of the conventions that the writer must then match. The hyper-attention to these kinds of surface modalities causes a student like Aaliyah to abandon her sense of responsibility for the text. Since the teacher is the discourse-selector, the text belongs to the teacher. And, since the discourse selected is beyond Aaliyah's skill set, anxiety sets in. Outside of school, Aaliyah's writing style includes playing with conventionalized spelling and constructing arguments through lyrical allusions. She can experience a sense of flow when composing in the discourse of an artist like Drake, not just because she enjoys his music, but because she enjoys the status of expert. She believes in her competence to write both *about* Drake and *like* Drake. When required to write a research paper that adheres to MLA format, on the other hand, Aaliyah becomes a novice writer again. Anxiety sets in and disrupts the flow of her writing engagement.

Aaliyah's Strategies for Combating Disengagement

Traditional English writing assignments do not facilitate the kinds of dialogical meaning-making that intrinsically motivate Aaliyah, but the desire to meet assessment criteria and earn good grades extrinsically motivates her. Therefore, she has developed a strategy to cope with the boredom and anxiety she feels during writing by injecting the composition experience with moments of authentic dialogue. She closes the distance between her world and the world of the teachers: (1) by dialoguing through the text with self, authority figures, the emerging text and mentor texts, (2) by dialoguing about the text through multiple modalities, (3) and by dialoguing beyond the text via verbal, mechanical, and gestural modes.

Overall, Aaliyah was always tuned in to the classroom around her. She stared at her neighbors' screens when they were surfing web sites illicitly. She watched the teachers' interactions with other students. She listened to students in the row behind her having off-task conversations and contributed an empathetic comment occasionally. She always divided her attention between finishing the writing to earn a good grade and reaching out visually, gesturally, verbally, and mentally to check-in with the pulse of activity going on all around her.

All of this interaction with the social world of her classroom might at first appear to distract her from the task at hand; there was evidence that it disrupted her writing flow. The findings indicate, however, that dialogue functioned strategically to help her combat the persistent boredom and anxiety threatening to defeat her determination to succeed. Aaliyah's strategies are essentially part of the motivational resources that Bruning and Horn (2000) asserted must be marshaled for successful writing engagement. Aaliyah's beliefs about authentic meaning-making through writing and her goals to enact her Discourse with her peer community are also motivational resources that, according to Hayes (2004), fundamentally shape the writing experience.

Implications for Classroom Practice and Further Research

I began this article by claiming that while we know much about how teachers can adapt instruction and the format of writing assignments to increase adolescent writing engagement, it is equally important to understand more about how students adapt their own strategies to meet the demands of challenging academic writing genres. Aaliyah shows us the impressive resources that a motivated, developing writer may rely on to find a path to success: ingenuity, resilience, and a touch of subversion. While the findings of this study are not generalizable across all developing adolescent writers, they are consistent with prior research. Specifically, the study supports the idea that adolescent writing engagement is influenced by opportunities to share meaning dialogically with a peer (Bintz & Shelton, 2004; Boling et al., 2008; Hallman, 2009; Morgan & Beaumont, 2003) and by opportunities to enact a Discourse by selecting writing topics and discursive conventions (Jacobs, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Rowsell & Kendrick, 2013). More research is needed to explore how increasing these opportunities in academic writing contexts might enhance the experience of flow for developing adolescent writers.

Aaliyah's story also suggests the potential of more explicitly dialogic writing as an instructional intervention. Writing back and forth with a partner may help resolve the distance some students feel between home and school literacies; rather than asking students to write to and for a teacher exclusively, we can create writing assignments where students write *to each other* in true dialogic partnerships.

While not all research or literature-response tasks can afford students full autonomy over the writing topic, many of the common instructional practices currently used in writing and content-area classrooms might be modified to support more authentic dialogue between and among students. For example, many students are required to annotate class readings that teachers later assess. A more dialogic approach would be to have students respond to each other's annotations; this approach visually and cognitively reifies the chain of utterances many adolescents find engaging in social media contexts while maintaining the academic rigor. In addition, the study

also suggests that some students crave the chance to share the truth of their lived experiences. Assignments that provide students with autonomy over the content and style of their writing may allow them to experience deeper engagement supported by an enhanced sense of their own competence and the relevance of the topic.

More research is needed to study the specific learning outcomes that might result from the instructional interventions just mentioned. The findings of this study, however, do support the idea that more opportunities for interpersonal, dialogic writing in the classroom have the following instructional benefits:

- Opportunities to write in dialogic partnership with a trusted peer can support increased engagement among adolescents and scaffold writing development
- Dialogue through text can alleviate the anxiety of having to match academic writing conventions by restoring the focus on content rather than surface modalities
- Writing that is shared dialogically can help restore a student's engagement in the authentic meaning-making purpose of writing by highlighting the socially-situated nature of meaning construction

My work with Aaliyah indicated areas that need more research. A singular case study is inherently limited in its ability to reveal generalizable causes of adolescents' writing anxieties and the strategies that they devise for combating disengagement. Further research that investigates whether increased engagement influences writing outcomes and what those outcomes might be would be beneficial. For now, I believe the greatest challenge continues to be finding practical ways to reduce the anxiety and boredom that surround academic writing and help our students to find the flow.

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