

Refereed Article

Resistance, Transformation, and Identity: Replacing At-Risk Patterns with Agency through the Creative Writing Workshop

Lori Howe

Abstract

This qualitative study of five successful college students, all of whom entered community college with histories of underachievement in English Language Arts, investigates the role of the creative writing workshop in the disruption of student resistance and as a catalyst for transformative learning. Findings suggest that a lack of cohesion between student interest/engagement and curricular content/method of delivery may be a cause of underachievement for many students. Transformative Learning Theory, catalyzed by the creative writing workshop, may positively disrupt student resistance and offer academic motivation transferable to students' personal and professional lives.

Introduction

This qualitative study of five successful college students previously deemed at-risk of underachievement or failure, seeks to identify influential factors that contribute to and disrupt this status. While the literature of early childhood literacy consistently suggests that early home and school literacy practices are key determiners of at-risk status for students (Heath, 1983), this study identifies additional causal factors, offering educators an alternative approach to scaffolding student success (Smagorinsky, 2013). The questions that inspired this study are “What

Lori Howe is a Doctoral Student, Literacy Studies, at the University of Wyoming College of Education.

causes adolescent writing students to become at-risk of underachievement or failure” (Bottrell, 2007), and “how can creative writing workshops disrupt that status?”

Having taught writing and English courses at the community college level for seven years, too frequently I encountered underachieving students at risk of failure--students who were clearly capable of personal and academic success. For the purposes of this study, the term at-risk refers to spiraling patterns of student underachievement that may lead to failure; each participant entered community college with a history of under-engagement and underachievement in high school and early college English/Language Arts classes. In this study, I examine student resistance and offer examples of student redefinition of self (Foucault & Rabinow, 1997) through the creative writing workshop (Nichols, 2007). The purpose of this research is to investigate ways in which participation in the creative writing workshop helps students to let go of ingrained patterns of resistance and reimagine themselves as writers, through the processes described by Transformative Learning Theory (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Mezirow, 2000). This study also seeks answers for those students who have strong literacy backgrounds and are at risk of underachievement or failure later in their academic lives.

Theoretical Framework

In constructing a theoretical framework, I align two distinct theoretical perspectives that illuminate the phenomenon of resistance and demonstrate how creative writing workshops actively transform resistance into agency and success. Here, I briefly synthesize Resistance Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, illuminating the gap in the research that is filled by this study.

Resistance can be defined as “political behavior, including discursive and symbolic acts” (Haenfler, 2004, p. 408). The one definitive common thread in all resistance is its relationship with power (Foucault, 1997). Often, this is represented by the appropriation of power by subcultures that subvert the dominant paradigm (Haenfler, 2004). It is not enough, however, to consider resistance from this collectivist angle. “A conceptualization of resistance must account for individual opposition to domination” (Haenfler, 2004, p.409).

In research on individuals, resistance is represented as non-appropriative of power, offering only one alternative to assimilation: refusal to participate. By rejecting the dominant paradigm, individuals become

effectively voiceless. When students remove themselves from the dialogue, failure may result without any clear reason, because it is difficult to see why students are not motivated (Knoester, 2009). Thus, resistance plays an influential role in the categorizing of able students as at-risk:

The student prefers not to write because it is his way of controlling what he regards as the meaningless ends produced in the composition classroom, but although he believes he remains in control of his freedom and his humanness, in reality the opposite is probably true (Palmerino, 2011, p. 299).

Resistance results when education fails to be meaningful to the student; education may then be experienced as colonization (Aper, 2010).

In this study, I sought reasons for the disengagement that leads students capable of success to become locked into patterns of underachievement, and methods of re-engaging students similarly embedded in resistance.

Educational research suggests that adolescents represent their lived experiences through multi-media literacies, creating new repositories of knowledge (Jocson, 2007). This supports multiliteracies (Moje, 2000) that encourage student expression, helping them to “find some means and strength...to take risks and become active agents in reconstituting lives and composing new stories” (West, 1996, preface, xi).

The redistribution of power may offer self-isolated students “a way to change and direct self into new terrains” (Jocson, 2007, p.171) by providing them with “need(ed) spaces in schools to explore and experiment with multiple literacies and to receive feedback from peers and adults” (Nichols, 2007, p.122). This describes the creative writing workshop, linking it crucially with Transformative Learning Theory.

Transformative Learning Theory’s greatest strength is its ability to change perspectives of resistant learners. It offers them the chance to “Understand and order the meaning of [their] experience...[by] becom[ing] more critically reflective of their assumptions and those of others...more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action” (Mezirow, 2000, p.167). Transformative Learning Theory necessitates redefining education as meaningful and accessible. The process is achieved through 10 steps:

1. The confrontation of a disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination, with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame

3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence
10. A reintegration into one's life with new perspectives (Howie & Bagnall, 2013, p. 819)

The overarching goal of transformative learning is to allow students to reimagine themselves and shuck off deficit categorizations. Essentially, the “goal is to draw students into experiences where they can begin to... transform their being...so as to achieve the...essence of living well” (Hostetler, 2011, p. 175). Thus, a safe and open zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) is necessary to foster confidence and identity. “If the environment is supportive, students learn to create and develop a sense of Self. By discovering your Self through the creative process, you build self-esteem and self-respect”(Browning, 2008, p. 213).

The above explanation of Transformative Learning Theory offers important insights into the practice and results of the creative writing workshop, and ways in which workshop pedagogy may be employed in agentic, empowering ways.

Methods

Settings and Participants

The study was conducted in Redcliff, a town of 30,000 in the Mountain West of the United States (all participant names, the name of the literary magazine, and the town are pseudonyms). It is home to a university with graduate and PhD programs. Redcliff is primarily Caucasian and English-speaking. The participants are, currently, five successful college students, three males and two females, ages 24-35, all of whom are editors of a literary magazine, Sagelands, and members of a creative writing workshop group by the same name. Each participant left high school and entered the community college with a history of underachievement and/or under-engagement in English classes. Their tenure with the Sagelands magazine and eponymous workshop averages 3 years. The settings for

my research were out of school, as Sagelands is in the process of becoming a non-profit organization.

Participant Community of Practice

Each of the participants has moved beyond the community college, and each remains dedicated to the Sagelands workshop. Over the last year, they have published Sagelands, attended conferences, and given recitations with the University. The workshop maintains a consistent schedule despite the fact that all members are now either teachers or full-time students and work part-time or full-time jobs. Two members are parents.

Individual Participants

Berra, a founding senior editor of Sagelands, is currently an English major and full-time employee at the University. He is a 24-year-old, single, white male.

Shine is also a founding editor and full-time English major at the University. Her goals with both the workshop and the Sagelands literary magazine are social justice outreach (Green, 2001) with women and youth. She is a 26-year-old single female of Caucasian and Chinese descent and works full-time at Walmart.

Jay, another original founding member and senior editor of the journal, earned his Bachelor's degree and secondary teaching certification in Language Arts in 2013, and was recently accepted into the graduate program in English at the University. Editor in Chief of Sagelands, Jay is married, with two small children. He is a 30-year-old, white male, and a decorated veteran of multiple tours in Iraq.

Lando has studied with the workshop for two years. He is now a senior at the University, double-majoring in Geography and Entomology. Lando is a 28-year-old, white male, employed full-time as a butcher. He has recently married his long-time girlfriend and joined the U.S. Navy.

Laurel has studied with the Sagelands workshop for 3 years. Laurel is a 35-year-old single female of Caucasian and Irish descent. She is a senior, majoring in Psychology at the University, and is a single parent to three teenagers.

Researcher's Role

As the sole researcher in this study, I am also the founder of Sagelands, as well as former creative writing workshop teacher and mentor to

all five participants. I have worked with each of them for several years, and continue to work with them now, after they have all matriculated to the university and into four-year degrees and beyond. I have also left the community college to pursue a doctorate in Literacy Studies at the university. The Sagelands workshop and journal continue to thrive. My ongoing research focus lies in student engagement and strategies for success in at-risk, early-college student populations, seeking causal patterns for that status and best practices for transformation.

The Creative Writing Workshop: An Introduction to the Pedagogical Model

The vast majority of all creative writing workshops, from MFA programs to middle-school Language Arts classes, follow the same model: during each workshop session, the group offers helpful critique of the work of between one and three of its members who have submitted drafts of their writing in advance. All other members of the workshop are responsible for having read the drafts and commented in writing before the workshop takes place, and for presenting their comments during the round-robin format of the workshop session. The author of the piece introduces it by reading it aloud, after which he or she receives a round of applause. During the critique that follows, the author sits silently and listens, optionally taking notes. Critique usually begins with the workshop facilitator, and proceeds around the room. For clarity and brevity, members avoid repetition of comments. The author has a short period at the end—usually 3-5 minutes—to ask and answer questions before the next author's piece is introduced. In very large participant settings, several small-group workshops may be led by veteran workshop members.

The creative writing workshop model is based on a fundamentally egalitarian structure. The workshop leader may be a teacher or a veteran of the writing community, and serves as a facilitator, rather than an authority figure, organizing the workshop schedule and helping to scaffold the process for initiate members. The workshop is structured so that each member has equal opportunity to write original poetry, fiction, or non-fiction—based on assigned prompts or self-generated ones—and to receive the thoughtful critique of each workshop member, with the goal of improvement through the revision process.

Veteran members of the workshop—including the facilitator—introduce new members to the language and levels of commentary utilized by the workshop group. Inherent in this process is a democratic shar-

ing of responsibility and authority; all voices carry equal weight in the workshop community of practice. As the facilitator of such workshops with my community college creative writing students, my role is that of mentor, to veteran and novice members alike. The workshop is truly a student-centered model.

Data Collection

I collected data from my participants over the 2013-2014 academic year. I began with open- and closed-ended survey questions regarding early childhood and adolescent literacy practice, both in and out of school. Closed-ended questions sought information regarding demographics for participants and parents; open-ended questions were intended to elicit thoughtful, experience-based responses that would help me understand participants' educational experiences at home and in the classroom. Specifically, this information involved familial educational history, childhood home literacy practices, resources, and ages of reading and writing acquisition. The goal of this data collection was inquiry into the relationship between participants' lack of reading and writing engagement and a possible lack of early childhood home literacies. In individual and group interviews, participants responded verbally to questions related to their childhood adolescent literacy practices and spoke thoughtfully about their experiences as former at-risk students. During video and audio recorded sessions, they demonstrated the format and process of the Sagelands workshop, gave readings, and discussed experiences at workshops and conferences.

As I designed data collection, I focused on the questions: "what early literacy experiences, if any, contributed to these participants' adolescent categorization as at-risk students? What later practices worked to transform that status?" This study sought insights and practical approaches to success for students at risk of underachievement or failure, by examining the early influences of literacy in their lives.

Data Analysis

From compiled, transcribed data and my memoing notes, I coded, synthesized, and collapsed significant patterned responses. I created themed matrices, producing themes that suggest or negate relationships between home and classroom practice and student resistance, as well as the relationship between the creative writing workshop and Transformative Learning Theory. I originally developed nine themes, but upon

reaching data saturation realized that the related nature of some themes (such as the themes “Transformation” and “Empowerment,” and “Home Literacies” and “Familial Attitudes Toward Literacy Practices”) was causing thematic overlap, and thus collapsed those nine themes to produce four individual themes that represent participant responses without redundancy. Those four themes are 1) Home Literacies; 2) Student Resistance; 3) Transformation; and 4) Best Practices.

Trustworthiness was supported by member-checks conducted twice during the study and after the study’s end. Whole-group member checks were conducted mid- and post-study to validate compiled themes and data representative of whole-group responses. Qualitative cross-validation (Oliver-Hoyo, 2003; Wiersma 2000) tested validity by comparing results of interviews, open-ended questions, and closed-ended scales.

Findings

The four independent themes that emerged were Home Literacies, Student Resistance, Transformation, and Best Practices. Each theme is presented through the responses and insights provided by participants, and is followed by a brief discussion of its relevance to the questions that motivated the study.

Theme 1: Home Literacies, Findings and Discussion

I collected data on childhood home literacy practices from participants, asking closed-ended survey questions to determine average ages of reading/writing literacy acquisition, highest level of education completed by participants and their parents, and availability of literacy resources in their childhood homes, along with levels of encouragement. These questions were designed to discover if these students reported a lack of childhood literacy practices and resources.

Each college student participating in this study was asked a series of questions designed to determine approximate ages of reading and writing skills acquisition, parental educational histories, and home literacy practices and resources. Participants reported an average of reading skills acquisition of 4.75 years and an average age of writing skills acquisition of 5.25 years. Parental education history indicated that all but one parent had completed some college, and the remaining parents have college degrees varying from Associate’s degrees to a PhD and DVM. Four out of five participants reported consistent parental encouragement

toward mastering literacy practices, and all participants reported access to a broad spectrum of literacy resources during childhood and adolescence. Four out of five participants indicated that education was consistently valued in their homes. Parental involvement included:

- Helping with homework
- Reading bedtime stories
- Reading together
- Encouraging independent reading for pleasure
- Encouraging independent writing for pleasure

All participants reported access to home literacy materials:

- Age-appropriate books and magazines
- Flash cards
- Word games
- Puzzle, coloring, and comic books
- Notebooks/journals
- Pens/pencils

Interview data collected on early childhood and adolescent home literacy practice and resources also represents these participants as members of high-functioning literacy households during childhood and adolescence. Laurel recalled, “Reading was a family activity in my home, growing up—we read instead of watching television,” and Berra confirmed, “We were always encouraged to enjoy reading; books have always been one of my greatest pleasures.”

These responses suggest that although a lack of early childhood literacies may be a causal factor in some students’ at-risk status later in life, additional causal factors need to be identified.

Theme 2: Student Resistance, Findings and Discussion

As participants’ positive descriptions of early childhood literacy practices indicate, other factors clearly contributed to their status as at-risk students as they matriculated from high school and into community college. When asked to choose five words that described themselves as young students, the roots of “otherness” begin to appear in their classroom histories. All participants choose the words “distracted and unengaged,” and four out of five described their young selves as:

- Creative
- Unique
- Quiet/Shy
- Intelligent
- Insightful

Three out of five also used the words “apathetic” and “lazy”. All reported that they found it difficult to engage with coursework, and many felt that their creativity, intelligence, and voice were undervalued.

When asked to rate their engagement with reading and writing, in and out of school, across all grades, participants reported levels of enjoyment of reading and writing for pleasure 50% higher than for school assignments. When asked to explain the disparity, they listed the following reasons:

- School curricula/material not enjoyable/relevant
- School assignments not meaningful
- Decreasing genres of student interest
- Reading/writing assignments not sufficiently challenging

All participants report that profound disengagement with curricula resulted in lack of motivation. Each reported resisting curricula they deemed irrelevant to their lives and interests. All report a high level of engagement and satisfaction with reading and writing outside of the school; as Laurel explains, “I enjoyed writing on my own because I felt there was more meaning and purpose.”

Later, as community college students, all five describe entering college under the “expectation of inarticulacy...(when) people who expect to have no voice of their own collude with the status quo precisely to avoid communicating openly and thereby expose the full extent of their disadvantage”(Myles, 2010, p. 11).

These participants and many students like them are as capable of success as their high-achieving classmates, but resistance is perpetuated by what Shine and Jay both describe as “insults to (my) intelligence,” and as Laurel articulates: “I felt that the assigned items were below my level and were meaningless.”

Theme 3: Transformation, Findings and Discussion

As first- and second-year college students, each of them entered my creative writing workshop, with its focus on agency, voice, and col-

laboration. Each of them reported initial skepticism, as they had become inured against disappointment. Soon, however, the workshop model allowed them to take ownership of their educational experiences in rich and meaningful ways. For Sagelands workshop participants, this methodology motivated them to leave the “expectation of inarticulacy” (Myles, 2010, p. 11) behind, creating their own community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through this experience, each revived a student identity they had long possessed, but which had never been fully actualized. The following interview responses from participants illustrate their movement through the stages of initial resistance/otherness, questioning assumptions, imagining new roles, creating and acting on a plan, changing behavior, and integrating these changes into their lives in comprehensive ways. These stages illustrate the essence of the transformative process described by Howie and Bagnall (2013) and reiterated by Mezirow (2000). As synthesized by Lando: “I have a lot more confidence in myself as a writer now than I did before. Workshop makes you more than a better writer, though—I can see it helping people in pretty much every way you can imagine.”

For Sagelands workshop members, the egalitarian atmosphere and personal investment fostered transformation. As Jay explains, “Creative Writing is an excellent form of self-expression. It provides an outlet for describing and overcoming loss. Its therapeutic qualities absolutely improve the lives of both the writer and readership because it uniquely addresses underlying internal and external conflict.” Laurel offered the following thoughts on the transformative power of the workshop:

Collaborative work in the creative writing workshop has a lot of power to change people’s lives. I hope someday to use writing to alleviate the stigma people with children affected by mental disorders experience. Life writes a story on all of us, but we can turn that our way, too.

Theme 4: Best Practices, Findings and Discussion

Based on experience as secondary and college students, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the following pedagogical methods:

- Online courses;
- Group or lab work;

- Lecture;
- Lecture with Visual Aids;
- Lecture with Discussion;
- Whole Class or Small Group Discussion;
- Workshop

Participant responses indicate that Workshop, followed closely by Whole Class/Small Group Discussion, is the most effective teaching method; in third, fourth and fifth place, participants rated Lecture with Discussion, Lecture with Visual Aids, and Lecture. Group or Lab work came in 6th, followed only by Online Courses, in 7th place.

These responses support use of the writing workshop. When asked what made workshop best practice, Lando's response reifies the self-building aspect of workshop: "Workshop makes me feel like my being there matters—my opinion is valuable to the group. Being in workshop means that I'm actually treated like a person, and that makes me want to be there."

The agentic, self-motivated aspect of workshop is further explicated by Shine, who explained, "I need hands-on work in order to learn. Experience is how I process new knowledge; I need my thoughts and opinions to matter."

The "hands-on" aspect is of great importance for these participants; it is a constant reminder that the teacher-centered paradigm of the past is unsatisfactory to a generation eager to participate actively in their education, as explained by Jay: "Workshops are greatly beneficial because you are "getting your hands dirty." The byproduct of the critical analysis of others' work is the improvement of one's own."

When asked if the workshop in K-12 classrooms might prevent students from becoming at-risk, Jay, who is currently a middle-school language arts teacher, responded: "I struggle with this as a teacher. I would tell teachers to balance high-interest content and writing workshop with expository writing and classic literature. Taking that advice would absolutely help at-risk students."

Berra, who is studying to be an English teacher, offers a longitudinal perspective: "I believe that it would drastically reduce the number of problems that students have, giving students a class that they care about. If workshop is integrated throughout K-12, it should keep many students from reaching at-risk status."

It is worth noting that the pedagogical methods rated most effective in this study, Workshop and Whole Class or Small Group Discussion, are

those least commonly employed in secondary and college classrooms. The most common information delivery in U.S. secondary schools and colleges—Lecture, with or without Visual Aids and/or Discussion—was awarded scores reflecting dubious efficacy by the participants, and a rising tide of research suggests that today’s technologized students are doing other things during lectures (Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013; Sana et al, 2013). This is only one, small qualitative study, but its results help to illuminate a great responsibility shared by educators in contemporary America, “We should ask of any proposal for curriculum, instruction, discipline, research, or whatever: “How does this contribute, if at all, to making life worthwhile for human beings?” (Hostetler, 2011, p.3).

Conclusions

The themes that emerged from data analysis are suggestive of processes by which resistance accumulates and may be transformed. These participant responses suggest that although a lack of early childhood literacies may be a causal factor in some students’ at-risk status later in life, additional causal factors need to be identified.

Shine, Berra, Jay, Lando and Laurel are now thriving, but their previous status is a reminder of the many students continuing to labor under assigned false identities in classrooms across America. Their community outreach through Sagelands is testimony of the power of the workshop to give young people back their authentic voices. The transformative power of the workshop is further illustrated and supported by the research and practice of many other instructors, mentors, and researchers. They recognize the need for transformative learning that unlocks creativity and offers students the opportunity to construct meaningful voices and identities as students (Botrell, 2007; Browning, 2008; Green, 2001; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Hostetler, 2011).

In the era of Common Core standards, meaningful curricula that include student-centered writing workshops may make all the difference. Studies on meaningful learning are ongoing in schools across America, and further research in diverse learning populations will yield additional data. Further study is also necessary to examine the benefits of the creative writing workshop for students whose home literacy practice was insufficient to prepare them for school. This study examines the workshop model through the double theoretical lens of Transformative Learning Theory (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Taylor, 2000) and student resistance (Botrell, 2007; Palmerino, 2011); still other studies are needed

to examine the effects of the creative writing workshop through lenses of critical race theory, feminism, postmodernism, LGBTQ issues, and socio-economics, in order to have a full and representative illustration of the uses of the creative writing workshop model by and for myriad writing populations in America today.

This study serves as a call to action for teachers of writing classes to examine their curricula and evaluate the methods they are using to teach and engage students. These participants comprehensively agree that instruction is most successful when it is interactively student-centered. As Berra offers: "I learn by doing. I don't consider the lecture-based course as 'doing,' I consider it listening." Extraordinarily helpful, intuitively designed resources are available for teachers who wish to integrate elements of the creative writing workshop model and other student-centered, dynamic, transformative methods into their own classrooms. Some fine examples are included below:

- ***Catching Tigers in Red Weather***, by Judith Rowe Michaels (NCTE, 2011) offers teachers an inspiring primer for reimagining the important role of creative writing in the literature classroom, and of freedom of choice and expression for students;
- ***Teaching Literacy for LOVE and WISDOM: Being the BOOK and BEING the Change***, by Jeffrey Wilhelm and Bruce Novak (NCTE, 2011), gets at the heart of every teacher's need to find ways to engage students and create passionate readers and writers by banishing student apathy and giving students choice and voice;
- ***360 Degrees of Text***, by Eileen Murphy Buckley (NCTE, 2011) focuses on engaging students in literature that represents phenomena important to them, and by offering them the agency and voice they need to become meaning-makers, while gaining skills through creative writing and more traditional writing assignments
- ***Situating Readers: Students Making Meaning of Literature***, Vine and Faust (NCTE, 1993) presents the case for students as meaning-makers, and for validating student interpretations of literature based on lived experience and knowledges.

The above titles are just a small sample of the resources available to teachers of reading and writing who wish to make a positive difference in the lives of all their students. Additional resources that offer writing

assignments, templates, and activities are readily available for free, on-line. As instructors, we recognize in our Millennial students a great desire for engagement, agency, and meaningful participation in their own educations; if we continue to uphold pedagogy offering students little to no agency or self-direction, we must consider what sort of citizens we are shaping to become the future architects—and future teachers—of our world.

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