I am teaching my English 9 class on a cool October day, and I couldn't ask for more: students are engaged in conversations around our literature. As our lesson focus shifts to writing, I can see a visual change overtake nearly two-thirds of the students in front of me. Slouches in chairs appear, and it feels as though instead of looking at me, they’re looking past me, looking at anything else but me, in an attempt to avoid the task before them. As the topic of writing is introduced, it seems fairly common to hear an occasional groan or heavy sigh. Pep talk can rarely turn the experience around, and everyone, including me, is unsure of how to move forward.

Writing all too often gets this response, and, for teachers, it may seem that little can be done to change the situation. But just as with many other topics, educators and researchers are learning more about teaching writing. In many cases, the focus has been at the primary level, but I was curious about the research specific to literacy practices that foster engagement in adolescent writing. I had read articles and talked to other professionals, scoured education blogs and hunted for texts, focused a critical eye on the topic in coursework, all in an attempt to find some way to prevent those groans and heavy sighs, to help students care about and learn from their own writing. In reviewing this work on adolescent engagement in writing, I discovered four patterns and angles: the role of authenticity, the value of choice and variety, the overlap and connections between reading and writing, and the role of conversation as part of the process.

**Role of Authenticity**

Authenticity in writing plays a significant role within writing engagement. The idea of authenticity has been well known and often valued in society and does not apply just to
writing; in this context, though, it refers to something that is true to life. Behizadeh (2014a) spent two years interviewing 22 students and noting that the concept of authentic writing was often thought of in terms of a task, purpose, or text. Whether writing was authentic or not was decided based on the existence of a genre outside of a school setting. With this understanding, Behizadeh noted factors that could influence the authenticity of writing, including the text type, the purpose for writing, the presence of real-world topic, an actual audience, and conversations with peers (p. 29). It seems these factors are often considered in the context of the classroom.

In her case study of Xavier, Behizadeh (2014b) challenged this understanding of authenticity in her research by suggesting that authenticity is actually a perception of the individual student (p. 290). In that respect, students themselves would determine the authenticity of texts in terms of their meaning to their own lives rather than their meaning in general. This idea also connects to comments by Yost, Liang, and Vogel (2014), who note that connections made between the student and the topic, a peer or teacher, or the instructional approach correlate to student motivation and engagement. The shift in mindset about the nature of authenticity could then shift the writing done by the students, who would have more control in the writing process. This also shifts the educator to a more supportive rather than a directive role. By extension, if more writing is deemed authentic by the students, teachers would likely notice increased engagement and achievement (Behizadeh, 2014b).

Through this revised definition of authenticity, Behizadeh (2014a) suggested that three unique factors may impact authenticity. First, Behizadeh noted the choice of a valued topic: Students are more likely to be engaged in writing about topics personal to them, such as interests or an important person, or topics new and unfamiliar, such as global or community issues. A second factor is the potential for impact on the audience. Though the purpose for writing may vary, writing to impact the audience in some way can increase the authenticity of a piece of writing. This impact could take a variety of formats, but Behizadeh noted that often adolescent writers will share their own identity and experiences with others as a way to connect or will attempt to change the opinions of the audience. The final factor is the importance of valuing expression over conventions. Students note that they found more value in expressing and sharing about themselves. The study notes that conventions may curb authenticity, for
many students felt it more important that the audience, particularly the teacher, validate their ideas rather than focus on mechanics. This shift may also free the writers to focus on the intended meaning of their writing rather than struggling to place punctuation marks.

This shift in mindset allows students the ability and freedom to look closely at themselves and, by extension, at the situation of the world around them and their role in it. The ability to identify authentic purposes can also benefit struggling writers. Just as Ivey (1999) suggested that struggling readers need and can benefit from real purposes for reading, struggling students may benefit by looking at writing as a step toward completing a larger task.

**Necessity of Choice and Variety**
The concept of authentic writing then extends into the necessity of choice and variety. From her experiences teaching writing, Atwell (2015) posits that “student choice is synonymous with student engagement” (p. 21). Choice and variety could include both topic- and genre-choice. Behizadeh (2014b) noted in her case study that allowing for choice does not necessarily mean that the students have complete control of this decision. Often, they may need guidance in selecting an appropriate topic that can be meaningful and challenging yet attainable. Atwell (2015) presents this idea of guidance in a slightly different light by discussing “handover,” in which both the instructor and the child are actively involved in a process. The handover for one skill—topic choice perhaps—is completed when the student is able to do this independently (p. 15). These topics may vary. Chai (2010) conducted case studies on three sixth-grade girls with varying levels of engagement and confidence as writers, noting that choice may allow for struggling writers to be “engaged and self-motivated” (p. 36). In addition, Chai suggested that volition, defined as “one’s will or desire in participating in a specific task or activity” (p. 30), may play an important role in student engagement in connection to choice. Personal views, whether positive or negative, can also play a role in student volition. Chai noted that choice in writing topics may positively impact student volition and that this positive volition can help to increase engagement in writing (p. 35).

Ivey (1999) posited that students often lose interest in reading during adolescence because of the reading required in school. The same could be suggested for writing: students do not entirely lose interest in writing at this level, instead losing interest in required writing. In a case study investigating how individual ideologies may impact reading and writing in a school-context,
Kirkland (2011) suggested that engagement increasing when students are asked to interact with topics and genres that are meaningful. Weinstein (2007) examined social literacies to gain a better understanding of the reading and writing that adolescents participate in outside of classroom, noting that they often willingly engage in writing about their own topics within genres of their choice outside of school, often through texting, blogs, raps, Twitter, and other forms of social media (also see Kirkland, 2011; Yost et al., 2014).

Overlap and Connections between Reading and Writing
Since reading and writing both fall into the broader category of literacy, it makes sense that they overlap and connect. In many cases, research suggestions that reading engagement may be adapted and extended to writing engagement as well. In her observations and analysis of the three sixth-grade girls, Chai (2010) asserts that there is a direct connection between reading and writing when it comes to engagement, for reading interests and engagement often foster writing engagement. Struggling writers will also acknowledge that what they are interested in writing about is directly related to the topics they are interested in reading about. Ivey’s (1999) observations of and reflections on struggling adolescent readers could also be extended to writers, commenting that “readers want to be and can become good readers” (p. 378). The same may be said about adolescent writers, who need to be part of classrooms in which emphasis is placed on positive interactions toward improvement.

In his article focused on reading engagement, Guthrie (2004) also pointed out that engaged reading benefits a student two-fold, initially during the process of engaged reading, and continuing to the improved outcome. Again, the same idea may be applied to writing because students benefit both from working through the writing process and at the end with a final product (and hopefully increased volition for writing). Guthrie (2004) also approached the idea of engaged versus disengaged readers and shared what that might look like in a student context. To emphasize the reading/writing connection even further, Kirkland (2011) challenged the term “disengaged” altogether in the case study mentioned earlier by stating that the term “assumes that they do not read” (p. 201). Several researchers demonstrated this same argument, for students continually engage in multiple literacies, including popular culture and social media outlets (Kirkland, 2011; Yost, et al., 2014). This idea ties back to writing as well. Students may not
be engaged in writing in traditional school-based formats but are engaged in formats relevant to their own lives (Weinstein, 2006). Greco (1999) suggested that this is the case as well, finding that when writing is made to bring the students closer to the texts (i.e. responding subjectively rather than objectively), they are likely to become “more active, self-reflective, and confident readers and writers” (p. 71). These opportunities for authentic writing set the stage for student engagement and lay the groundwork for future engagement.

**Conversation as Part of the Process**

Ivey (1999) mentioned that struggling readers, though I would add all readers, need the opportunity to share experiences with peers and teachers because conversation can be a driving force for engagement, especially in a writing classroom. Dawson (2009) suggested that if students are taught to have authentic conversations about their own writing, the result is that they may begin to position themselves as writers. Unfortunately, it seems that students are trained from early on in most cases that conversations about writing are formulaic and scripted, often stemming from a writing checklist or rubric. These scripted conversations offer little in the way of meaningful feedback, which is necessary in increasing a writing’s authenticity and a student’s engagement.

With conversation and sharing important parts of the writing process, it is vitally important that teachers remain actively involved rather than in a strictly directive role (Dawson, 2009; Yost, et al., 2014). Being involved alongside adolescent writers, teachers may position themselves at a different level or in a different role than usual. For example, teachers who position themselves as student writers themselves increase their ethos by offering greater opportunities to validate ideas (Casey, 2008). Atwell (2015) counters this idea slightly by suggesting that there should be a balance between the amount of freedom and guidance that teachers provide based on the writing situation. This balance most often presents itself during conversation or conferencing moments.

Just as writing can serve as opportunities for students to share and explore their own identities, conversation can continue that exploration (Casey, 2008). Students may also be able to bridge new connections because during conversations, they have opportunities to notice connections with unlikely peers (Yost, et al., 2014). These could then increase their perceptions of themselves as writers through increased
opportunities to take ownership of their own abilities (Chai, 2010).

**Classroom Implications**

It’s important to remember that we cannot think of lack of student engagement as a problem with a quick fix. We must keep in mind that a one-size-fits-all approach rarely works in education because students are all different and constantly changing. The research does suggest starting points for increasing engagement in adolescent writers, points addressing all four angles addressed previously: choice, authenticity, overlap between reading and writing, and conversations. Research points toward an approach that is student-centered and flexible as well as activities and lessons that are meaningful or purposeful.

In an attempt to move toward a more student-centered approach, it seems that the workshop model provides teachers with a variety of opportunities for engagement. In typical writing workshops, including Atwell’s (2015), the teacher will share a short mini-lesson on a particular skill and dedicate the majority of the class time to writing. Because students may be in different writing stages, the teacher will conference during this time on topics based on writing needs. Behizadeh (2014b), Chai (2010), and Yost, et al. (2014) all offer this as a suggestion. The workshop model offers immense flexibility in the direction it takes because student choice is often at the center of this approach. Atwell (2015), an avid practitioner of the workshop model, sums it up by saying that “Because they decide, they engage” (p. 3). Moving to a workshop approach may have several advantages:

1. Since skills are taught in the context of writing rather than in an isolated setting, students are able to apply those skills or practices within their own writing immediately. Teachers are then able to gauge understanding with an informal formative assessment.

2. Students are given the opportunity to choose both writing topics and genre (Kirkland, 2011; Weinstein, 2006), offering more ownership and engagement in the writing process. The choice in topic and genre allows the students to make the decision on what will be most authentic in their lives at that point (Behizadeh, 2014a).

3. The workshop model offers the opportunity for the curriculum to be built around the concepts of relevance, choice, and shared decision making (Yost et al., 2014, p. 83).
4. The workshop model also offers opportunities for scaffolding in order for teachers to meet the needs of individual students in an attempt to develop their confidence as writers. Atwell (2015) refers to the handover process in this effort to build confidence. She offers support and guidance based on her knowledge of writing and continues the guidance as needed until the student can work independently.

A student-centered approach offers the flexibility necessary in regard to authenticity in writing because student views on what is authentic may differ. Behizadeh (2014a) suggests that teachers may want to re-evaluate what it means to be authentic and shift their thinking to the student-perceived understanding. This re-evaluation might also extend to the curriculum as a whole; teachers may consider re-evaluating the intended end goal. Do we want to be able to check off skills that our students are able to complete, or do we want to provide opportunities for our students to value writing and demonstrate those skills in the process?

In looking at the connection and overlap in reading and writing, variety plays an important part (Guthrie, 2004; Ivey, 1999). This variety could take the form of the texts read and used, the formats in which students read or write, or approaches to thinking. As teachers, we don’t always want to read the same genre or write in the same format every time; we experiment and try new things. Students are the same: we can’t, for example, expect them to be interested and engaged in always writing short stories or essays. Greco (1999) suggests encouraging written responses to literature in which the responses allow students to make connections to themselves and their own identities (Kirkland, 2011), thus strengthening the connection between reading and writing. Students might choose to write this response in a narrative journal or possibly even a rap.

A student-centered approach also addresses the importance of conversation. Since conversation is a likely extension of writing, and since conversation can be used as a way to express and shape views (Behizadeh, 2014a; Behizadeh, 2014b; Casey, 2008), teachers must make time for conversation during the class period. Behizadeh (2014b) notes that one-on-one conversation as part of the workshop model would allow time to guide students through topic selection and other stages of the writing process. Fostering conversations in small-group settings may also allow students the opportunity to look deeper at a topic or issue (Guthrie, 2004). If teachers can facilitate
authentic conversations and teach students to engage in authentic conversations with one another, this will likely have a positive impact on students to add value and shape their writing in a productive way (Dawson, 2009).

**Limitations**

With so much said about engagement and adolescent writing, still our work is not complete. I mentioned earlier that reading and writing have a clear connection and overlap, and that adaptations and extensions can be made from the research on reading engagement to writing. These adaptations should not substitute for writing research. In several cases, reading and writing exist under the literacy umbrella, but all too often when reading and writing are lumped together, the focus tends to be on reading. Additional research that focuses on writing is necessary at the middle and secondary levels since it tends to be quite different from the primary level.

**Conclusion**

Research on engagement in adolescent writers is multi-faceted, but all are looking to improve our knowledge and support the success of our students. Some studies suggest that adolescent engagement in writing is impacted by the role of authenticity, the value of choice and variety, the overlap and connections between reading and writing, and the role of conversation as part of the process. It is important to recognize that while these factors may have positive impacts on engagement, they do not function in isolation, and there is considerable overlap.

This research may serve as a starting point in the always-changing area of student engagement, or it may be a stepping stone to the next level of engaging student writers. It seems that educators, myself included, are always searching for ways to improve. Either way, knowledge on the topic of engagement in adolescent writing will help to meet the diverse needs of our students.

**References**


Adolescent Engagement in Writing


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