IDENTITY REVISION IN A RESISTANT STUDENT WRITER

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Although thirteen-year-old Trevor is physically small for his age, his classroom presence is large. With his loud voice, animated gestures, and restless feet, he commands attention. Donning baggy black jeans with long chains clipped to his belt loop; a long-sleeved, flannel shirt over a t-shirt featuring words and symbols of anarchy; and black Vans on his feet, Trevor enters the classroom and takes his seat in the circle, smiling slightly. Today, he will share a draft of a choice piece generated early in the fall semester of his English Language Arts class at the local middle school:

My mind has twists and turns
Down the Blood SPLATTERD Hallway
Of my mind
I can't find my way out.
Escaping myself is the hardest test
Of strength and endurance of
my mind and soul.
I will find a way
to kill my self-sided Satan
and rid myself of this tyranny
and anguish.

The adults in Trevor's school characterized him as a struggling writer, one who repeatedly failed the annual standardized state writing test. As evidenced by the above poem, however, Trevor can indeed write and might more accurately be described as resistant to writing in ways most valued by the academic community. Trevor, consistent with existing research on resistant writers (C. Street; Williams), called himself a non-writer despite

the skills he evidenced in the classroom. He refused to assume the test-performance-oriented writing identity valued within the school. Instead, he assumed an alternate identity characterized by a subversive response to the system, one that drew from his perceptions of the effective writer and resulted in texts that examined sometimes taboo topics in non-school-sanctioned ways. Upon spending sustained and significant time with Trevor as his teacher in a writing workshop over an academic year, the researcher witnessed perceptible revisions in the writing identities he chose to assume.

This paper describes and examines the key discourse events that trace Trevor's identity shifts, demonstrating the ways in which an adolescent author negotiated his position in a writing classroom founded on workshop principles. It is grounded in the collaborative work of an English educator and classroom teacher dedicated to creating a classroom in which participants entered into shared cultural and behavioral practices of a community of writers and were allowed to try on multiple author identities. For this paper, the researcher describes the significant transformation witnessed in a single student over the span of a shared teaching experience, particularly in terms of the moments in which she witnessed a visible change in the student's vision of self as a writer. In this piece, writer identity is defined by the labels assigned by self or other relative to writing performance—writer, non-writer, successful writer, etc. The paper examines the following question: What discourse events shaped the changing identity construction of a resistant writer participating in a writing workshop?

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided, in large part, by Ivanic's conceptualization of writer identity, particularly the relationship between the discoursal self and the related possibilities for selfhood (24-29). The *discoursal self* reflects the impressions—often multiple, sometimes contradictory—that writers consciously or unconsciously convey of themselves in any particular text they

write (Ivanic 25). This writer's voice, as the discoursal self is often conceived, represents how an author positions him/herself in a social environment. The *possibilities for selfhood* extend beyond individual writers and reflect the subject positions available to an author in a particular setting. Multiple possibilities for selfhood exist in the socio-cultural and institutional context, but, within any culture or institution, some are privileged over others; "possibilities for selfhood are socially constrained" (Ivanic 28).

The discoursal self and the possibilities for selfhood are interconnected. As writers write in a particular setting, they engage in a process of negotiation; they make choices influenced by the socio-cultural and institutional settings in which they write that influence the discoursal self they present to others. These identities might merge or clash with differing effects such that the adoption of one identity and rejection of another might be seen as a political act (Connolly). As Ivanic argues, "Every time writers construct a discoursal self which draws on less privileged possibilities for selfhood they are, like a drop in the ocean, infinitesimally redefining the possibilities for selfhood" (28).

In the school setting, the intersection of these two writing selves—the lived and the potential—occurs in the context of a community (Bourne; Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf; Dyson, 2002; Flint and Cappello; Glenn; Van Sluys). As participants in this community, individual writers negotiate identities within a range of possibilities for selfhood supported, or tolerated by, that community and inscribed in its communicative practices (Ivanic 82). Access to discourses is socially constrained, not random or arbitrary, and "the social worlds in which people move define these opportunities and consequently restrict the discoursal resources people have available for self-presentation" (Ivanic 213).

The writing workshop has been identified as a community capable of fostering multiple identities and offering students "an alternative sense of themselves as writers by helping to challenge and realign many of the [archetypal] images from the social imagination" (Graham 361). For resistant writers whose vision of self is shaped directly by their experiences and roles within the

classroom and school communities over time, the workshop offers an alternative to often academically-sanctioned visions of what it means to be a successful writer, particularly the ability to produce writing in standardized forms (Barton and Hamilton; Collins; B. Street). This study examines the ways in which a resistant adolescent writer negotiates the relationship between the discoursal self and the possibilities of selfhood in such a workshop setting.

Method

Context, Participants, Procedures

An English educator and classroom teacher worked with Trevor on a project funded by Teachers for a New Era. For one academic year, they team-taught one section of eighth grade students. The English educator, a white female, was in her fourth year at the university and had six years of teaching experience at the middle/high school level. The classroom teacher, a white female, had fifteen years of public school teaching experience, ten at this site. The two met socially a year prior and discussed working together given their shared philosophies of teaching and beliefs about young people and their learning.

Eleven eighth-graders were enrolled in the class. The school, moderately diverse in class and race, is situated in a small university town of approximately 12,000 people in the northeastern United States (Strategic). Each student was selected for placement in the course based upon failing performance on the state writing exam and a recommendation by seventh-grade teachers. The class composition was unusual for the site. English/Language Arts classes in this school typically contain approximately twenty-three students, are staffed by a single teacher, and consist of heterogeneously-grouped student populations, particularly with respect to student performance. However, given the principal's commitment to supporting resistant student writers before they leave the school to enroll at

the high school the following year, the course was identified as essential and offered despite its unique make-up.

Class members met three times each week, twice for ninety minutes and once for forty-five. Both educators worked together to plan and implement activities for each meeting, utilizing a workshop model (Atwell) grounded in the belief that, with opportunities for choice, ample time to write, and appropriate response, authentic writing is likely to emerge. Students determined content and form for each piece they wrote; had extended daily time in class to write, revise, and conference with one another and their teachers; and shared their progress with the larger group at the end of each class period. Teacher-directed mini-lessons focused on writing strategies and supplemented daily writing work.

Although the researcher gathered data for each student enrolled in the course, the decision to focus on Trevor in this paper stems from the intensity of his transformation over the duration of the course. Trevor is a white, middle-class student who, at the time of the study, lived alternately with his mother and father, who were divorced. A self-professed and real outsider who traveled independently beyond the established circles of friends within the school community, Trevor asserted himself in this classroom by proudly exclaiming his tendency toward darker interests.

Data Sources and Collection

Qualitative research methods (Guba and Lincoln) were used to gather data from multiple sources over the duration of the academic year:

- Open-ended surveys (Atwell; Harlin, Lipa, and Lonberger) designed to elicit student attitudes toward and interests in writing were administered to Trevor and his peers three times—during the first week of the school year, during the first week back

in school after winter break, and in the final week of the school year.

- Semi-structured individual interviews with Trevor and his classmates were conducted twice over the school year, once in the early fall and once in the final month of the school year, to explore student perceptions of themselves as writers. Interview responses were recorded and transcribed. Sample questions include:

  –Think about a time when you felt really good about yourself as a writer. How did that come about?

  –Who do you know who is a good writer? What about this person's writing do you like?

  –Do you believe that the ability to write well is something one is born with or something developed with practice?

- A whole class interview was conducted in the final month of the school year. The goal was to solicit student reflections upon their experiences in the writing classroom over the course of the year. The researcher posed an initial question, "What did you notice about yourselves and your peers as writers this year?," and allowed students to lead the conversation from there.

- Classroom observations of student and teacher behaviors, comments, and interactions were conducted during each class meeting over the duration of the school year. Field notes were generated by the researcher immediately following each class meeting and used to determine the instructional choices that followed.

- Artifacts in the form of student writing were collected over the duration of the school year and used to determine instructional plans and methods

in response to student needs, as well as to document student growth in writing over time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved a process of reading the data as a story of Trevor's experiences in the workshop classroom over the course of an academic year. The researcher sought to identify key discourse events, or plot points, that indicated shifts in Trevor's assumed identities. Drawing from Gee's vision of discourse identity, the researcher examined the multiple dialogues in which Trevor engaged (with his teachers during the interviews and class meetings and with his peers during whole and small group meetings as well as independent writing time) as a means to explore the iterations of discoursal self that emerged among the possibilities of selfhood in this setting.

More specifically, the researcher employed constant comparative analysis techniques (Strauss and Corbin). In the identification of key discourse events that traced Trevor's changing writing identities, survey results, interview transcripts, observation field notes, and written artifacts were read and re-read by the researcher and marked with notes capturing recurring and repeated ideas and patterns. These notes then informed the creation of preliminary emic codes (Strauss and Corbin) that centered on "essential moments," those that signaled a change in Trevor's perception of self as a writer. After reviewing the data and applying the determined codes, the researcher collapsed and grouped the codes into categories that ultimately defined the findings along key discourse events. To increase credibility and reliability of the resulting categories or events, the researcher solicited support from a university colleague who acted as peer debriefer (Denzin and Lincoln; Guba and Lincoln), challenging the pattern codes, asking for clarification, and offering alternative interpretations of the data. Three key discourse events were ultimately identified, each of which is more fully discussed below.

Findings

In his writing at the start of the year, Trevor identified with what he called, "the dark side," calling himself a "fantasy writer" who doesn't "like to come back to the reality." He cited Stephen King as his author inspiration, noting King's ability to surprise readers by creating characters whose confused states of mind leave the reader wondering what is real. With King, Trevor said, "You don't know what the character is going to do. You think you know him but you don't."

In his own writing, Trevor explored these alternative states of mind, most notably in his examination of the violent vigilante as archetypal character and the question of what happens after death. In an early piece, for example, Trevor generated a love story in which the male and female protagonists find connection in the act of murdering helpless victims. This piece was followed by another love story that graphically describes a woman's suicide and the subsequent travels of her husband and daughter into a "shadow realm" where "the dead roam and the living fear to tread." The piece opens with this prologue:

> Some people remember there loved ones the way they used to be but not everyone remembers the lifeless corpse floating in the tub of blood or swimming in stomach acid. Those people fall victim of the shadow stalker, until one little girl put up a fight. She would converge mentally but physically she was already there.

A seminal discourse event emerged in an exchange between Trevor and the English educator in response to one of these early pieces:

Trevor sits at one of the classroom computers, a draft of his piece well underway. The English educator kneels next to him to conference about his progress. Albeit concerned about the violent nature of the story in its raw form thus far, the English educator witnesses a determination in Trevor's demeanor. Fingers moving

rapidly across the keyboard, words filling the screen, attention rapt, he is invested in and committed to his piece. Given this level of engagement, the English educator makes an explicit decision to encourage Trevor despite the questions of appropriate content that emerged. She focuses the conference discussion around issues of character, asking Trevor to think about how his piece might be affected by the development of each character's internal ponderings—motivations, fears, concerns, passions. She encourages him to consider the ways in which Stephen King makes us care about his characters, even when they might exist on the fringes of "accepted" society. Trevor responds with enthusiasm, nodding as he begins revising his piece.

Trevor later shared his appreciation regarding the opportunity to write about what interested him, reporting, "At the beginning of the year, I found myself not liking writing a lot; now I am starting to enjoy it." When probed, "Are you a better writer now?," he stated, "Not much better. I could have written it [that piece] last year, but, in this class, I've learned to be much bolder." When asked as to why he believed this change resulted, he claimed, "I'm more motivated to write. You guys get into it and understand what we're writing, so we put more expression and thought into each piece. You think of us as individual people writing. Last year, I got shut out of so many pieces. It was so discouraging that I just quit writing them."

A second key discourse event that highlights Trevor's changing author identities emerged midway through the spring semester when the English educator and classroom teacher led students in a writing activity. The goal was to encourage students to elaborate in their writing by generating details to create a more compelling and rich narrative, fictional or otherwise.

Students sit in a large circle and are asked to compose independently three statements about themselves, only one of which is true. The English educator models the process by sharing her own statements: 1) One summer, I worked as a popcorn vendor in a

traveling carnival. 2) I lived in six different states in the U.S. before I turned twelve years old. 3) I participated in the Rose Bowl Parade as a piccolo player in the Sun Devil Marching Band. She then asks students to orally pose questions to which she responds, elaborating (and fabricating) where necessary. One student asks, for example, "What was it like working in a carnival?" The teacher explains how she met several fascinating people, including a young woman named Candy who, with her blue-streaked hair and red-stained lips, hoped to marry Prince William by impressing the Queen with her unique ability to yodel the English National Anthem. After approximately five minutes, students attempt to identify which statements are true (in this case, statement number two). A discussion surrounding the (in)effectiveness of the teacher's elaborations ensues.

After writing their own statements, students are then directed to work in small groups and engage in the question-answer portion of the activity. Trevor chooses to work with two males in the class. As the two educators circulate, listening in on student conversations, their attention is drawn to the back corner of the classroom where Trevor's peers utter loudly and emphatically, "That's gross." "Are you kidding me? You're twisted, dude!" Upon further investigation, Trevor reveals the source of concern: his statement of truth describes his attempt to "see what happens when I put a cat in the microwave." By this point, all are drawn into the conversation; students' attention is squarely on Trevor. An onlooker, Janine, tells Trevor he has gone too far. Kate has no words and offers only an open-mouthed, wide-eyed stare. The tension in the room is palpable. In response, Trevor tries to laugh off the event, saying, "What's the big deal? The cat was fine in the end—just a little warm." When his joke is met with silence, he attempts to deny the act: "Naw, I was just kidding, you guys."

In the conversation with the English educator immediately following this exchange, Trevor expressed his discomfort, not as a social outsider, but as a writer. While he continued to pride himself on his uniqueness, he also demonstrated an increasing

recognition of the ramifications of his dark topics and style. He claimed, "People get irritated because I can take the most basic thing and turn it around. I usually go against the crowd. Not many people can get into the same style of writing as me." In describing his writing interests, Trevor pointed to his fascination with symbols and their multiple meanings, "like the true meaning of the pentagram and different religions and the real meaning behind voodoo." He took pride in his ability to look at these common representations unconventionally, saying, "My ability to learn this made me feel good, that I proved Hollywood wrong. Like the pentagram means protection and safety, not evil. Even though Hollywood keeps portraying it with blood splattered on the wall." Yet, his attempt to laugh off his decision to write about the cat in a way his peers perceived as macabre and inappropriate reveals the fact that he does put stock in what they think of him and his writing.

A final discourse event that serves to reveal Trevor's changing identities occurred in the last month of the school year when Trevor read a poem during a sharing session in the classroom circle.

Trevor sits at his desk in the circle of his peers, his eyes wet, his voice now quiet. With care, compassion, and clear risk, he has just described his emotional response to the death of his grandfather, a model figure in his life. The silence is slowly punctuated by student response to the piece. Brad notices the shift and says explicitly, "What is cool here is that you're sharing your ideas, sharing your writing, expressing your mind to others." Ivan adds, "Trevor, this class makes you happier." Trevor ends his sharing session with the claim, "I'm not completely dark. It's important for me to let others see my light side. I'm not just a kid who doesn't care about stuff."

Trevor surprised himself with this piece, admitting, "In the poem I wrote about my grandfather, I blew myself away. I didn't know I could do that." During the focus group interview, Trevor was pushed to explain how this piece reflected a change in his

writing. "At the beginning of year," he revealed, "I was writing depressing death poems. Now I write about events in reality that I want to change for good." When probed as to why this change might have come about, Trevor responded, "I noticed things about humans that irritate me madly, how they don't want to be themselves around certain people and how you should just be yourself. I like to write about these issues now. They affect everybody." When prompted as to why this change might have emerged, he reported, "A lot of people [in this class] have realized that, after hearing a few pieces that are out there, it's OK to take a huge risk; no one will judge you. I like this class better than my other English/Language Arts classes because it's more open than others. I feel like I can share with the class rather than staying closed in." When asked how the experience might shape his future as a writer, Trevor revealed, "I will test my way of the light side. This class has taught me to go beyond my limits. It's a lot harder than I thought. I am still hesitant, but over the year, I've gotten bolder. It's like I'm putting my soul, myself, in my pieces."

Discussion

In this study, the workshop setting provided Trevor a safe place in which to don various writer identities, especially those not explicitly aligned with traditionally school-supported definitions of the successful writer. In this setting, he was granted freedom to write about anything—and learn that his choices have consequences. In Trevor's case, this autonomy opened doors for exploration in a way he had not encountered in the English/Language Arts classroom, both in terms of the writing process and his writing identities.

As Trevor considered his position in our classroom writing community over time, his writing identities expanded and enlarged. Trevor retained a valid commitment to writing as a means of exploring the shadows but broadened his perception of himself as an author, adding new dimensions that resulted in his willingness to craft a wider range of pieces. Trevor was afforded the time and space to explore alternate identities without fear of

reprimand, navigating multiple positions. To take up any practice of literacy is to name oneself within or against a real or imagined community. The participant's potential practice is made possible, supported, and constrained through the relations of power that are imminent in a given discourse community (Foucault). In Trevor's case, his positionings–and resulting identity moves–occurred along three dimensions–student to teacher, student to student, and student to self–and revealed the interplay between the discoursal self and possibilities of selfhood in this setting.

Student-teacher Positioning

In the workshop, Trevor was able to both embrace his affiliation with the dark side and find validation in writing beyond conceptions of what a successful school writer ought to be. In this setting, teachers were not the singular authorities; students maintained rights and responsibilities as writers. Given Trevor's description of his experiences in English/Language Arts classes prior to the workshop experience, this supported autonomy resulted in a new role for him to navigate. In the year prior, he challenged his teachers from the outset, identifying Stephen King as representative of his vision of the ideal writer and emulating his style in his work. His teachers responded by telling him his writing topics were unacceptable for the classroom and refusing to allow him to continue his work. In response, Trevor gave up and chose not to enact any writing identity if he couldn't enact the one he imagined for himself. His discoursal self clashed with the possibilities of selfhood within the classroom and resulted in Trevor's rejection of what the school deemed important; his refusal served as a political act (Connolly).

Upon entering the workshop community, Trevor challenged his teachers in the same way he tried the year before. This time, however, student choice was validated, even when it became uncomfortable. Trevor was allowed to enact his desired identity– drawing upon violent imagery, rogue characters, and action-driven plots–and, with guidance and persistent reminders of the writer's craft, he ultimately wrote more pages in the creation of a

single story than he drafted in the entirety of the year prior. The forces that shaped Trevor's initial self-representation likely extended beyond his earlier school experiences and reflected greater complexity than captured here. However, his choice to adopt a discoursal self that reflected a less privileged possibility for selfhood, one that had already been denied and resulted in negative academic consequences (i.e., poor grades in the course), reveals the persistence of this writing identity.

Student-student Positioning

In the workshop community, Trevor negotiated an identity within the acceptable (or tolerated) possibilities of selfhood. At the outset, Trevor embraced the way in which his identity ran at odds with the norm; he liked being on the outside and accepted the restriction to discoursal resources his position afforded. With time, however, his membership in the community shifted and reflected a greater commitment to a shared culture and community of practice, thus putting Trevor in a position that demanded the need for trust.

Trevor's attempt to retain his dark side during the elaboration activity resulted in isolation that proved undesirable; he was ostracized by his classmates who viewed him with disgust and shock, and he didn't like this feeling, trying instead to avert it through denial. Whereas Trevor might once have reveled in his outsider status, this event revealed his awareness that the outside might not be the only desirable place. Earlier, Trevor avoided engagement with the group to avoid being found out, perhaps assuming that his classmates figured out how to participate in a way he had not (Ottery; Williams; Zebroski). Once he began to build relationships with his classmates, he risked removing the protective shell.

Student-self Positioning

Perhaps most significantly, Trevor's experiences in this community allowed him to negotiate a more comprehensive vision of himself as an author. At the start, Trevor wrote about

topics that kept him safely hidden behind the façade of outsider he crafted for himself in the school setting. The discoursal self he presented was impersonal and non-revelatory, affording him a position that demanded few risks as a writer. By the end, Trevor took intentional risks in his writing by exploring events and people that forced him to reveal himself in a way that violent episodes featuring extreme characters could not. As the discourse event surrounding his poetic tribute to his grandfather reveals, Trevor displayed himself and his feelings—his fears, his sadness, his connection to another person—to his peers and teachers. Rather than focusing his writing on the fringes of society, the outcasts, the social deviants, Trevor chose instead to write about the universal. He found a different place within this writing community.

Implications

This study centers on issues related to writing instruction in the classroom setting, more generally, and identity formation among resistant writers, more specifically. It provides scholars and educators insights into the potential influence of the workshop setting as a space in which students might be granted multiple and broad possibilities for selfhood and thus explore a wide range of discoursal selves. The study reminds us that there are multiple reasons for writing, each of which could (and should) be supported in the school setting. An author identity selected by students might not be our own, but it is no less valid than one more closely aligned with our expectations of those of the school. Whether or not we admire Stephen King's writing, for example, we cannot deny his hefty fan base. There must be space for multiple voices within the school writing community.

The study intimates specific suggestions for teachers and literacy educators working with resistant writers. Trevor's initial commitment to "darkness" was validated as an acceptable author identity within this classroom. His teachers allowed him to don this vision of the writer but pushed him to think critically about what this entailed. Although both educators were concerned by

the violence inherent in his earlier pieces and discussed sharing the work with the school counselor, they decided to educate Trevor rather than obstruct his attempts at self-expression. Admittedly, teachers in most school communities today are encouraged, if not mandated, to report any suggestions of violence mentioned by students orally or in writing, and some may disagree with our decision to keep this information to ourselves. In Trevor's case, however, references to violence emerged only in his fictional writing and could be traced directly to his admiration of authors who employ similar techniques. As educators, we opted to trust Trevor and nurture him as he followed his own path in developing as an author over time, recognizing, of course, that such trust has become all the more complicated in a society in which violence increasingly serves as an outlet of expression. These are decisions that teachers of writing committed to fostering authentic and engaging communicative experiences for students have to make. Some teachers might choose to establish and articulate specific parameters that define how they will respond to writing that includes violence or addresses other potentially destructive topics. Although some may argue that such an approach may hinder the establishment of a trusting relationship between teacher and student, honest discussion of such a policy and emphasis on its intent would open the potential for rich conversations regarding authorial choices and the resulting impact on readers.

The study suggests, too, the influence of the larger community on a writer's identity within the writing workshop. When Trevor pushed his dark, even cloaked, identity to the limit and experienced resistance on behalf of his peers, he reconsidered his own vision of self as a writer, choosing to try on a writer identity that required him to reveal more of himself. His awareness of audience shaped his understandings of the choices authors make in enacting their craft, encouraging him to consider writing as communication beyond his earlier vision of writing as shock-inducing entertainment.

This awareness of audience was fostered by the relationships that developed among and between students and teachers engaged

in the writing workshop. Although the researchers did not design this study to determine whether or not class size and structure were factors in Trevor's performance or attitudes toward writing, they may very well have been. Given the smaller number of students enrolled, we might speculate that Trevor was more easily afforded the opportunity of building trusting relationships with his teachers and peers and thus be more willing to write about personal matters. Similarly, given the homogeneous nature of the group with respect to past writing performance, Trevor was perhaps allowed to emerge more readily as a leader among his peers. And, given the existence of two classroom teachers, students, Trevor included, were provided more individualized support than they might have been in a more typical course of twenty-three (or more) students. These factors certainly warrant additional attention.

Conclusion

This study provides a richer understanding of the processes that underlie identity formation in a resistant writer, highlighting the relationship between the discoursal self and possibilities of selfhood in a workshop setting and how the navigation of that relationship resulted in a student's determination of self as author. The analysis of key discourse events involving a resistant writer in a workshop setting over time revealed the ways in which this student tested the limits of his multiple author identities, validating the value of each in the process.

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