Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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CHAPTER 2

WRITING TO LEARN BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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Writing helps to "formulate what I want to do [and] who I am." In this short but powerful statement, a study participant offered us an example of writing as a method for discovering new ways of acting and being. He was one of a number of people we found who write in support of their evolving identities. The field of writing studies features rich scholarship on how students write, how they write to learn new knowledge, and how writing informs their identities. However, we have much yet to learn—and to share throughout higher education—about how writing similarly functions for people beyond our classrooms and campuses.

Self-sponsored writing (SSW) has been defined as writing that people take up beyond the requirements of work or school; it is writing that people pursue on their own time for their own purposes (Yancey 2004). Research has shown how SSW and obligatory writing can interanimate one another, indicating the untapped potential of SSW as a learning tool (Gere 1994; Lindenman and Rosinski 2020; Prior and Shipka 2003; Roozen 2009; Sternglass 1989; Yancey

2004). Indeed, the line between what is self-sponsored and what is required is blurry, as we found among our participants, including those featured in this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how adults write in order to learn outside of work and school contexts—or to manipulate their boundaries—practicing a strategy we call "self-sponsored writing to learn" (SSWTL). We also offer implications for faculty and administrators invested in teaching writing.

The literature, based primarily on classroom contexts, establishes two central foci of writing to learn (WTL). The first focus centers on using writing as a tool to learn content area knowledge (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson 2004; Fry and Villagomez 2012). The second focus of WTL hones in on developing writing proficiency (Beaufort 2007; Melzer 2009; Soliday 2011; Thaiss and Zawacki 2006), and neither of these foci are mutually exclusive. What we discovered, however, were people pursuing WTL strategies long after their days as students. Far from the carefully deployed lesson plans of higher education, the individuals in our study write of their own volition in order to challenge themselves with new knowledge, express their inner lives, and lean into their identities. The examples we share suggest emergent intersections of SSW and WTL—SSWTL, as it were. The participants we feature here also demonstrate that the two well-documented aims of WTL might now include a third: self-motivated writing for intra/interpersonal growth. What, these cases led us to ask, do we need to do in higher education to help students to enact throughout their lives the kinds of SSW we found in the participants we highlight here?

Self-Sponsored Writing Within and Beyond the Classroom

Scholarship on SSW often explores best practices for teaching and implications within classroom contexts. This work ranges from framing SSW in terms of self-chosen topics in classroom assignments (Sternglass 1989) to documenting how SSW within classroom contexts can bolster writing knowledge transfer (Fishman et al.

2005; Gere 1994; Roozen 2009; Yancey 2004). We know that writers often draw on SSW to focus their resources on writing tasks for school (Prior and Shipka 2003; Shepherd 2018) and have likewise learned that "extracurricular journaling" can contribute to writing within classroom contexts (Roozen 2009). SSW's emergence as an area of study has also positioned it as a WTL technique for students with varying linguistic backgrounds (Yi and Angay-Crowder 2018).

Outside of classrooms, literacy scholars have worked to understand the writing that people do in the world. For example, Beverly Moss (2003) examines writing practices of African American preachers to highlight how entire discourse communities inform rhetorical activity, and Deborah Brandt's (2001) research connects Americans' writing practices to labor and the evolving economy of the twentieth century. Further, Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) seminal work represents a landmark study of writing development of two racially homogenous communities—one white and one Black—tracing these communities' writing practices at home and school. Extending this research on the literacy practices within professional and personal spheres, our work serves as a lens for looking at how voluntary writing practices operate within self-sponsored contexts in the twenty-first century, specifically considering how SSWTL might serve as a bridge connecting writing in the classroom to writing beyond the university.

While composition scholarship helps us understand the value of WTL practices within classrooms, and literacy studies has examined specific communities' writing practices beyond the school sphere, there is little exploration of how WTL strategies in particular operate beyond classroom contexts. We therefore ask: if WTL is, indeed, an effective way of helping people develop their writing and thinking, how does it unfold in self-sponsored contexts? Our work follows Manian and Hsu's (2019) scholarship, which highlights medical students' scholarly blog posts as a WTL tool. We likewise extend Shepherd's (2018) work, which explores the connections first-year college students make between their digital compositions in-school and out-of-school, in that we, too, interrogate the fine

line between obligatory and SSWTL. We explore how individuals take up writing outside of school—and work—as means to learn or deepen knowledge, grow as people and writers, or explore new ways of being.

The Writers

Our research explores how WTL functions in self-sponsored contexts, offering a slice of what we learned from our larger multi-institutional study, employing online survey (n=713) and video/phone interview (n=27) techniques. Our study explores the functions of SSW and rhetorical activity in writers' professional, personal, and civic lives. The survey was distributed using a snowball sampling technique across our university listservs, personal networks, and social media, aiming for wide distribution. It was open from September to December 2019 and asked respondents if they would be willing to be interviewed.

To the extent possible, we selected interviewees to ensure a range of ages, education levels, geographic locations, genders, and professions. Though we did not ask participants to identify their race on the survey, we were able to use participants' self-disclosure of racial identity to select a more racially diverse range of interview participants. Within the interview sample, there were five undergraduates, five graduate students, and seventeen non-students. Seventy percent identified as female. Over half held degrees beyond high school diplomas, including associate's, bachelor's, master's, and professional degrees. Sixty-two percent of interviewees were between the ages of 18–44, and 38% were 45 or older. Both survey and interview participants were asked to submit samples of SSW that were meaningful to them in some way. All interviewees selected their own pseudonyms.

Highlighting a portion of our larger study, we focus here on three interviews with non-students, all of whom indicated that writing to learn is one key function of their self-sponsored writing. After interviews were professionally transcribed, each interview transcript was coded by two research team members to create a

taxonomy of the functions of SSW, and we identified thirty-eight functions, one of which was "writing to learn." The "writing to learn" code appeared in 48.1% of our interviews. The three interviews we discuss below represent one female- and two male-identifying participants, all college graduates. We chose to focus on these interviews for the frequency of WTL as a code in the data and also for the richness of how these participants used WTL strategies in connection to their SSW, reflecting that SSWTL functioned as a mechanism for learning, self-exploration, and identity development. Specifically, we see our participants using SSWTL to develop knowledge in service of individual and communal identity.

Self-Sponsored Writing to Learn (SSWTL) Case Snapshots

"To challenge myself"

A woman between the ages of 35–44, Kristen has worked for seventeen years as a physician's assistant in a dermatologist's office, and she indicated she loved her work. On the survey, Kristen indicated that she wrote daily, though in her interview, she was adamant that she was not a writer. In Kristen's words, her writing was "more of a self-help motivational skill." Kristen described writing in order to learn new knowledge in a wide variety of areas, explicitly mentioning politics, history, and self-help techniques. She calls her SSW "note-taking," including personal lists of important facts, conceptual relationships, and questions to follow up on later. In our survey, Kristen identified her SSW as "summaries of knowledge attained through documentaries or educational sources/research."

Kristen's WTL, despite being self-motivated, connects to her professional goals. In addition to clinical reports she writes for work, she pursues medical knowledge outside her professional field of dermatology, examples of which are notes she took "at a conference just in review for my board exam." Kristen insisted that writing to learn medical knowledge for personal reasons is nothing like the "robotic" writing she does for work, such as clinical notes, referrals, and prescriptions. She noted that she writes to learn how to read

EKGs, for example, a skill that, she says, has mostly eluded her since her professional training and rarely, if ever, arises in her daily work. While at first such writing to learn may not seem to be self-sponsored because of its proximity to obligatory professional writing, the terms in which Kristen described these efforts clearly identify it as such: "I'm challenging myself, which is important to me. It reminds me that I need to take time for me, and that I succeeded in doing so."

Note that writing to learn new medical knowledge, disconnected from the day-to-day in her professional work, is writing that Kristen described in terms of challenging herself, taking time for herself, and envisioning personal success. These motivations for her writing are connected to her professional and personal identities. She elaborated, "I intentionally set out to allocate time to educate myself and challenge myself and figure out where my faults were and try to improve on them." Additionally, Kristen described her SSW as "calming, like many feel about coloring or listening to music" and "a self-help [or] motivational skill." Kristen engaged in WTL that, at first, appears to be more professional than self-sponsored, but upon closer examination reveals a more complex set of relations between the professional and the personal, writing to learn beyond the classroom, and personal issues of identity.

"I'm still learning and studying this"
A retired high school English teacher between the ages of 55–64, Dean identifies as a Druid, a nature-based minority religion, and describes himself as a daily writer. He spoke of writing in sophisticated ways perhaps because of his MFA and teaching experience. He considered his writing an integral part of his identity as a member of a minority religion: "My poetry and fiction answer the deepest call I experience to be creative and to express my inner life." His poetry was a means of connecting with and honoring his ancestors, paying homage to how "we got here and the people that came before us," which are important aspects of his spirituality.

Dean also described his SSW in intersecting layers of learning, including lifelong learning of the craft of writing. He wrote as part

of an Old English Facebook Group, a space he described primarily as one of learning, and noted that he had been writing poetry since high school, basing his creative work off both coursework and his own self-tutored approach. He described his creative writing in terms that underscore an ongoing relationship and explicitly invoked terms we associate with WTL: "I need to put some discipline . . . in my writing and see what happens," he said; "I'm still learning and studying this." When he was teaching, he would often use pieces of his own writing in the classroom as examples for students while simultaneously workshopping them with students, an act that blurs the line between professional and SSW. While a primary purpose of Dean's SSW is to learn to become a better writer, Dean understands this effort as inextricable from his sense of himself and his connection to other people.

"To really learn about Black culture"

An 18–24-year-old male with a bachelor's degree, Jerome identifies as African American and works for an education non-profit committed to racial justice. In his interview, Jerome reported writing a wide variety of texts, some of which are unambiguously self-sponsored and others of which blur the lines between the self-sponsored and the obligatory. Jerome's interview is important to our argument because his SSW, including the learning functions that we focus on here, does not only involve individual identity similar to those described by Dean and Kristen, but also collective identity.

Jerome's SSWTL emerged through a discussion about a book he wrote in a college course that guides students through the writing and publishing process in partnership with a publishing company. Although Jerome's book could certainly be characterized as writing he did for school—thus, obligatory—he framed it as writing that he ultimately did for himself. Reflecting on his book, Jerome commented, "I realized how much I thought I knew who I was before versus after the book came out. It was night and day." More specifically, Jerome's book functioned to establish his identity as a person of color, detailing that his "Blackness was questioned" earlier in his life because he "didn't get certain references." He explained:

"I didn't have a Black mom playing Erykah Badu or Jill Scott. . . . Like, that wasn't part of my lived experience." Jerome explicitly described writing his book to "really learn about Black culture [and] Black history." He added, "I was just coming to terms with my own sense of consciousness around race and also that time period in my life also fueled me to write the book." In terms quite different from Kristen and Dean, Jerome wrote about Blackness to learn about and further understand his own racial identity.

More important than a discrete distinction between Jerome's obligatory and self-sponsored writing is, in our view, his grasping of the opportunity afforded by his college course to write for personal aims. Jerome, by choosing this class for what it could do for him, transformed the obligatory nature of the assignment into a functionally self-sponsored act of writing. And what was that function? Learning about his own racial identity in order to grow more fully into the Black man he wants to be.

Discussion: Blurring Self-Sponsored and Obligatory Writing

In each participant's case, we observed blurry relationships between self-sponsored and obligatory writing, on the one hand, and between learning (almost anything) and identity development, on the other. Our findings encourage us not to think about self-sponsored and obligatory writing as opposites, or even on a spectrum; rather we see these operating in dynamic relationships with each other. For Kristen, SSWTL is a mechanism for learning new information that develops her personal and professional identity through a growing knowledge base. For Dean, SSWTL functions to develop his writing craft, which is tied to his personal, interpersonal, and spiritual identities, toward personal growth through the craft of writing itself. For Jerome, SSWTL connects him with others and performs the action of personal growth via learning more about his intersectional racial, socio-cultural identity. And for each, SSWTL functions, sometimes in tandem with obligatory contexts, in all of these ways in varying degrees: to learn new knowledge, to become

a better writer, to relate to oneself and others. SSWTL techniques extend beyond writing fluency and domain knowledge; our research participants taught us that writing to learn is a lifetime practice people use to formulate and negotiate their personal, professional, and communal identities. Writing, in these cases, is an affordance of everyday life, one that bridges the mundane to the most fundamental levels of what it means to live.

SSWTL seems to be an important way to make meaning in life after university, for as Prior and Shipka (2003) note "literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world" (181). We believe our findings indicate a new direction for research in SSW, including continued exploration of how individuals combine SSW with WTL techniques throughout their adult lives, and how these efforts interact not only with their obligatory writing, as a good deal of research already investigates, but how these efforts energize and provide the very stuff of individual identity.

Implications

Leveraging SSW(TL) in the Classroom as a Lifelong Learning Strategy

Many institutions emphasize lifelong learning in their mission statements. Our findings suggest that SSWTL is a mechanism for such learning and extends existing scholarship that establishes SSW's relationship to the classroom. While we resist too fully pulling SSW into classrooms for fear of conflating it with obligatory writing, the blurriness between writing that is self-sponsored and obligatory already exists; as all of our cases show, self-sponsored and obligatory writing already commingle in meaningful ways in people's lives.

Understanding how SSWTL might be useful in life beyond college can make educators even more intentional about the spaces we create in our classrooms for WTL activities. That is, educators can invite students to bring some of their SSW into classrooms in order to introduce and frame accompanying WTL activities as explicitly transferable and broadly applicable. For example, faculty who teach introductory history courses could invite students to

bring in a piece of SSW that documents parts of their personal history to use as a springboard for discussing the role primary texts play in historiography. An example of such texts might be an email to a friend, a card from a family member, or a scrapbook. Asking students to meaningfully engage with SSW within classroom contexts, understanding the social function of SSW genres, may reinforce the value of SSW as connected to learning as well as related to their personal lives. SSW is more than a tool for learning a particular discipline or developing writing skill: it is a method for navigating new environments and phases of one's life. This is not to suggest that we should appropriate students' SSW in classroom spaces. Rather, we suggest that, when students see the connection between their SSW meaning-making practices and other kinds of writing as meaning-making, this helps them recognize the wholeness of their writing lives. Tapping into students' SSW and inviting them to pursue self-sponsored functions in required writing provides a pathway for students to transfer a newly broadened sense of themselves as writers into unfamiliar contexts throughout the rest of their lives.

Implications for Administrators

Administrative leadership of writing programs, writing centers, and teaching and learning centers can also benefit from understanding the reach of SSWTL strategies illuminated in our research. As our interviews indicate, SSW and workplace writing can be highly interconnected. Writing program administrators and teaching center directors should encourage faculty and tutors they supervise to begin from the premise that students have rich writing lives beyond and prior to the classroom, and encourage students to use SSW to learn and develop as people beyond the purview of writing classrooms.

A writing center administrator, for instance, might work with writing consultants on ways to engage student writers through their SSW in order to open conversations about genre conventions, for example, which can be subsequently brought back around to techniques useful in classroom writing. Administrators who lead

faculty development across institutional spaces have the capacity to introduce the kinds of WTL assignments we discuss above to faculty who teach undergraduate and graduate students with the intent of integrating SSWTL awareness into the curriculum and beyond. Again, our intent is not to appropriate SSW for classroom use, but to strengthen classroom dynamics through acknowledgment of the importance of SSW and writers' tacit knowledge through it. In short, we want educators to recognize the ways classroom learning primes writers for learning that takes place in many contexts to more intentionally build connections between classroom- and out-of-classroom learning.

Taking a wider lens, we hope that teachers, administrators, and researchers will join us and those cited throughout this chapter in exploring our field's growing awareness of the reciprocal and social nature of learning and the role writing plays in it throughout people's lives. Such awareness would, we believe, help faculty and administrators across disciplines and educational spaces more fully understand how writing can be operationalized for life, both in terms of the work writing does for people in obligatory contexts, like work and school, and self-sponsored contexts, like identity development and lifelong learning.

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