

The Writing on the Wall: Attending to Self-motivated Student Literacies¹

Susan Weinstein

And so I will ask that question—"How do these texts come to be?"—of some of the variety of texts that I have encountered as a teacher and as a citizen and as a parent, texts that reflect individual efforts to make sense of the world through literacy and that represent acts of engaging in the discourses of that world.

—Robert P. Yagelski (2000, p. 14)

It's a Thursday morning at *La Juventud* Alternative High School on the south side of Chicago. The school is a kind of "second chance" for kids who have left the public schools for a variety of reasons; there are usually somewhere between seventy and one hundred students enrolled, almost all of them Latino or African American. At the moment, everyone who has come to school today is on the third floor, in the largest room in the building. The room was newly tiled at the beginning of this school year; the floor is a shiny, pebbled gray and white. There are two green chalkboards side by side on the wall at the far side of the room. Three students sit on top of a table in front of the boards. Another table juts out lengthwise from the wall, near the emergency exit that usually serves as a surreptitious escape route for a few kids during school meetings like this one.

Though I am sitting here specifically looking for "literacy activities"—in other words, any reading and writing kids may be doing—the only thing I see at the moment is Gerald browsing through *The Source* (a popular, glossy hip-hop magazine). Two girls are looking over Gerald's shoulder; they take the magazine from him to look at something more closely. I begin to worry that I won't find anything else.

When I first thought about documenting the students' literacy habits, about a month before this assembly, I explained the idea to Dave, a staff

member who has worked at the school as a science teacher, principal, and grant writer for about seven years. I told him that I would be haunting classrooms and hallways, trying to observe students engaged in reading and writing that was not related to their official classroom activities. He looked at me and smirked, a smirk I took to mean that he doubted I'd find much. I responded to this implication: "Yes, Dave, they *do* read and write on their own." I know this from my own experience as an English teacher at the school for two years, as a part-time librarian there when I went back to school myself, and as a continuing participant/observer. It wasn't that Dave didn't believe in the students and their abilities; his particular work at the school just hadn't brought him into the kind of close contact with their reading and writing that I have had because of my own roles there. But now I am worried that I have overestimated the amount of this activity that I'll witness at school if I'm not specifically encouraging students to share it with me.

However, as the assembly speaker arrives and begins to talk, I notice a girl sitting across the room. She has long, slightly wet brown hair parted in the middle, and wears several gold chains and a dark blue FUBU (For Us By Us, the brand name of a popular African American-owned clothing company) t-shirt. On her lap she holds an old-fashioned, black-and-white speckled composition book. She writes several lines quickly, then pauses to read them over. Her lips move as she reads her writing to herself. She seems to be thinking hard—her forehead is scrunched and every once in awhile she looks up, her eyes moving back and forth as though she's either trying to read her own thoughts, or looking around the room to see if she can find the word she needs out there somewhere.

In front of her, a thin, pale-skinned Latina girl in a small red t-shirt that reveals her midriff writes in a notebook in front of her on a desk. She seems to be writing notes to Katiria, a girl with curly blondish hair pulled tightly back into a ponytail, who is sitting next to her. Each girl takes a turn writing in the notebook, then passing it to the other.

Miguel, a thin, well-groomed student in black turtleneck and black leather jacket (and a talented soccer player), writes "EZLN" on the board behind him in wide letters with the side of a piece of chalk. These letters are an acronym for *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional*, the rebel army active in the Chiapas region of Mexico.

What I have described here is not unusual; my guess is that anybody walking into any school assembly could find similar moments of reading

and writing. It is, in fact, precisely because these activities are common that they demand attention. Teachers struggle to motivate students to read and write and engage in their classes; all the while, students are reading and writing all around them. However, as Elizabeth Moje (2000) has observed, “[W]e have only a few studies of how marginalized adolescents—those who are considered by school personnel to be ‘at risk of failure,’ ‘problem’ students, or ‘low achievers’—use literacy to make sense of their social and school lives” (p. 653). This project, then, is one attempt to address this lack; it represents an effort to uncover the contexts and motivations that surround some such activities, and to suggest ways in which these findings can inform an approach to English and, specifically, to English education that emphasizes literacy as something teachers and students explore together, with mutual respect for one another’s different experiences with language.

In her research among adolescent girls in a junior high school, Margaret Finders (1997) identifies “two literate systems in operation: sanctioned literacies (those literacies that are recognized, circulated, and sanctioned by adults in authority) and . . . ‘literate underlife’ (those practices that refuse in some way to accept the official view, practices designed and enacted to challenge and disrupt the official expectations)” (p. 24). There is, in my research, evidence of both the kinds of sanctioned and underlife practices that Finders suggests. However, Finders’ model is not one that fits the direction of this specific project, because of how it positions students’ self-motivated literacy activities: that is, as a *response* (whether resistant or conforming) to sanctioned school practices. In contrast, the graffiti, lyrics and poetry that students in this study write are influenced by many things: the discourse communities with which they choose to identify, the similar or complementary interests of friends, and their own reading as well as the reading and writing they do for class. A single activity may at times reflect an underlife positioning *vis a vis* the practices of an individual classroom (as when a student writes a rap lyric instead of reading or working on an assigned essay in class), while it may be sanctioned and, indeed, celebrated in another school context (as when the same student submits that lyric to a school literary magazine), to say nothing of the prestige it may earn in discourse communities unconnected with the school.

In fact, a student writing during a lull in assembly, or at the computer during lunch, may be doing something that has neither a conforming nor a resistant relationship to the school, but is related instead to purposes that extend beyond the school walls. Given the fluidity and, at times, tenuousness of the relationship between students’ literacy practices and those required by the school, I will use the term *self-motivated* to refer to these

practices, since it is a descriptive term that stops short of suggesting a particular stance toward school practices.²

The variety of self-motivated literacy activities that students engage in within and outside of school is too broad to be covered in a single article.

By exploring the role that tagging (a simple form of graffiti) plays around the school and community, and in the life of one particular tagger at *La Juventud*, I will argue that even the simplest literate act—the writing of a name on a wall—opens out into a rich discourse community, in which taggers carry on complex conversations, negotiate and challenge shared discursive norms, and develop identities that are intimately connected to a specific communicative world.

Therefore, while I will discuss briefly several such activities, this article will focus extensively on only one—in fact, the one that is least obviously a literate act. By exploring the role that tagging (a simple form of graffiti) plays around the school and community, and in the life of one particular tagger at *La Juventud*, I will argue that even the simplest literate act—the writing of a name on a wall—opens out into a rich discourse community, in which taggers carry on complex conversations, negotiate and challenge shared discursive norms, and develop identities that are intimately connected to a specific communicative world.

Such a study would be of only passing interest to English educators and the preservice teachers with whom they work if not for the fact that so many of these taggers inhabit the classrooms in which new teachers will work. English

teachers are trained to go into the classroom and to invite students to enter into various types of formal and creative discourse, sharing with students the characteristic elements of these genres and helping them to develop into skillful writers. What is less common is for the teacher to ask students to invite her into *their* forms of discourse. This move is important, however, because it strengthens the possibility that a truly dialogic pedagogy will develop, as both teacher and students discuss the kinds of discourse with which they are familiar and in which they are skilled, and explore the ways in which the characteristics of these discourses overlap and differ.

This dialogue can lead to the development, among students and teachers, of an experience-based understanding of both Rhetoric and rhetorics (in other words, of the art and function of communicative acts, and of the variety of forms and styles that these acts take) and to the ability to choose among them and move among them based on the context in which communication occurs. This, it seems to me, is a more broadly and deeply educative project than the decontextualized teaching of the various genres of formal writing, with no discussion of either the connections between those

genres, or the connections between them and the writing in which students already engage.

A word about method seems appropriate before the rest of this story unfolds. The formal research for this project took place during a three-month period (from about February through April). During that time, I spent two to four hours at the school on three to four days during each week. Not all of this time was directly focused on research; as befits the participant-observer role of the ethnographic researcher, I also worked part-time as the school librarian. This position fed my research because one of my library duties was the compilation of a student literary book (the school had received a small grant from a [now-defunct] online publisher to produce these books, which were handed out to all of the authors and any other student who requested one). Therefore, it was in keeping with my role at the school to approach students with questions about their writing, to carry on extended conversations about the development of individual pieces or about their writing processes more generally, and to collect student texts. The writers were, of course, fully aware of my dual role as librarian and researcher at all times, and entered into every conversation with the understanding that it could be used for research purposes.

In addition to the roles I inhabited during the actual research, I was, for the two years previous to this time period, a full-time English teacher at the school. The majority of the students mentioned here, therefore, were students with whom I had already worked and knew quite well. This might help to explain why Leo, a person of few words where adults are concerned, was willing to talk to me at some length, and it might also explain why students like Michelle and Yesenia, whom you will meet shortly, felt comfortable approaching me to talk about writing in open and sometimes personal ways.

Tagging as Discourse

Outside of La Juventud, written vertically along the side of a telephone pole in thick white letters, is the word SYRAK. Inside the building, toward the back of a second-floor classroom used mostly for English, a small SYRAK is carved into the top middle of a desk. In front of it, another SYRAK is scrawled in faded red marker on the back of a yellow plastic chair, and an even more faded one lingers on the back of an orange-ish chair.

Lunchtime in the library. I'm leaning over the teacher's desk, talking to a student, my back to the table where Leo (a.k.a. Syrak) and Joaquin G. sit,

talking. I gradually become aware of their conversation. Joaquin is addressing Leo admiringly: "I never knew who Syrak was, then I came to this school, I was like, 'Where's Syrak at?'" Leo responds briefly, then Joaquin continues, saying that he tags (writes his name graffiti-style) over at the Big K-Mart. He laughs as [HE?] describes the people watching him tag as they drive by in their cars. Leo acknowledges the rush of the public act, saying, "If it wasn't risky I wouldn't do it."

I ask Joaquin later why he seemed so excited talking to Leo about tagging. He says, "It's that Leo does these big things, like over the bridge. And I'm like, 'How'd you do that?' Or you see one he didn't finish, and Leo says, 'That's the day I got chased by the 5-0 [police].'" For Joaquin, these are the stories of a pro, a skilled practitioner in the discourse community in which Joaquin claims membership. (Field notes, 3 April 2001)

Among students at *La Juventud*, there are two major student discourse communities in which writing is a primary focus: rap and tagging. Both of these forms are regularly devalued in mainstream discourse, rap because of the controversy that often surrounds its language and subject matter, tagging because it usually involves the defacement of private property. However, they are also forms that are very much a part of the experience of students at *La Juventud*, and at many other schools. As Giroux and Simon (1989) argue, this fact alone makes them important areas of study:

By ignoring the cultural and social forms that are authorized by youth and simultaneously empower or disempower them, educators risk complicitly silencing and negating their students. This is unwittingly accomplished by refusing to recognize the importance of those sites and social practices outside of schools that actively shape student experiences and through which students often define and construct their sense of identity, politics, and culture. (p. 3)

Of the two forms mentioned above, rap is the more closely tied to traditional ideas of literacy as written expression. A number of male students at *La Juventud* regularly compose lyrics during class and at lunch, sometimes writing silently and sometimes rapping rhythmically to their friends (the female students that I have worked with tend more to other genres of lyric-writing, poetry, and stories). Tagging, in contrast, is superficially the least obviously an act of literacy. If one can accept an argument for tagging, the mere writing of a word on a wall, then the work of arguing for the accep-

tance of other, more traditionally literate forms of student writing will be that much easier.

Tagging is interesting in part because of the way in which issues of identity and writing are conflated. Tagging is “the simplest and most elemental form” of graffiti, “stylized signatures written in marker, spray paint, grease pencil, paint stick, or shoe polish; they represent the writer’s chosen, self-fashioned street name” (Brewer and Miller, 1990, p. 348). It is writing-as-identity in its purest form: the name, a single word, carries all meaning. It is all inference, indexicality—nothing is explicit—but it carries messages of, “I’m here, this is my territory, this adds to my body of work.” Because of the significance of the word, which a tagger will write thousands of times, Leo says that “people usually pick out names that mean something to them, or their nickname growing up. . . .”³ The conflation of name/word and identity/meaning means that if someone takes a name that already has been claimed, it can lead to a challenge. Leo says that the way this challenge plays out has changed over time. “Back then it was like, ‘Ah, let’s take it to the wall, we’ll do it.’⁴ Now it’s like, violent, it’s turned into more like gangbanging with tagging, so they call it ‘tagbanging,’ so they probably want to beat you up for that.”

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For Leo, tagging seems to accomplish many purposes: it encompasses issues of communal and individual identity, communication and risk. The conversation with Joaquin at the beginning of this section illustrates the success with which Leo is accomplishing goals he has set out for himself as part of an organized, complex and far-reaching discourse community centered on a seemingly elemental act of writing. For Leo and for other taggers and graffiti writers, the practice “is central to who they are as people. It is a way of conveying, constructing, and maintaining identity, thought and power” (Moje, 2000, p. 651) to anyone who is literate enough in this particular discourse to interpret it (although in his study of Denver taggers, Jeff Ferrell [1993] makes the point that tagging is also about something other than identity and territory; it is also about the act itself, “the incalculably rich experience of ‘going out tagging,’ especially with other writers” [p. 71]).

I use the term *discourse* in reference to tagging for specific reasons: It is tagging’s existence at the center of a discourse community that makes it relevant to this study’s general exploration of contexts and motivations for student writing. James Gee (1996) defines a Discourse⁵ as both a thing and a way of behaving:

A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. . . . Another way to look at Discourses is that they are always ways of displaying (through words, actions, values, and beliefs) membership in a particular social group or social network. (pp.127-128)

The main members of the tagging discourse community are, of course, the taggers themselves, who often form into "crews" to try to claim territory which may range from an individual school or neighborhood to an entire city. Often, the nuts and bolts of tagging are passed on from one generation to another, although Leo says that this was not the case for him:

People when they're growing up, they probably have older guys in the neighborhood . . . teach them the history, or like why they do it. To me, I learned everything by myself. . . . I seen my friends, they were doing it too but they were not serious. I grew up with these guys, I used to like to draw, they liked to draw . . . we seen some tagging, murals on the wall, we liked it, so we just started doing it. People teach you how to do it, but we had to learn just by seeing.

These days, the Internet has broadened the practices and the reach of this discourse community. When I sit down in the school library with Leo during a lunch period to conduct an interview, he immediately rolls his chair over to a computer and logs on. He tells me he'll be able to talk better if he can browse a website at the same time. He goes to a tagging site, and as he stares at the screen, then clicks on a letter from an alphabet list, he explains,

I'm looking for my name, they put it in websites. . . . They'll leave a message. . . . Now the Internet has more graffiti, maybe like your own city, all the taggers talking about you, or they want you to turn [join] their crew, or just information, parties, whatever. . . . People started to do their own website with their crew . . . so people . . . all over the world can see their art.

There is another group of taggers who participate in this discourse, for purposes that seem both similar and different. In the bathroom across from the main office at *La Juventud* one morning, a staff member finds written on the window frame the words "King Love" with a five-point crown drawn above them. As soon as the registrar finds out, she grabs a can of Comet and a rag and begins to scrub it off. The registrar's quick reaction is due to the fact that this tag is a familiar example of gang representation: "King" and the five point crown are both references to the Latin Kings, the predominant gang in the immediate area of *La Juventud*. Gang tagging tends to be taken much more seriously at the school than the kind in which Leo

engages. Although he has spent many hours there scrubbing surfaces clean of his tags, Leo's "hobby" (as he calls it) has generally been viewed fairly lightly by the staff, in some cases with a sort of amused disapproval. Gang tagging, on the other hand, has led to school assemblies and staff meetings in which gang "experts" run through the meaning of various symbols, letters, and colors prevalent in the tagging of the major Chicago gangs.

The more serious staff reaction to gang tagging is a result of the potential danger that such writing represents—it is often done as a warning or outright threat to rival gang members who may attend the school. However, Leo sees the differences between his tagging and that of gang members as more connected to style than to intent. In fact, he sees their purposes as being somewhat similar:

Gangbangers try to claim the school, try to show they have more power in the school. I write in the school, but they don't say nothing, because I guess I did more writing than them so, if they're fighting for the school to see who it is, I should say it's mine, because I got my name more over it, and I been here longer.

Leo is trying to claim the school territory as a tagger; the gangbangers are trying to claim it for their gangs. The concept of claiming, though, is shared by both, and seems to be connected, for both, to a desire for respect and recognition. Leo does acknowledge that there is a difference in what these claims mean and where they lead: "A lot of gangbangers, when they represent, when they're tagging, they put *killer*, it's like threatening the other gang." When we tag, we just represent." The term *represent* is widely used to mean that one is making oneself and one's affiliations known—one can represent one's neighborhood, one's school, one's ethnic group, as well as one's crew or gang. As Leo points out, the act of representation can carry different meanings. In both of the cases he describes, however, one thing is constant: The writing on the wall declares an ongoing presence even when those it represents are physically absent. It stands in for them, communicating much of what the writer and his affiliates would communicate if they were there—threat, challenge, recognition, declaration. For all intents and purposes, the word *is* the person or group, which is why a defacement of the writing elicits strong reactions, sometimes leading to representational battles in which each side does violence to the others' words and images.

The real differences for Leo, however, are in where and how members of each group tag: "Gangbangers, they write on garages, houses. . . . Taggers, they write on El stations, where people could see it. Gangbangers, they do it hidden. . . . People think it's the same thing but it ain't." This

seems to suggest that for taggers, part of the purpose is to reach an audience beyond those at the center of the discourse community—there is some lure to public attention. Jeff Ferrell (1993) argues, however, that other taggers make up the primary audience: “Though they may hope that a piece will be seen and appreciated by the public, they can be sure that it will be seen and evaluated by members of the subculture” (p. 51). For gang members, tags may be targeted at a more specific audience—members of their own and opposing gangs. It is an internal conversation, as opposed to the taggers’ partially public dialogue.

As far as style, Leo says, “Gangbangers will do Old English [lettering] all the time. Taggers, they make new letters, so it’s more creative. . . . To me gang graffiti’s boring, ’cause you do the same thing over and over. If you do gang graffiti, you might as well try and get new letters.” His pride in his own practice starts to come through here, but becomes even more apparent when he talks about the difference in scope: “They [gang taggers] are trying to claim neighborhoods.” Then he laughs and says, “I ain’t trying to take over a neighborhood, I’m trying to take over the city . . . trying to be all-city.”

Leo also alludes to peripheral members of this discourse community⁷ who don’t engage in tagging themselves but can read its meaning: “A lot of people aren’t about tagging, but they know if they see it, because they see it so much. Like you keep on seeing the same name over and over, you’re gonna, every time you’re walking, check to see if it’s the same guy. They recognize it.” For Leo, at least, these non-tagging observers seem to be part of the intended audience; he likes it that even people who do not have tagging on their minds become his readers, because he is supplying so much text.

This raises an interesting issue, since any tagger knows that his/her audience will include, along with fellow taggers and passive observers, individuals for whom the tagging demands a response other than the answering tag that another crew member might produce. For Leo, such individuals include parents and police:

Like my mom, she ain’t about tagging, she hates it, but she sees my name here or there. At first she was mad, ’cause you know, I was young and underage for going to jail. I guess they take it out on your parents—the cops, whatever, the judge. And I guess as I got older, she couldn’t do nothing about it, because if I got caught, she was going to let me stay in jail.

This story provides evidence of the overlapping nature of discourses—while tagging is its own discourse, it can also enter family and legal discourses, in ways that can be problematic for the tagger.

Leo represents himself as an active and enthusiastic member of the tagging discourse community. Yet, he also rebels against its norms by assert-

ing his individuality in the midst of a discourse in which group identity (here, the identity of the “crew” to which a tagger belongs) is often emphasized:

Some people . . . when they tag they throw up [write] their crew name. To me when I tag I throw up my name. I try to get my name up more than other crews, trying to show them that I could out-tag them [just by himself]. I’m in a crew, I throw it up, yeah, but, I rather prefer to throw up my name. Because if I’m gonna get caught tagging, I might as well get caught doing my name instead of throwing my crew.

This individualistic action might reflect the way that “writers continually negotiate the boundaries of personal and collective style” (Ferrell, 1993, p. 85). However, one can also read Leo’s resistance to the rules and regulations of a community to which he belongs as an example of underlife activity. Like Margaret Finders, Robert Brooke (1987) discusses underlife in his writing about schools, identifying it as “those behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation” to show that these participants have “a more complex personality outside that role” (p. 141). Leo’s simultaneous membership in tagging crews, with the acceptance of the discourse community’s norms that suggests, and his resistance to strictly following the rules of that discourse (i.e., representing your crew when you tag, foregrounding communal rather than individual identity) seem to demonstrate that even here, within a discourse which could be perceived as pure underlife, there is in fact a well-defined set of standards and a measure of controlled reaction against those standards. This suggests that underlife is in a constant dialectical relationship with any institution, and it problematizes Brooke’s claim that one can, in a writing classroom, simply make the underlife into the overlife. What we see through Leo’s example is that even something which could itself be viewed as an underlife, once it becomes a dominant discourse or practice, will tend to generate an underlife of its own.

English teachers often see their role as one of preparing students to enter the dominant social discourse through a teaching of standard English and of standard academic forms of writing. It has been argued that this goal may be problematic for two reasons: first, there are students who “struggle . . . to enter the so-called dominant discourse” despite our best efforts to teach them; second, some educational scholars claim that “there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship between literacy and economic or political power in American society” (Yagelski, 2000, p. 16; see also Graff, 1995, and Stuckey, 1991). Leo’s descriptions of the tagging discourse community serve to further complicate the “dominant discourse” argument. Teachers

can become so focused on preparing students to enter this discourse that they miss the fact that students are often actively participating in and honing their literacy skills in the discourses that *they* define as dominant in their lives. Students may internalize the idea that a specific set of skills will lead unproblematically to success in high school, college, work, and life. But even for students who *do* try to master these skills, the standard academic discourse may not be as immediate to them as other discourses.

For Leo, tagging is, if not *the*, at least *a* dominant discourse in his world, and he is invested in studying it, participating in it, and refining the skills he needs to be successful in it. Like those students who write rap lyrics, taggers are doing much of what English teachers try to get them to do,

but within an alternative discourse which educators and parents may see as socially or academically illegitimate. My argument is not that academic writing and standard English are not worth teaching; it is rather that, while English teachers may see themselves as responsible for broadening the range of discourse communities in which students are equipped to participate, they must not claim sole right to identify which ones are worth participating in. If any of us, as high school English teachers or as teacher edu-

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This question may seem dangerously naive, especially if one does buy into the argument that an English teacher's responsibility is very specifically to teach students the literacy skills that will get them into college or a good job. This is where the question of the real value of literacy becomes critical. If it is true that literacy does not necessarily lead directly to social and economic success, it represents a serious challenge to skills-based methods classes. I would argue that it is imperative, therefore, that prospective teachers develop a critical notion of why they will teach what they teach before their students pose that question. And pose it they likely will, since students like Leo have discovered that the kinds of non-standardized languages and forms that are discouraged in many classrooms actually *do* lead to power within the alternative discourse communities in which they choose to participate. Leo gains respect and recognition for his tagging from the members of his own and other crews, much as a writer of rap lyrics gains

respect from his peers and perhaps a positive self-image from perceiving himself as a writer among other writers whom he admires.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that just as literacy in a given discourse can empower within the discourse community, it can simultaneously disempower, when it conflicts with other discourses. The examples of rap and tagging make this point clear: Writing a skilled rap lyric can potentially give someone power within the rap discourse community, and it can be a real, concrete kind of power—that is, power to pursue one's goals, to influence others, to earn respect, to earn money. At the same time, being a skilled rap lyricist can disempower precisely because the language, themes, and self-representations that are standard in rap do not match mainstream standards. When we consider the example of graffiti, the point becomes clearer still—the very skills which earn respect and recognition among other taggers can get someone arrested (an extreme form of disempowerment) by police who represent a society which sees such acts as criminal, and whose job it is to defend the “systems of legal and economic domination” (Ferrell, 1993, p. 171) within which tagging occurs. Leo has already had a small taste of this through two day-long sentences of community service, which he spent cleaning up expressways and “dirty neighborhoods.”

What fascinates me here is the movement by students between and among discourse communities that involve more- or less-socially valued literacy activities. Leo is in school, presumably willing to make the attempt to become skilled in standard literacy activities. At the same time, he is regularly engaged in tagging, an activity which is socially condemned. Yet it is the dialectical empowerment and disempowerment of this activity that has led Leo to identify future goals: “I can't see myself doing graffiti a long time. I'd rather have a job, try to make money out of it, instead of getting arrested for it . . . try to go to college, get up on computer graphics.” He goes on to say that he'll probably continue to do graffiti until he's fifty, though he'll switch mostly to “permission walls” (walls that a private owner allows someone to tag or to create a mural on). However, it seems that Leo doesn't want to have to give up the power and recognition he's gained as a tagger even as he moves into other worlds where power is measured and distributed differently. He says, in fact, that at this point in his tagging career, he does it more to maintain his legacy than to compete. In talking about the difference between his tag-

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ging and that of gangbangers in the school, he says he does it now not to claim power but so that “maybe if I graduate, to say I was here, to leave a message I was here.”

For preservice English teachers, familiarity with the ways that teenagers move within and among various discourse communities can provide new ways of thinking about how to bring high school students into conversations about why and how we choose the particular languages we do in particular situations. The teacher who enters the classroom with this knowledge can start such conversations by challenging students to become conscious of the various discourses they already employ, thus creating an environment in which students are encouraged to learn from themselves, each other, and lived experience, rather than solely from teacher and textbooks.

In writing about her experiences as an alternative school teacher, Debbie Smith (1997) says that when she first walked into her small classroom, she found eight young men who did not respond when she invited them to write. Once she allowed them to bring their own literacy practice—in this case, tagging—into that room, however, it created a space for dialogue and understanding, and therefore a new openness and willingness, on both sides. She took a risk by inviting this activity in, and she acknowledges that she continues to deal with “the ethical issues associated with them [the students] and their culture” (p. 134). Despite these concerns, however, she finds the risk worth taking:

Teachers need to acknowledge the experience and knowledge students bring to the classroom. The curriculum should be built on this knowledge and experience. Before a teacher can accept the whole student for who he or she is, that teacher needs to understand the student’s culture. Part of accepting my students—and many other teenagers—is to acknowledge their tagging. Accepting the whole student turns a classroom once filled with disenfranchised students who were not willing to risk and learn into one filled with students with the courage to take the risk to learn. (p. 134)

Writing the Social Self

As the students file out of the assembly described earlier, I walk over to Carolina, the young woman who seemed so intent on writing in her notebook. I pull her aside and ask her what she was writing. She says it’s a song, and shows it to me:

as we lay ~~here~~ down in bed
tell me ~~w~~ what is it ~~that’s~~ in

your head
tell me what is it you feel

I ask her if she writes a lot of songs; she tells me that she “always” writes—mostly songs and letters. I ask her if she sings, too. She says yes, that she has a plan with a musician friend for after they graduate from high school, to get a sound system/recording system and start performing (Personal conversation, 15 February 2001).

When I talk to another student, Kevin, about his poetry and rap writing, I expect that he will tell me that he regularly shares his writing with his peers, since I know that he writes often and is friends with a couple of other guys at school who are also prolific writers. In fact, when I interviewed one of these students, Johnny, earlier in the year, he told me that the sharing of his rap lyrics is very much a part of his writing process—it is through “rehearsing it” with his friends that he figures out what’s working and what isn’t, and therefore makes decisions about revision (16 November 2001). However, while Kevin says that he does sometimes show his works-in-progress to Johnny, there is in fact a separate group of peers whom he considers his main collaborators:

Mainly it’s the Maniacals, a group me and my brother came up with. It’s about fifteen of us now. Each of us specializes in a certain field [like] writing, music, typing, building cars, math, various different areas. Like me, I’m specializing in graphic arts and music. My brother is the one specializing in business and make sure everything runs right. Other people are specializing in math and everything else to take care of the financial business. (Interview, 4 April 2001)

Kevin says that the goal of the Maniacals is to pool their skills and talents in order to go into business and to develop community programs.

Another lunch period in the library. Cornelius sits at a computer, typing a rap lyric using something less than the “hunt and peck” method—more like the “hunt” method, as he uses only his right middle finger. He stops to talk to a teacher, then turns back to the computer screen, reading his new rap quietly to himself. From the way he’s reading, it sounds like he’s checking both the lyrics and the rhythm. At one point, he scoots back a little in his wheeled black office chair, laughs, and—to no one in particular, though he could want Leo, who is sitting at the computer next to him, to hear—says, “That sound raw, Joe. On the real, Joe.” Then he looks back at his computer screen and continues reading silently. During the next period, I go back into the library to get something. Cornelius’s class is there, and I see him reading his new lyric to two

classmates. (Field notes, 15 February 2001)

Penelope, the Spanish teacher, tells me that in her 3rd period class, Jose T. writes love letters to his girlfriend. Actually, she says, laughing, "it's worse than that." Jenny writes poems and Jose copies them into the letters. Penelope says this happens all the time, that she sees it and says to him, "Jose, put that away," and he says, "Si, si, si, maestra." And then she has to tell him again and again. (Personal conversation, 9 March 2001)

These vignettes illustrate various kinds of writing that are familiar to most classroom teachers—students scribbling in a notebook instead of attending to the lesson, writing rap lyrics full of slang and occasional profanity, or whispering and writing messages to each other in the back of the room. While they may seem very different from the public tagging that Leo describes, these practices can arise out of similar motivations and serve similar purposes, and may be similarly worthy of attention and investigation rather than immediate censure.

Carolina and Kevin serve as examples of students who identify themselves as members of communities in which writing is only one of various activities. In such contexts, it seems that members value and support individual literacy activities both because they are in some way valuable to the community's activities and goals and because they are part of a whole person who is part of that community.

The description of Cornelius shows a seemingly more isolated kind of writing, although one that he clearly enjoys. While he is composing, he reads his words out loud; it is possible that by doing this, he wants Leo to listen, but it is also possible that he just wants to hear the way the rhythm flows, since rap is primarily an oral form. Later, he does specifically bring others into his process, yet the relationship between Cornelius and the students to whom he recites his rap is not an ongoing one in which they are working on a joint project or engaged in the kinds of discourse communities I have described in previous sections. Similarly, while Jenny may regularly help Jose compose letters to his girlfriend, this too seems to be a periodic activity unconnected to an ongoing, shared project.

Michelle, a prolific writer of poetry, offers an extended example of this more tenuous kind of discourse community, one perhaps best thought of as a web of sometimes casual relationships in which students compose in relative isolation, but interact with other student writers in order to talk about and critique one another's work. Michelle is particularly attuned to audience;

for her, there are poems for public consumption—"the ones that rhyme"—and poems that she writes more specifically to express her feelings.

The ones that rhyme are the ones that I'm working on, the ones that I'm really trying to make sense of it. The ones that don't rhyme are the ones that to me are the most . . . they're my feelings. It's not intentionally trying to make it sound good, it's just what I'm feeling at the moment. And the ones that rhyme, they're like more that I would show it to people 'cause they rhyme or something like that. (Personal conversation, 9 March 2001)

Michelle's reason for making the rhyming poems public, she says, is because those seem to be what most of her peers expect from poetry. When she shows them the other kind, "they're like, 'Oh, it doesn't rhyme.'" She has, therefore, learned to cater to her audience's expectations and not to share certain poems with certain friends because "a lot of my friends, they're different than me, so sometimes I get encouraged by certain people that are like, 'Hey, you know, you should keep writing'. . . and other people they're like 'Oh, this is nothing.' So it depends on who I'm around."

For Michelle, then, being a writer sometimes has the opposite effect of that which we have seen with the other students, as her poem, "Differences," shows:

So many differences.
I am writing.
Am I different?
No, people write.
But some do not understand
they can't feel me.
I guess it's differences
Alone in a corner
writing
Writing my thoughts.
Others perceive me as "weird"
so I stay in my corner,
and write.
I look up, and see them.
They kind of look like me.
But in so many ways we're different.

Although it is clear from this poem that Michelle's writing causes her to feel alienated from her peers, she still has an impulse to share her work. Fortunately, Michelle has found some people at the school who respond positively to her less formulaic poems. These students, primarily Maurice and

Lydia, also write poetry, and Michelle has found that with them she can have conversations about her writing and theirs. If these three have formed a community, it is a very loose one, comprised of individuals who have identified a common interest and who occasionally come together in brief moments to talk about their writing: "Some people, like Maurice, when we show each other our poems, he likes them, 'cause he knows—he's a writer too—he knows they don't have to rhyme." She described one conversation with Maurice that started after he showed her a poem he had written:

We started talking when he wrote that poem, "Black Heaven," and I was telling him that I liked it, and I asked him if I could read it. And then we were talking about it, and I was gonna show him some of my poems . . . and he said that he liked them. I showed him different ones, they're like ones that kinda don't make sense, but then they do. And he's like, 'Yeah, I like that.' He said that when he writes things, he breaks it down 'cause he wants people to understand, and he said that when I write, I don't really do that, I just write the way I understand, I use big words or things like that. And he said, 'Oh yeah, I like that'. . . [He said that] I should write more, like, a lot of my things are old. I haven't wrote anything new that I like. Like yeah, that I should write more, that I should express myself.

Michelle goes on to describe a similar conversation with Lydia where she took on the role of critical reader regarding Lydia's poem, "Where I'm From," the last section of which I include here:

. . . Where I'm from
I'm from two worlds
In one I look around me
and see shit and garbage
Crusty neighborhood, trash everywhere
It sickens me but I gotta see it
In the other everything's all neat and clean, quiet and peaceful
Mostly white people around
hardly any brown
That's the world I like but
I don't belong
Can I find a place between?

Michelle says, "I was talking to her [Lydia] about the end. She said, 'Maybe I should put it somewhere else.' I'm like, 'Maybe you should just take the end out and leave it,' 'cause there's a part of it that says, 'Will I ever find a world between?' I'm like, 'Maybe you should just close it off right there'." Interestingly, when Lydia later shows *me* this poem, the ending to which

Michelle referred to no longer there, suggesting that the conversation with Michelle may have caused Lydia to revise.

When I tell Michelle that her feedback was much better than that which I gave to Lydia, Michelle laughs: “‘Cause I know how she feels, it’s like that with me, too, so that’s probably why I understood it more.” In other words, while these students might share their writing with teachers, it is from fellow student writers that connections, based on shared experiences and situations, most meaningfully evolve. What I find most interesting, however, in looking back at Lydia’s and Michelle’s poems, is that while alienation is a major theme for both of them the very act of writing has brought these students into contact with other writers with whom they can feel at least periodically connected.

Connecting the Academic and Non-Academic

Michelle approaches me during lunch and hands me a piece of three-hole punch notebook paper with three poems on it that she wants me to consider for the student writing book. I read the first one, “Beauty”:

*Beautiful Roses, or beautiful
anything will make you smile.
But beauty could only last
a little while.
The rose will wilt and die.*

I ask Michelle if she has ever read The Outsiders, because her poem sounds like one by Robert Frost that is featured in that novel. Michelle says no, though her friends have told her it’s good. We walk over to the fiction shelf and search until we find it. I open the book, flipping the pages to Frost’s poem, “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” After Michelle reads it, I ask her if she sees any similarities to her poem. Michelle says yes, and we discuss how both poems seem to be about beautiful things going away or fading. Michelle decides to check the book out. Then I ask her what inspired the second poem on her paper, “Lost Happiness.” She says, “I was reading different poems and I wanted to write in a different way. Something kind of sounding a sort of way, but not really.” The poems she was reading at the time, she says, were by Langston Hughes (Field notes and personal conversation, 9 March 2001).

This conversation demonstrates one small way in which encouraging students to share their self-motivated writing within the school, and giving

them opportunities to publish it, can lead to encounters between teachers and students, and among students, that can, in turn, lead to exposure to further texts and to ongoing conversations with staff and peers about writing. But the circumstances in which these kinds of encounters regularly occur must be consciously developed.

The discussion thus far has focused on students who already write regularly. There was, however, one conversation that convinced me that the publishing and dissemination of student writing within the school can also be a motivator for students who do not self-identify as writers, or who are less vocal about their desire to write.

Late one morning, I wander into the student lounge where members of the theater class are setting up to sell food at lunch as a fundraiser for a class project. Yesenia walks in carrying a big, yellow box that says M&M's on the side, with two smaller boxes piled on top of it. After she drops off her boxes at the table, she comes over and asks me about an earlier conversation we had regarding her desire to get extra help in some classes. Then she changes the subject, telling me that she wants to write something for the new student writing book. She knows about it because there has been a call for submissions in the school announcements for the past week or two. She asks what kind of writing she should do. I tell her it can be anything—poetry, personal essay, short story. I ask if she has written poems before; she says yes. I tell her I can help her work on something, that maybe she can play around with some stuff, then bring it in and we'll work together. She says that she has been writing—that in fact, she has wanted to put something in this book ever since she saw the last one at the end of November. In fact, she says, she has already written some things (Field notes, 6 March 2001).

It becomes clear that Yesenia has already looked through the November book to see what kinds of things people wrote, in order to use this as a guide for what she should try. It may be that her difficulties with writing caused her to bring up the possibility of contributing a piece in this round-about way. For Yesenia, who has been in Special Education classes for years, who came to *La Juventud* reading and writing at a first- or second-grade level, this is a big deal. She is entertaining the possibility that she can, like anyone else, be a writer—that this call for submissions is speaking to her as much as to any other student.

This story shows the effect on students of seeing peers' writing as text, of reading not only "official," canonical writers but reading the writing of fellow students, and therefore seeing their peers as authors—someone like Yesenia can see herself in her peers in a way that she can't in professional authors.

Conclusion: English Education and Student Literacies

There is a dilemma at the heart of contemporary teaching with which both high school English teachers and university English educators struggle. In both situations, the teacher finds herself attempting to negotiate between the immediate need of her students to develop the skills that popular wisdom deems necessary for post-school success. For the beginning teacher, these skills include writing lesson plans that align with state standards, developing activities that target the skills delineated in those standards, and so on. For high school students, most of the skills that are supposed to add up to “cultural capital” involve a mastery of the spoken and written forms of standardized English. Both preservice teachers and high school students are often nervous about making it in the “real world,” and so they may themselves demand that they be taught as many skills as possible. Yet, at the same time, both classrooms have the potential to serve as sites for a critical examination of what an emphasis on such skills means.

The goal of this article is to argue that critical conversations about language and literacy—about students’ experiences with them, about the unexamined assumptions that surround them, about the power dynamics that infuse them—must be a central part of the education of high school students and English teachers if we are to hold out any hope of resisting, even partially, the reproductive tendencies of American education.

For some of the students in this paper, we have seen that literacy activities are a means of participating in a discourse community in which they desire to achieve both status and solidarity (Gee, 1996). This desire to participate is precisely what students often seem to lack in the classroom. One way to invite students into the academic discourse community is by first acknowledging and valuing the literate activities which are already meaningful to them and in which they are already, often, quite skilled. In fact, their practices often display a consciousness of some of the very concepts and skills that English teachers attempt to teach, such as a strong sense of audience and purpose, and the ability to manipulate and vary writing styles in response to varying contexts (Mahiri, 1998). “Researchers and teachers,” Elizabeth Moje (2000) argues in her article on gang graffiti, “can learn

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valuable lessons for extending literacy theory, practice, and research from the sophisticated—albeit marginalized and vilified—practices of these youth” (p. 653).

They also can learn more concrete lessons directly from students once they see those students as experienced users of language. Moje tells a story similar to one I experienced: She describes having noticed the various symbols that her seventh-graders used and asking a female student to explain them. “My question prompted a 20-minute ‘lesson’ from her on the different rules of gang-related writing” (p. 673), Moje says. While still working at *La Juventud* as an English teacher, I once brought in *Our America* (1997), a book written by two young residents of a Chicago housing project. After the table of contents, there is a glossary of the vernacular and slang terms used throughout the book. As soon as Julia, one of my most energetic and outspoken students, saw the glossary, she announced that she was going to make one for me. This glossary is hanging on the wall behind my computer as I type; some of the words and phrases have side commentary (“Julia’s favorite word | next to ‘ghetto fabulous’|,” “JULIA’S WORD,” “Julia’s invention”). Both of these stories illustrate the validity of the argument that students can respond enthusiastically to sharing their own knowledge in the classroom.

Before preservice teachers prepare to go into the classroom, they must begin to develop an understanding of the dialects, discourse communities, socio-economic situations, and cultural backgrounds of the students in their area. Jabari Mahiri (1998) argues that this is particularly important when teachers are working with minority populations. He calls on teachers “to better understand and to build on the authentic experiences of students who have been marginalized in and by the educational process . . .” (p. 3), claiming that the teacher who does this will find her students more accepting of the curriculum she introduces. This teacher also will be well-prepared to engage with her students, and to help those students learn “what [their] gifts and interests are” and “how [they] might develop these potentials through activities [they] recognize as relevant to [their] past, present, and future life” (DeStigter, 2001, p. 101).

It is important to emphasize that the purpose of this article is not to argue for co-opting students’ self-motivated literacy activities by moving them from the “unsanctioned” to the “sanctioned” column and to make the English classroom about producing these texts. To do this would be to alter the context, and therefore the meaning, of such activities and, quite possibly, to destroy the connection between a given literacy act and its context that motivated students to engage in it in the first place. David O’Brien (1998)

reports that a teacher raised this issue with him as O'Brien allowed students to explore "multiple literacies" in his Literacy Lab:

If we allow multiple literacies to intrude into school culture, do we run the risk of institutionalizing these literacies? If we condone, explicitly or implicitly, writing and reading in school about taboo or bizarre topics or topics tied closely to the popular culture of adolescents, we might cancel out the very appeal those topics have in the first place. In designing programs and curricula for these students, we need to be careful not to simply juxtapose multiple nonacademic literacies next to academic literacy in the prescribed curriculum. (p. 46)

I am arguing, then, not for a classroom full of tagging and lyricizing, but for a classroom full of talk, analysis, and respect for these practices, wherever they occur and with open acknowledgment of and struggle with the complex and contradictory spaces that they occupy *vis à vis* the dominant social ideology.

To encourage new teachers to engage with students in the ways suggested in this article, without also challenging them to consider the social context in which their teaching choices occur, is to turn the opening of the classroom to students' experiences of literacy into little more than a classroom activity or a friendly introduction to the same old subject matter. As teachers learn more about the ways that students learn the norms of an activity such as tagging, they may find it necessary to restructure their classrooms. Moje (2000) notes that the norms of tagging and graffiti writing are "fluid, and changeable and are learned in what would be considered informal ways when contrasted to the formal institutions of schooling." Taggers "learned these practices by apprenticing to others in a community of practice . . . and by practicing the different forms in various spaces" (p. 672).

Therefore, one purpose of English education might be to experiment with this idea. The English education classroom itself can model a peer-learning structure and can challenge preservice teachers to envision alternative approaches to schooling in which the way students learn outside of school informs the way we ask them to learn inside.

One issue remains to be explored: What is the ultimate benefit of valuing students' self-motivated literacies in the classroom if that is the only mainstream social site where they will be valued? Do we risk creating a false expectation in our students of the larger social potential for them to be respected for abilities, skills, and experiences that even educational researchers refer to as "unsanctioned"? Or will we contribute to the development of a generation that will demand respect and will be less willing to be pack-

aged and positioned by others? Can such demands have any effect if the larger socio-economic structures are unchanged?

They're not answerable questions, and they may not even be the right ones to ask. Before we can begin to speculate about the possible long-term effects of such a pedagogical shift for students, we have to consider how such a shift will work with teachers. Unless there is a large-scale change in the attitudes that teachers espouse and encourage toward student literacies, the above questions will never be necessary, remaining the concern only of individual teachers in isolated classrooms.

Notes

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2. I do this in full recognition of the imperfection of this term—how can I call these activities *self-motivated* if my argument is centered on the way that student writing is intimately connected with students' discourse communities? Wouldn't they, then, be *socially-motivated*? The lack of an adequate term is evident when one looks at the writing on this subject: Elizabeth Moje (2000) uses *unsanctioned, social* (p.652), and, in one heroic effort, "alternative, unsanctioned, and nonschooled" (p.661). David O'Brien (1998) uses *unofficial* (p.30) and *nonacademic* (p.46). In the title to her 1999 book, Michele Knobel refers to *everyday* literacies, a term she says she borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein (p.16).

One could probably construct an argument against the appropriateness of each of these terms. To give one example, a reviewer objected to my use, in an earlier draft, of *nonacademic* because it reinforces the perceived opposition of in-school and out-of-school practices that I am, in fact, attempting to break down. Similarly, I shy away from *unsanctioned*, unless it is being used in the specific context of underlife writing in the classroom or the school (where the sanctioner is clear and present), because this term suggests that there is some dominant group who has sole power to sanction certain practices or not, when in fact, much of the writing that I describe below is very much sanctioned within certain discourse communities. So, *self-motivated* it will be, until something better suggests itself.

3. All dialogue from Leo in this section is taken from an informal interview conducted on April 3, 2001.

4. *Taking it to the wall* refers to a kind of tagging "showdown" in which two taggers compete. The one whose tag is judged more accomplished keeps the contested name.

5. Gee uses the capital *D* to differentiate this use of the term from the more limited use of *discourse* to refer to "connected stretches of language that make sense"; I am using the term *discourse community* to maintain this distinction, although I recognize that the term *community* may suggest a more stable, nonporous quality than Discourses actually display.

6. For instance, a gang tag written by a rival of the Gangster Disciples may read "GDK," which means "Gangster Disciples Killer."

7. This is where metaphors of *community* and *membership* start to become inad-

equate. They work fairly well when discussing individuals at the center of an activity or institution, but are less helpful in reflecting the ways that people on the perimeters can move in and out of connections to and interactions within a given Discourse.

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Susan Weinstein is a doctoral student in English education at the University of Illinois, Chicago.