During the years that I taught English at a large high school in the Bronx, I became aware that some of my students wrote on their own, outside of school. Sometimes the students themselves brought this to my attention. "I write poems," a student would tell me. "Do you want to see them?" If I said yes, the writer would bring to school a worn folder of carefully written out verse. Or occasionally, a class assignment would reveal a student’s interest in writing. Once, when I offered the possibility of doing a book report in comic book form, a boy in my class took that option and produced an elaborately drawn, lavishly captioned report. It turned out that he wrote and illustrated comic books on his own, for fun. Or I’d notice that a student in my homeroom class always spent the time writing letters to her boyfriend in the army. And quite often I’d notice writing being passed around and read surreptitiously during class. Were they notes? Announcements? Something else?

I was teaching in a school plagued with problems. Many of our students, almost all of whom were either African-American or Latino, were absent from school a great deal, failed classes regularly, were reluctant to do homework, and tested poorly in reading and writing. Too many of them never finished high school. Their academic problems, particularly their deficiencies in reading and writing, were regularly ascribed, by the faculty, by people I met socially, by the media, to a lack of literacy in their out-of-school lives. It was assumed, that save for school assignments, "these kids" didn’t read or write. We pictured them watching TV, hanging out, partying.

Of course there were also students in the school who functioned reasonably well as students, did their homework, came to school every day, passed their classes and their tests. But the phenomenon of self-sponsored writing that I had noticed wasn’t restricted to these better-achieving students.

I was curious. Was it at all common for students like mine to write on their own? And if they did write outside of school, what did they write? And why did they write it? I began to ask colleagues if they had students who wrote on their own, and a few of them said yes, they did. When it came time for me to design and carry out a research study as part of my graduate work, I decided to see if I could find out more about the writing students like mine did at home.

I wanted particularly to look at the phenomenon of self-sponsored writing among low-income minority students who weren’t always successful in school. If self-sponsored writing existed in this population, the stereotype of the literate minority teenager who reads or writes only under duress might need to be revised. It also seemed to me important to know more about this phenomenon than the mere fact of its existence. If there were low-income minority students who were self-sponsored writers, I wanted to know if their understanding of what writing is and what it’s for was at variance with that of the culture at large or the culture of the school. How was the writing they did on their own different from the writing they did for school? Given the high drop-out rate of minority students from urban high schools it seemed an important question.
I got permission to conduct my research at a school I'll call Harriet Tubman Academy, an alternative high school located in the heart of New York's South Bronx, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. tubman Academy is tiny by New York City standards, having only 150 students. The school is unusual in another way as well. Almost all the students at Tubman have dropped out of other New York City high schools. Indeed, it is not unusual for a Tubman student to have been in and out of more than one high school before coming here. For most of them, Tubman is a last chance to "make it," to get a regular high school diploma.

If self-sponsored writing existed in this population, the stereotype of the literate minority teenager who reads or writes only under duress might need to be revised.

My plan was to interview and examine the writing of six Tubman students who wrote outside of school. In order to find my research participants, and in order to find out how typical they were of the whole school population, I asked all the students in the school to fill out a brief questionnaire for me in their homeroom classes. A total of 98 students filled out these questionnaires—57 girls and 41 boys. In response to my first question, "Do you ever do any writing that is not assigned by school?" 77 of the 98 students (46 girls and 31 boys) answered yes. Twenty-three students indicated that they had written more than 20 pages! I decided to choose my research participants from this group. After consulting with teachers at the school as to which of the students were likely to show up at school regularly enough to participate in my study, I chose six students to talk with.

Although the six students varied in the kinds of writing they did (Millie kept a diary and wrote poems; Diane wrote diary entries and letters; Yvonne wrote diary-like "Letters to the Lord"; Richie and a partner created flyers for parties; Shawn wrote short autobiographical novels, some pornographic; Angel kept a diary and wrote accounts of his and his friends' past exploits), Diane exemplifies many of the themes and issues common to the group.

Diane — A Case Study
When I first met her, Diane was a tall, well-built, attractive African-American woman of nineteen who lived with her mother, stepfather, and two younger brothers in an apartment in the Bronx. Her older married sister lived elsewhere.

Diane's relationship with her mother has been a turbulent one. As Diane puts it, "I'm the baby girl. I got an older sister, I got two younger brothers, but my mother seemed to cherish me. And I can't do nothing." Diane feels her mother blocks many of her attempts to become more independent. Her relationship with her mother has been complicated by her mother's recurring breast cancer. "She stays in her house a lot of times feeling sorry for herself about this, about that, and I try to be there for support," Diane explained. At one point things got so bad between Diane and her mother that Diane left home ("I felt like everybody was against me rather than on my side. I think I have a whole mind. I like to use it sometime, not for nobody to always tell me what to do.") and stayed with friends and family for a number of months before returning home.

Diane's relationship to school has been rocky too, although her early school experiences were good. "I loved school in elementary school," she told me. "You couldn't keep me home. In junior high school you couldn't keep me home for nothing."

After junior high, Diane started ninth grade at a tough, often chaotic Bronx high school housed in an old deteriorating building. She had expected to be assigned to a newer school in a better neighborhood with a wider range of programs:

I went for a day or so, I just stopped going. I just did not like it ... The first day I went home and I just stayed home. And I got into the stories [soap operas] and I looked at the stories for a year.

At the end of the school year Diane was told she would have to repeat all of her courses. Instead, in January of the next year, she applied and was accepted at Tubman, but dropped out again the following November when she left home. After about three months, Diane enrolled in a GED program, but quickly left:

Things were so easy for me. I didn't have to ask nothing. I like to communicate with the teacher, not just sit there, tell if the answer is right. ... I do not like GED schools for nothing. It's like a quick education and I don't want that.

Diane returned to Tubman and asked to be readmitted.

Although she is personable and outgoing, Diane has a sense of being different from many of her peers. She tries to keep away from the girls in her neighborhood who hang out on the street, many of whom already have babies. "Right now, a baby no. No time for it now. Plenty of time later on," she told me.
Diane works after school as a secretary for a lawyer in Manhattan from 3 to 10 p.m. every day. Her goal is to become a lawyer herself. "It just popped to me," she explained. "No nurse, no doctor, no nothing. Lawyer." She feels she has a newly acquired sense of direction about her life:

I like to make my own decisions. When you keep telling me to, I'm just following somebody else's path. I want to look at my own path first. That's really the main thing now.

How Diane Began to Write
Diane doesn't have early memories of drawing or writing, but she has always liked to read. When she finishes one book, she starts another. She always has a book with her. Diane remembers beginning to write on her own when she was about twelve and her mother was hospitalized for cancer. She had to stay with her grandmother with whom she didn't get along. She began to confide her thoughts to paper.

Occasions for Writing
Diane writes daily, but she writes the most at times of strong emotion. Diane often turns to writing when she's distressed or frustrated. For example, when she was left with her grandmother, she wrote a great deal. Later, when she was locked in struggle with her mother, Diane also found herself writing a lot. "It really started getting to me, all of it. And I'd go to bed at night and I'd get some paper and I'd just start writing just the way I feel," she explains. But Diane does not write only when she's unhappy. Good times prompt her to write too. "When I'm happy, I can write twelve pages," she told me. "I can just write on and on. Especially when I'm really happy, you know, I can write all day."

What Diane Writes About
Diane writes exclusively about events in her life and her feelings about them. Often, she writes about situations and feelings that trouble her. For instance, one of her "letters" is about an argument with her mother who refused Diane permission to go out, even after she had completed a chore. But another "letter" marks a happy occasion — her return to school. It begins:

On this day I took a test for Tubman Academy and I passed. Tomorrow I will try to pass the interview. I met a lot of nice people on the first day it was strange because my idea of a new school is girls rolling there eyes because of their boyfriend looked at me. It wasn't like that at all.

Still another of Diane's letters is about difficulties between Diane's mother and stepfather, arguments between Diane and her mother, and finally, Diane's decision to leave home. It ends with a kind of pep talk to herself:

I can laugh now about the time I was planning to take my own life for an unworthy cause. I got through that I can get through any thing.

The tone of another letter, dated three weeks after Diane returned home, is clearly elated:

I've been home for 3 weeks and it's like I'm in paradise it's not like [the] same place I've been a few months ago. Today is my mom's birthday and she is 45 years old and looking good I'm glad I have good things to say this time and that I'm feeling better than I have in a long time. Diary, it feels like nothing can go wrong for me.

Perhaps Diane summarizes the content of her letters best when she says, "I'm just telling how I felt and what things I've been through."

The Form of Diane's Writing
Diane has chosen essentially one form for her writing — "letters." Diane's letters are diary entries, written on looseleaf paper and kept together in an envelope. Diane occasionally writes letters that she actually sends — to her uncle in jail, for instance — but the letters that she doesn't send are her most frequent form. She also writes occasionally in a diary, a bound notebook sold as a diary with dates and times printed in it.

Diane's letters follow a consistent form similar to that of a personal letter. At the top right of the page is the date and below it the time Diane began writing. Below the time and the date, on the left, following letter form, are the words "Dear Diary," and below this, centered, the title of the entry. The title, which Diane also calls the topic, sums up the contents of the entry. It is written after an entry is completed. Typical titles are "Where the problems begin," "Mom's birthday," and "Unreasonable."

The time and the title are not optional elements of Diane's letters. As she puts it, "I gotta put the time down" and "I have to write a title what it's about, to make sure I remember." Once, Diane wrote a letter to her uncle that she intended to send, but didn't. When she decided to add it to her envelope of letters, she added a title:

I had to give it a topic. It was one I had never given a topic, cause it was something I was sending off, but since I kept it, I had to put a topic. It didn't seem right to have one without a topic.
Each letter ends with the word "signed" and below it a signature. Diane never signs her actual name to her letters. Often she signs with a nickname, "Champale." Sometimes the signature at the end of a letter is related to its contents, much like the signatures on letters published in advice columns in newspapers and magazines. "Miss Education," for example, signs a letter about Diane's return to school. "Ferious [sic]" is the signature on a letter about an argument between Diane and her mother.

At the end of some letters, Diane gives an indication in words of her mood at the beginning and at the end of writing, as for example "confused — relieved [sic]" or in pictures of frowning and smiling faces. Often, a letter ends with either a smiling face or a frowning one, depending on the letter's overall mood.

If a letter is about an ongoing situation that Diane intends to write more about, she puts the word "Reminder" at the top to remind her to add to it.

Diane's letters are conversational in tone, much as if she were writing to a friend. On occasion she addresses her diary directly ("Diary, it feels like nothing can go wrong for me") or seems to give it human attributes ("Today I stayed in the house why don't ask me just listen to what happened"). Diane doesn't presume that her diary-audience has all the information that she has about her life. She writes, for example, "Today is my mom's birthday and I was staying with my girlfriend and her family," as if she were writing to someone else who needed background information in order to understand a situation in her life.

Diane's Composing Process
Diane is most likely to do her writing at night in her room. "I go home, either read my book, and after I finish writing, or write first and then read my book," she explains. "I might, after I write, fall asleep on the book. As long as I don't fall asleep writing."

Part of Diane's writing routine is to look over what she wrote the previous night before she begins writing. When Diane writes, she's writing "just the way I feel." Although she feels unsure of the correct way to paragraph her work, at night when she writes, she puts those doubts aside. "I write straight down," she explained. "Sometimes I'll start off, I'll indent, but otherwise I stay down."

However, Diane never leaves her work in the state in which she has composed it. Even though she shows her writing to no one, each of her letters is rewritten to make it neater, more correct, and more "decent." She explains:

I would write them down, the way I feel right then and there. And sometimes you could read, I call it a rough draft or whatever, if you could read that, you're gonna be shocked. There's a lot of things I have to change. After a while I read it over, that ain't supposed to be in there, that ain't supposed to be in there.

When she's finished writing, Diane marks her first versions "R.D." for "rough draft" in the top left-hand corner. Sometimes she writes the final version the same night. More often she'll write it over the next day. Although Diane does not always keep her rough drafts, she does keep some of them in a separate envelope, away from the final versions.

Diane's conception of revision is a narrow one. She doesn't tend to make any major changes in her work. Instead, revision, for Diane, seems to be a kind of beautification process. Rough edges of both the mechanics and the content of her writing are smoothed away, resulting in a product that is more proper in both respects. As she puts it:

[In the rough draft] I'm saying things exactly the way I feel it. And sometime's there's bad words and curses and this and that in there. I'll read it and I'll say no. I'll stick to that and be realistic about this here. And I'll write it over. I say it the way I feel but I say it decently. There's still everything important, I don't go beyond it, it's still just the way I felt. Just take out the curses and all of that.

For Diane, the second version still retains the emotional resonance of the original. "I can still put the curses back in there. As long as I have the basic words, it's all right."

Why Diane Writes
Diane has several reasons for writing about her life. First, she feels that writing provides her with a perfect confidante. As she puts it, "My best friend is a pen and paper." She sees certain advantages to confiding her thoughts to paper rather than to a person. Most important, the pen and paper are perfectly discreet. "The paper ain't gonna jump and tell somebody what I'm saying," she explains. "I could sit there and really say it without hurting somebody else's feelings." And a pen and paper never argue. "Talking things out, you're gonna get somebody that don't like what you said. Disagreeing with you." Further, she can even write about the friend she might otherwise confide in. "Sometimes what you have to say might be about your friend."

Diane also finds that she can express herself better on paper than she can when she talks to people. Her meaning becomes clearer to her when she writes it down:
How does Diane, who writes every day, who chooses her own topics, who has designed a form for her writing, who writes freely and then revises, who re-reads her writing in order to learn from it, fare when she writes in school?

A lot of times I can write better than I can say things. I can get to the inner feeling on paper better than I can do saying it. Like when I'm by myself and I'm writing, I understand, like they say if you talk to yourself you make more sense than when you're saying things to other people and if I put on paper what I can't say to other people, it comes out on paper.

She also finds that writing helps her to recapture things she's forgotten and come to new insights. "As I'm writing, more things are coming to my head, it's like things I didn't realize happened, that did happen."

The permanent quality of writing is important to Diane because she likes to learn from her writing:

I can go back on things, like say something happened recently, I can go back on one of my letters that's similar and I'll remember. And see how I handled it, what happened at the end and everything else. See if I handled that right and know my mistakes from there and I can do it right the next time. ... It's just like old homework. How'd I do it this time and how'd I learn, how I could go over it when I get another homework that's similar to it.

Writing For School
How does Diane, who writes every day, who chooses her own topics, who has designed a form for her writing, who writes freely and then revises, who re-reads her writing in order to learn from it, fare when she writes in school?

For the most part she doesn't like to write in school. Her biggest complaint about the writing she is assigned to do is that it is almost always related to reading. Diane describes this emphasis succinctly: "If it's not from a book, it's in a book." Diane doesn't mind doing book reports, for example, but as she puts it, "Sometimes a book is not always what you want to write about. You want to write about an occasion, I mean something that happened. Not always a book."

Despite her distaste for book-related writing, Diane, a compliant student, usually completes such assignments.

Her report on a book called Secrets of the Super Athletes begins this way:

The starting lineup; some of the best plays in baseball take place off the field. The team that takes the field on opening day is the result of a managers year long process of selection and elimination. Earl Weaver, manager of the Baltimore Orioles describes what takes place at organizational meetings.

The rest of the report continues in the same vein, discussing only the topic of developing a baseball team. Although the report appears to be almost entirely copied from the book, and one section of it at that, Diane received a B+ on the report. Her teacher commented, "Nice work. It sounds like you learned a few things about baseball. Give a little more opinion next time."

During her time at Tubman, Diane has had some assignments that are not related to books. She mentioned doing a lot of interview assignments which she said she "didn't mind," but she was still smarting from the way a recent interview project had been handled. Instead of following a standard question-answer format, Diane had written up her interview "my own way," and received only partial credit for her work.

In her English class Diane was required to keep a journal, writing for ten minutes every day at the beginning of class on a topic of her own choosing. These journal entries were then placed in Diane's writing folder. Diane says this assignment is "no problem" and she rates it considerably higher than book reports or answering questions about stories she's read. Indeed, on the surface the assignment seems close to the sort of writing Diane does outside of school. Nevertheless, she does her school journal writing in a considerably more perfunctory manner than the letters that she writes at home. For example, Diane writes only one draft of her school "journals" and they are generally shorter, sloppier, and more mechanical in tone and subject matter than her self-sponsored journal writing. Each entry begins with the phrase "I am writing about," a beginning that doesn't appear in her "letters" where she generally just plunges right into her topic.

In another class, Leadership, Diane is frequently asked to write on personal topics. But Diane doesn't like these assignments either. She doesn't like to write about personal things in school. She explains:

For me to go and just tell somebody about some kind of problem I got ... People my age, I feel a lot of them are too immature. I really do. ... They're not all alike but I say the majority of them are. I should be sitting there telling them something about me when they ain't pay-
ing no attention, they don't really want to hear it? So I won't even get into it.

The writing assignment that Diane was most enthusiastic about occurred in her science class. She had to keep a daily observation log on some gerbils in the classroom and then write up a weekly progress report on their growth:

We have to make a log five minutes a day. ... We have to write a progress report just about every week, based on everything we wrote. ... It's nice. See how they grow and expand and everything. It's exciting though. I mean I sit and write away from the tank because I don't like them things at all. But I sit there and it's amazing to see how they grow, how they get their hair and how they try to walk. It's really interesting. And I sat there for half an hour, he said five minutes. I just kept on writing.

Diane wrote a rough and a "good" draft of her progress report, just as she does with her "letters."

Another writing assignment that Diane felt involved in was a homework assignment to write an essay on capital punishment, a subject she's very interested in and about which she has strong opinions. She got the assignment right before she dropped out of Tubman:

When it's on a topic that I really like, that I'm really into, I could write for days on it. I was kind of mad when I left school and I left that class, but the way I was feeling and the things I was going through, at that time, I wasn't really into it. I started it but I had a feeling that I was gonna leave, I knew I was gonna leave my mother house and all, but still I started it.

Diane decided to finish the essay, even after she had dropped out of school, and turn it into one of her letters. She labelled the unfinished school assignment "RD" for rough draft. On the revised version, she put the time just as she does on all of her letters, corrected some spelling mistakes, and added on several new sentences. Thus, in the same school year that Diane wrote minimal required journal entries and copied a book report straight from the book, she chose to work on a school assignment, making it into a piece of her own writing, during a period when she had dropped out of school. When I asked Diane which was her favorite of all the writing she had shown me, she picked the letter on capital punishment because of the importance to her of its subject.

Despite some positive experience with school writing, Diane sees fundamental differences between school-

assigned and self-sponsored writing. She sums up the differences this way:

Writing in school, you have to do it. It's just classwork, it's homework. Writing at home, it's like you're not forced to do it, it's not you don't have to, it's up to you whether you're going to do it or not. So it's like if you're doing it of your own free will, it's lighter on you, it's easier, and you just write. But when you have to do it in school, you're hesitant, you know, you're like, I don't want to write this now, and this and that. But once you get home, and you want to write on your own, it's like it's no problem. You know, cause then nobody's telling you well you have to do this. You just write ... it's just for you.

... the most crucial finding of my study was the importance of teachers discovering how their students view and understand writing, and the importance of acknowledging and accommodating this information in the classroom.

---

Home vs. School

What are the implications for teachers of the contrasts between the writing that Diane does at home and the writing she does for school? Are there ways for Diane to become more involved in school writing, or is the difference between her attitude toward writing at home and writing for school inevitable?

Some of the answers to these questions will be obvious to many Writing Project teachers. We know, for example, that school writing doesn't always have to be impersonal and factual, that there is ample room across the curriculum for students to write original observations, opinions, and reactions — the kind of writing that Diane liked in her science class. We know too, that when students write in response to reading, they needn't simply write answers to questions or summaries that prove they've understood what they've read — the kind of writing Diane so dislikes. And we often advise our students to write freely and then revise or edit their writing, the same process Diane uses at home, and to choose their own topics, as Diane likes to do.

But some of the contrasts between Diane's school and home writing are less easily erased. For example, Diane, like the other five students I talked to, judged her writing by very different criteria than her teachers generally did. In her opinion, her "best" writing was
writing that was about what mattered to her the most, regardless of how complete, or well-written, or correct it was. And like the other students, she believed in correcting her writing but not in making substantial revisions to it. Her first drafts are artifacts of how she felt and thought at particular moments and she sees no reason to change them beyond making them more proper.

Diane was also typical of the other students in her reluctance to reveal personal information and feelings in her school writing. She made a distinction between writing that is personal (about real events and opinions) and writing that is intimate (about private feelings and problems). And like the other students, Diane disliked being told how to structure her writing. She had devised a form for her self-sponsored writing and she wanted to be able to do the same for her school writing.

Do these contrasts matter? After all, one might argue, school is school and home is home. Why should it be expected or desirable that they match? Lisa, the highly successful student studied by Sperling and Freedman (1987) had no quarrel with her lack of authority over her school writing. As she told Sperling and Freedman:

*Sometimes he [the teacher] wants you to put this first and that last. You know, you do that. Even if you don't think it's that effective. ... Because when I write my own book, I can do it the other way.* (p. 357)

For Lisa, the rewards which come from pleasing the teacher outweigh the desire for control over her writing. Further she views her lack of authority as temporary. Her social class and history of school success enable her to speak with assurance (“When I write my own book ...”) about the future.

But for Diane and her peers, for whom pleasing the teacher does not bring the same rewards, for whom school failure is commonplace, the differing demands of home and school writing are more problematic. The longitudinal analysis conducted by Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock (1986) of a national sample of 30,000 high school sophomores found that dropouts are “disproportionately from low socio-economic status families and racial/ethnic minority groups” (p. 358) and that the “most frequently reported reasons for leaving school for the total group were poor grades and not liking school” (p. 363-364). Diane, who would like to be a lawyer, has dropped out twice.

Yet it would be simplistic to suggest that the school should attempt to replicate the contexts for writing that exist for students outside of school. The students I met at Tubman would not see this as appropriate or desirable. Further, it would be a case of missed opportunity if the job of the school is to stimulate new learning, not merely to reinforce what students already know.

As I thought about what I had learned from the students I talked with, I realized that the most crucial finding of my study was the importance of teachers discovering how their students view and understand writing, and the importance of acknowledging and accommodating this information in the classroom. I can think of several ways this might be done. We might, for example, give our students opportunities to indicate the kinds of writing they’d like to do and give students who have experience in those forms an opportunity to explain how they’ve used them. We could ask students who a piece of writing should be for, and what constraints this audience imposes on them. We might teach revision from a functional standpoint, giving students opportunities to discuss and decide, based on the purpose and audience for a piece of writing, what revisions need to be made in it. We might also give students the chance to discuss whether a piece of writing should be judged and by what criteria. And we might encourage explicit discussion in our classes of the differences students perceive between writing on their own and writing in school.

If we can find ways to acknowledge our students’ cultures of writing, just as we might other aspects of their racial, ethnic, and class identities, the Dianes in our own classrooms may become students who enjoy writing in school.

References


Carla Asher is a director of the New York City Writing Project at Lehman College, City University of New York.