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## Building a Community of Writers through Free Writing, Reflection, and Collaboration

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BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS THROUGH FREE WRITING, REFLECTION,  
AND COLLABORATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University  
Agriculture and Mechanical College  
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in

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by  
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## **Abstract**

This teacher-research project was implemented into a sophomore English Language Arts classroom in order to examine free writing as a writing strategy to encourage students' interactions and cultivate community. The researcher wanted to discover if free writing was a strategy English teachers can implement to encourage collaboration and community amongst his or her students. This study was conducted approximately for one semester in an English II honors class in southern region of the United States. This project used a mixed-methods approach to determine if free writing is a strategy to encourage students' interactions and cultivate community. To determine the effectiveness of this strategy, the researcher introduced a unit that incorporated a culminating task, which was a group project consisting of a 5-page paper, presentation, and debate. During the unit, the researcher collected beginning, middle, and end-of-unit surveys, interviewed selected students, collected student reflections, recorded observation notes, analyzed final papers, tracked students' written journal writings, and collected a peer evaluation from all participants. The findings included free writing is effective in helping students express themselves, in my study free writing, in the time permitted, did not effectively translate into cultivating community or enhancing students' academic writing styles.

## Chapter 1- Introduction

### Background

As a student, writing challenged me in high school. I found it difficult to approach writing prompts and often struggled with grammar and mechanics. I accepted the fact that writing was not one of my strong skills, until I discovered it was a tool I could use to express myself. In 2007, the book, *Freedom Writers* (Gruwell) inspired millions of English teachers to give their students notebooks and let them write their stories—my high school English teacher included. Similar to Gruwell, my English teacher handed us a composition notebook and gave us the freedom to write.

The journals that I wrote in her class gave me a vehicle to discuss things that I could not say out loud. My teacher did not set any boundaries for my writing. She simply allowed me to write. After I felt comfortable writing in this way, I began to share the contents of my journal with my peers. In class, I often spent time reading my peers' journals and giving them feedback. I no longer felt alone between the pages of my notebook. After gaining confidence in my writing, I began to look for an avenue to share my writing publicly. My high school offered journalism as an elective. At the time, my high school didn't have a newspaper and journalism was considered a filler class. I had the opportunity to enter a contest and the award was funding for a school newspaper. I won the contest and was able to be the first editor-in-chief of my high school newspaper. My journalism teacher told me I could use the newspaper to give my peers a voice. I became completely invested in writing and used my writing as an instrument to change my school community. The voice that I was trying to find with my mouth was actually being heard through my pen. As a teacher of writing, I now believe students need the same opportunity to find their voices and build their own community of writers in order to positively impact their community.

Writing is one of the most challenging things that I am required to teach, as an English teacher. I did not have the traditional training necessary to teach writing effectively that comes with undergraduate degrees in teacher education programs. As a novice teacher, through my alternative certification, I was assigned to an English content group that focused on how effectively to teach Common Core reading standards, but they did not provide strategies and techniques to teach writing to students. Instead, we focused on reading comprehension strategies and how to engage students in reading. Although I lacked the preparation to teach writing, I searched for resources through English teachers from my content group and online to develop strategies and techniques to teach writing in my class. Also as a part of my graduate program, I took a course in teaching writing at the secondary level, which exposed me to writing theories and methods of teaching writing, but left out concrete steps to teach me how to teach students to write.

As an English teacher, creating a community of writers has been a constant aspiration of mine since my first year teaching. I assumed that this community would come naturally as it did for my peers and me. I was wrong. I found teaching writing was difficult because my students often believed that they were not born to be writers. It has always been a challenge to encourage students to write because of the defeat they often feel during the writing process. I did not take into account the difference between my students and myself. For instance, I was in a Pre- AP English course when my students are academically years behind. I could not inspire my students to tell their stories the same way my English teacher inspired me to tell my story because my students could not form sentences to describe their lives. I, at least, had the foundational English skills to write the words in my head onto paper. Speaking was something easier for my students to manage. Discouraged, I changed my aspirations from helping my students find their written

voices and building a community of writers into teaching the writing standards necessary to master the state assessment.

In my experience, the assessment has always been more important than my students being able to express themselves. I am constantly pushed to be data-drive and align my daily objectives to the Common Core standards. I've spent more time teaching students a formulaic way of writing than allowing them space for self-reflection. I then find myself being disengaged when grading because all of my students lack voice and style. I've struggled with identifying a way to marry the two by challenging my students to write in the standard conventions of writing but also having an individualized voice in their writing.

I believe that students need the opportunity to identify themselves as writers. For students to feel comfortable with writing, they should write about things that interest them. With the Common Core Standards, students' voices are limited. The standards require them to provide evidence for their writing, which most of the time forces students back into writing formulaically, incorporating language from evidence. I've noticed on their standardized tests, such as PARCC and End-of-course tests, students are not asked to write personal narratives. Although the state assessment requires students to write in an evidence-based style, there is no reason why students should not be exposed to varied styles of writing, such as personal narratives.

### **Purpose**

In my opinion, a community of writers is a space where students feel comfortable with each other to share their writing and accept both positive and negative feedback from their peers. I want students to feel comfortable using language and storytelling techniques to connect with the other students in their class. I want to discover strategies to develop a community of writers, so students find value in their written voice. In the future, I plan to evaluate how these strategies



transfer to assessment-based writing, such as analytical, argumentative essays and speeches. I believe that building a space where my students feel comfortable with their peers, that also encourages collaboration and self-expression, can build transferable skills that are valuable beyond high school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research in this study is based on free writing as an exploratory thinking process. Peter Elbow's (2000) practice of free writing helps students to see writing as a fluid process. Elbow defined free writing as, "simple, private, non-stop writing"(p.85). As recorded in literature, very few theorists believe that free writing could be important for the generation of academic writing. (Maresella & Hilgers, 1991) However, as a teacher and researcher of free writing, Elbow described free writing as the most effective way to improve writing because it eliminated prematurely editing, which discourages students' authenticity (Elbow, 1998).

Macrorie, also a practitioner of free writing, found it to be helpful in his own practices as a composition instructor. Macrorie (1985), frustrated with his students' lack of voice in their writing, instructed them to write something authentic. According to *From Telling Writings*, his students wrote in "Engfish"- not fancy, academic language, but simple everyday words that say nothing. Macrorie speaks on the effectiveness of free writing in an academic setting to develop student voice (p.298) Overall, I want to determine students' approach to free writing as a precursor to class discussions and collaboration on writing projects.

Another practice framing this study is developing a culture of community in classrooms. Writing instructor, Linda Christensen, develops curriculum on social issues such as race, class, and solidarity. (Christensen, 2009) Christensen provides students with authentic tasks that encourage student voice and self-exploration. In her class, Christensen's cultivates an open space

where students feel compelled to speak out and express his or herself. (Christensen, 2009) This space gives students the opportunity to be authentic in their writing and in front of their peers.

Taken together, these writing instructors and researchers have identified ways that free writing as a strategy can change students' attitudes toward writing and build community in an English classroom.

### **Research Questions**

This mix-methods study focuses on how free writing might be used as a writing strategy to encourage a social interaction and cultivate a community of writers in an English Language Arts classroom.

- How can free writing encourage social interaction in an English class?
- What attitudes do students have toward writing and what effect does free writing have on classroom community over a period of time?
- What do we find when we examine students' free writing with their academic writing over the course of a nine-week unit?

### **Study Description**

The purpose of my study is to discover how the implementation of free writing encourages student interaction and community in my classroom. This study examined how free writing, student reflections, and collaboration on a final project influence students' self-expression in academic writing tasks. For clarity, I defined a community as a unified group of individuals who share a common goal to develop as writers, free writing as unstructured, uninterrupted time to write, and collaboration as students working together to examine and to strengthen each other collectively. In this study, I examined how a group of students enrolled in an honors' sophomore English Language Arts class approach writing. To achieve this task, evaluated if my students attitude toward writing change over a period of time. I implemented

writing strategies such as free writing, peer editing, and collaborative writing activities to determine if their attitudes' changed.

In the study, I gave students a beginning, middle, and end-of -unit survey to gather data on their attitudes toward writing in order to track if their attitudes' change. During each survey window, I implemented new strategies to determine the strategies' effectiveness and shifts in students' attitudes. Students wrote reflections during the unit and after to assist in determining their attitudes toward writing. I also took a focus group of students and interviewed them about their approach to writing. Finally, I examined the final papers of both groups. Based on the results of this data, I determined the effectiveness free writing to cultivate a culture of community.

This project is designed to determine if free writing is a strategy they can be used in the classroom to build community and collaboration amongst students. It is my goal that my research gives me the opportunity to acknowledge students' initial attitude to writing, determine if the implementation of free writing changes students' attitudes, and adjust my instruction to cultivate community and collaboration in my classroom through peer editing and a collaborative writing activities.

## Chapter 2- Literature Review

Writing is an essential tool for students' academic achievement in the English Language Arts classroom. Throughout the years, writing teachers and researchers have studied writing strategies such as free writing, reflective journaling, and graphic organizing to determine how effectively to teach writing. With the shift to Common Core happening in most states, students are required to think critically and are assessed through their ability to write effectively in order to communicate their thoughts (Gardner & Powell, 2013). However, many of the studies do not provide systematic steps to develop students as writers in a setting geared toward collaboration. The purpose of my study is to implement strategies such as free writing, editing, reflection, and collaboration to determine if those strategies alter students' approaches to creative and academic writing. In my research, I want to discover how students engage with certain writing strategies and if those strategies motivate students to write, share their writing, and contribute their writing to a larger product.

In order to further understand the topic of building a community of writers, I searched for studies on free writing, writing motivations, editing, peer editing, and student collaboration. I searched academic studies discussing writing instructors' approaches to building a community of writers. The purpose of this chapter is to explore academic research on of how instructors have approached writing.

The databases I used to locate the research mentioned in this chapter were: JSTOR, ERIC, EBSCO, and NCTE. Search terms included "free writing," "editing," "writing reflection," "student reflection," and "writing in collaboration." Of the articles I searched, the most beneficial were articles that discussed "collaborative writing" along with how writing instructors teach writing.

## **Outline**

When I searched for literature for my study, I focused on three main entities: free writing, editing, and collaborating. I begin with free writing because I wanted to determine if it motivates students to write in the English Language Arts classroom. It is the first section because it is the basis of my study. In my own experience, free writing was a major aspect of how I began to love writing. Because of my experiences, I decided to make free writing the foundation of my study. The second area of my study focused on the topics of openness/vulnerability. I discovered in the literature that editing is a process that prevents students from being vulnerable and sharing their writing. I also examined how writing teachers approached peer editing in their classrooms to determine if students became more open/vulnerable around their peers. Student collaboration is the third area in my literature review. I wanted to determine how writing instructors have built a community in their classroom, both through writing and culture. In the literature, I searched for ways writing teachers implement collaborative activities to foster community.

## **Free Writing**

As I searched through past literature, there seemed to be a lack of studies conducted in high school classrooms that exhibited the effectiveness of free writing. *In Nothing Begins with N* (1991), Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine claimed:

Freewriting has a history. But it doesn't have literature. There is little theory and even less data. Since most of what little has been published about freewriting has tended to defend, celebrate, or disapprove of it, the profession lacks any real understanding of what this mode of writing is, of what happens when people freewrite, or of the variety of ways teachers and writers can use it. (p.xii)

In addition to needing more research on what happens in classrooms, there are a number of ways researchers define the term "free writing."

Ken Macrorie (1991) coined the term "freewriting". While often referred to as "the father of free writing", Macrorie acknowledged Dorothea Brande, a respected writer and the author of

*Becoming a Writer*, as his influence (p. 175). In his essay, “The Free Writing Relationship,” he described what has been described as his “pedagogical death-rebirth experience of May 5, 1964.”(p. 174). He recounts the first invitation for students to free write as a result from being frustrated with his students. He literally told them to, “Go home and write some kind of truth for a change. Don’t worry about grammar, punctuation, and spelling” (p. 174). The next class period, two or three of his students demonstrated the authentic voice he had searched for. He describes those writers as “being born again” and in the following classes they continued to bring powerful papers (p.175).

Peter Elbow (2000) defined free writing as, “simply private, nonstop writing”(p. 85) He further explains the exercise as, “what you get when you remove most of the constraints involved in writing”(p. 85). In Elbows’ (2000) *Everyone Can Write* he reflects on his inability to write as a student at Oxford and Harvard. In his reflection he stated, “I became interested in freewriting because of my own difficulties with writing”(p. 86). He discussed his experiences struggling with writing as a student in pursuance of a doctorate. He stated,

I gradually lost my ability to get papers written, and I had to quit before getting kicked out. When I returned five years later, I discovered that the only way I could on writing papers was to force myself to blurt onto paper pages and of exploratory thinking musing and perplexity- a full week before deadline. (p. 86)

From his experience, Elbow found free writing to be an effective strategy to engage students who found writing to be difficult.

In Elbows’ (1998), *Writing Without Teachers*, he professed, “Everyone in the world wants to write”(p. xi). He made the assertion, “ Most people have had a bad experience writing, so they seldom talk about their dream; they often experience their desire as illicit or impossible”(p. xi). In his book he outlines methods and exercises to set up a teacherless writing

class (p. vii). Similar to Macrorie's claim he reflects, "I think it [free writing] comes first, before learning how to write critical papers" (p.173). Elbow describes free writing as a part of the writing process stating, "The main usefulness of the exercise is not in their immediate product but their gradual effect on future writing (p. 11). He concludes that free writing allows students to put more energy, attention, and focus into what they write (p. 8).

In "Using Focused Free Writing to Promote Critical Thinking" Lynn Hammond (1991) described two focused free writing strategies that helped students read accurately and respond critically to texts (p. 71). She first described her experience teaching college freshman and first-year law students as [they were] so worried about arriving at the "right answer. Hammond's students often abbreviated the creation process for their need to arrive at a persuasive product that ultimately made them shortchange the analytical process (p. 72). In her own observations, she recounts her students' approach to a writing task:

Students read through a poem a few times, decide what they think the poem is "about," and then write a paper to support that decision. They then either ignore aspects of the poem that contradict their original impression or force on them an interpretation that makes them "fit." The result is the same as with the legal memorandum: their reading of the poem is incompletely or even inaccurately informed. (p.72)

As a solution to the case mentioned above, she explained how focused free writing can eliminate the likelihood for students to approach writing in this manner.

In both cases, focused free writing can counteract these tendencies by helping students methodically (1) discover all the aspects relevant for examination, (2) to examine these aspects in detail and from varying points of view, (3) to see what patterns are emerging; and then only then (4) draw a conclusion. This process leads to more informed thinking and therefore more compelling writing. (p. 72)

In her study, she recommended

To help students use free writing to promote critical thinking, teachers must do three things: First, create a series of questions for focused free writing that lead students through all the necessary thinking stages of the task. Second help the writer engages in genuine explorations, without having to be "right" first, so that she discovers insights that

are more profound than her first thoughts. Third, divide the free writing into tiers that become increasing abstract. (p. 72)

In her conclusion, Hammond made the assertion that focused free writing helps to promote critical thinking and as teachers, “we need to break down the thinking process into its various stages and to create an atmosphere that helps students endure the struggles of insecurity that precede breakthroughs” (p.91). This atmosphere can also produce anxiety because it forces students the engage in a process that might feel uncomfortable in the beginning.

In “Free Writing in the Classroom: Good for What?” Anne E. Mullin (1991) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of free writing. She anecdotally begins her essay by describing her fear of free writing. She recounts her first free writing experience as being a “clutch of panic at being plunged into darkness of unknown expectations” (p. 139). She stated her fear of free writing has not subsided, “Luckily, although such painful memories can resurface, they lie most of the time now under the dominant joy of free writing I choose to do daily”(p.139). Mullin established free writing in her class, “for thought clarification and for emotional release” (p. 140). She reflected on how her students initially responded to free writing:

But can I expect what has been true for me also to be true for my students? Is free writing anxiety-laden for them at first? Uncomfortable? Does it feel like a waste of time? Should I feel guilty about demanding it of them frequently? Or does it become for them, too, a useful resource? Maybe liberating, playful, treasure-tapping experience to cherish, an ongoing dialogue with another self? Are there ways to answer these questions? (p. 140)

In order, to answer the questions above, she observed frequencies in her students’ writing such stops and restarts, noted distractions, crossed out or rewritten phrase (p. 140). She formulated a code, tracking marks of noted frequencies, to determine why students represented the notes strategies above. Mullin asked students to mark the code as they wrote, to stipulate the following:

1. Ran out of ideas



2. Thought what I wrote was no good.
3. Thought of a different idea I wanted to pursue
4. Distracted by sounds
5. Distracted by physical discomfort
6. Other (specify briefly)

As a result, the majority of her students noted during the free writing that they ran out of ideas, or were distracted by sounds. To ease this occurrence, Elbow suggested:

The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write, "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; or repeat the last words you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop."(p. 3)

Free writing is a writing strategy that has been used in classrooms to encourage students to write and promote critical thinking. Researchers and writing instructors have found that writing can cause anxiety for some students but free writing, in the studies mentioned, has been used to lessen that anxiety.

### **Editing**

Editing is the process of correcting, condensing, and modifying before publishing written work. Elbow (2000) claimed, "The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead" (p. 6). Editing should not happen until you have something to edit. If you have accumulated some interesting material and wondered about the topic in depth, only then, according to Elbow is it ok to edit. (p. 38). Elbow used the growth cycle of living cells as an analogy to the stages in the writing process. He first described free writing, the earlier stage, as production. Following the production stage, he noted that editing was a later stage. He explained how the difficulty in the editing stages is a reflection of the difficulty in the free writing stage. He recounts a personal experience in order to explain how he made this conclusion:

I had figured out perfectly well the importance of writing a lot and producing a lot, but not until I began to see more clearly my difficulties with editing did I realize that I was being held up because I really inhabited fully my difficulties with producing. (p.40)

In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow (2000) explained, “Editing, in itself, is not the problem. Editing is necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory” (p. 5). He declared the problem with editing is simultaneously producing a product. He gave the reason, “Many people are constantly thinking about spelling and grammar as they try to write“ (p. 5). He highlighted the similarities to writing to speaking stating that, “We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings as we do in speaking”(p. 5). Elbow(2000) claimed the difference occurs when speaking, someone is waiting for a reply and often times someone is looking for an instant response (p. 5). In writing, there is a chance to get it “right” often times puts a great burden on the student to pursue “correctness”(p.5).

This feeling of wanting to be “correct” transpires to writing anxiety. According to “Pain and Pleasure in Short Essay Writing: Factors Predicting University Students’ Writing Anxiety and Writing Self- Efficacy (Martinez, Kock & Cass, 2011),“While many factors contribute to college students’ anxiety, high expectations for writing across the curriculum are likely to contribute to increased writing anxiety, which can affect a students’ motivation and willingness to take writing courses”(p. 351). Similar to Elbow’s claim that writers should spend more time in the producing (free writing) stage, this study concludes that more proficient writers engaged in more leisure writing than did poor writers, suggesting that better writers write more outside of class (cited in Krashen, 1984) On the other hand, some researchers argued that leisure writing and free writing do not contribute to writing performance (cited in Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Hillocks, 1986).

In “Self-Tuning Teachers: Using Reflective Journals in Writing Classes” David Gorman (1998) used reflective journaling to implement change in his teaching practices. In his study, he recounts his experience implementing peer editing into his classroom in a journal entry,

“On October 21, I introduced peer editing. Students had to write letters to the principal, persuading her to bring their favorite musical groups to school. After the students wrote for 30 minutes, I had them exchange papers. They glanced at one another’s papers. I wanted more. I wrote,” I introduced peer editing, just had them read each other papers to see how they looked. I’ve got to get something going here. They just don’t know how to evaluate the good from bad.” (p. 436)

Similar to free writing, reflective journaling initiated the process of inquiry, helping the mind find effective learning methods. Gorman (1998) continued to write in his journal to determine methods to engage students in peer editing. This allowed him to determine ways to equip his students with the necessary skills to give feedback to their peers.

In *Writing without Teachers*, Elbow (2000) describes the idea of getting feedback from peers as “cooking” (p. 49). Elbow defines cooking as the interactions of contrasting or conflicting material. (p. 49). He used a metaphor that compared cooking to writing. He made the assertion,

I try in what follows to specify various kinds of interactions that are important in writing. But in any of them cooking consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, be reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other being mapped onto the other. (p. 49)

Similar to peer editing, Elbow explains,” If you are stuck in writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to.“ In his own experience, he discussed how he sought out a peer to discuss paper ideas and clarify themes in writing (p. 49) Elbow claimed, “Two head are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material

interact better than one head usually can“(p. 49). Peer editing can be one way to encourage students’ interaction and build a culture of community into classrooms.

### **Community and Collaboration in Classrooms**

Community is a group of people that share a particular interest and collaboration is the action of working with someone to produce or create a product. According to Green (2012), classroom community is an integral part of facilitating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. She advises, “We can build classroom communities that merge and respect the individual stories of our students while encouraging them to become stakeholders in their own communities and experiences” (p .13). She employed activities such as Think-Pair-Share to foster a healthy community in her classroom (p. 13). She asserted, ”When students feel valued and respected, they gain the confidence that they need to share their own experience, to engage in authentic opportunities for learning and to work in spaces that might be challenging or unfamiliar” (p. 14). Building a classroom community might be one way to address students’ anxiety toward writing.

Mitchham (2016) claimed the purpose of having fun in the English language arts classroom is twofold: build community and alleviate the monotony, drudgery, and anxiety that reading, speaking, and writing often produce...” (p. 13) Mitcham described how she created community in her ELA classroom through activities that highlight the purpose of having fun in the ELA class. She recounts an activity she initiated to create a “community of writers” in her classroom:

I asked two or three of the students from each class who are often reluctant literacy learners to create a banner with the caption “A Community of Writers.” After the banner is located on a wall with enough space, everyone writes a prescription for our class. I give them the charge to give me advice about how to make the class more fun. (p. 13)

As the year progressed, Mitcham refers to their advice to incorporate engaging activities into her class. Mitcham claimed the results of these activities are students getting to know each other, understand one another's differences, and are more respectful of one another (p. 13) Classroom communities are dependent on effective communication skills.

Dean and Warren (2012) made the assertion, "Community encourages rich learning because of the interactions among individuals, not the limited, two-way exchange of ideas or information that is often the case when students fail to form community"(p. 50). Dean and Warren suggest informal writing and sharing is essential to creating a community with writing (p. 53). They state," As students share these responses, they come to see that they are not alone in their feelings. They come to realize that they are a community in their common perceptions"(p. 51). Dean and Warren approach to collaborative practices used to create community is initiated from free writing and peer editing. They conclude, "The communities we create can be a powerful place for learning, if we let them. Writing informal and sharing that writing can create strong classroom communities, We can take the challenge: write and share"(p. 54). Today, students can share their writing on digital platforms.

In one quasiexperimental design study, Ornprapat and Saovapa (2012) compared students' writing abilities collaborating on Google Docs to students who worked face-to-face. The result indicated that the Google Docs group had a better performance than the face-to-face group. Researchers claimed this might be because of the collaboration method, special feature of Google Docs, which motivated students to learn more efficiently, and more contribution to work (p. 154). Zhou, Simpson, and Domizi (2012) conducted a similar study that examined the effectiveness of Google Doc a collaborative writing tool. The results indicated despite students'

unfamiliarity with Google Docs prior to the study, they were able successfully collaboratively writing using the tool.

### **Limitations in the Literature Review**

In my search for studies of how teachers established free writing, peer editing, and reflection in their English Language Arts classrooms, most of the literature discussed individual teachers' experiences with selected writing strategies but does not provide the data necessary to determine if these skills are effective in writing improving students' writing.

### **Summary**

This literature review is imperative to my study because it gives historical context to the development of free writing, the effects that free writing have on students' motivation to write, and how teachers have established community in their classrooms. Based on Hammond (1991), I will identify similar strategies of writing that will help me determine how to use free writing with my own students.

Using the literature mentioned in this literature review, I will determine if the strategies of free writing, editing, or reflection contribute to the process of creating a culture of community in my classroom. I also find it imperative to examine if free writing and peer editing are effective in motivating students to write. This literature review might have included research on how students write, collaborate, and create community outside the classroom.

## Chapter 3 – Methods

The purpose of my research is to evaluate how free writing might be used to cultivate a community of writers in an English classroom. In my own instruction, I have struggled to teach students how to write. I based the foundation of my study, free writing, with my own experiences with free writing as a high school student in my English class. In my approach, I wanted to identify students' attitudes toward writing and how free writing might change their attitudes over a nine-week unit. I also wanted to compare my students' free writing with their academic writing to examine trends between the two.

### Research Questions

- How can free writing encourage social interaction in an English class?
- What attitudes do students have toward writing and what effect does free writing have on classroom community over a period of time?
- What do we find when we examine students' free writing with their academic writing over the course of a nine- week- unit?

I conducted an action research project. Action research is defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning (cited in D.M. Burton & Barlett, 2005; Fox, Martin, & Green, 2007; Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Jarvis, 1999; Menter, Eliot, Hulme & Lewin, 2011). My study is focused on the outcomes of free writing to build community in an English classroom. Since my study is focused on students' attitudes and approaches to writing, I took the mixed-methods research approach when designing my study's research instruments.

## **Setting/Context**

I conducted the study in a charter school in South Louisiana. This charter school has branded itself as a STEAM academy focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics. The mission of the school is to prepare students for college, career, and citizenship. The school demographics include 89.74% African-American, 4.66% Caucasian, Asian 0.37%, and 0.19% Native Hawaiian. Approximately 81% students are economically disadvantaged according to the number of students who receive free and reduced lunch.

My classroom is set up with seven large tables where students sit in groups of fours. There is a large table in the center of the classroom that I use to conduct small group instruction. Since the school provides students with technology, the only technology in my classroom is my teacher laptop and a teacher-purchased- ELMO- document camera. In setting up my classroom culture, I grounded my classroom in three principles: community, growth, and resilience. To encourage community, I have several posters that display the advantages of collaboration. To support the principle of growth, I have a data wall that exhibits student mastery of concepts on individualized bases. This wall is used to foster a community of growth. Finally, to support the principle of resilience I have a poster that reads, “Just Do It..well” and “If you never try, you’ll never know.” I informed my students of the principles during culture building activities at the beginning of the school year.

## **Participants**

The participating students from my tenth grade English II honors class attend a charter school in South Louisiana. The school has branded itself as the STEAM school with a purpose to implement project-based learning, technology integration, and mentoring relationships. The school provides each student with technology. All students have a Nook, Chrome book, Laptop, or Apple Ipad depending on their grade level. Students are required to bring their device to and



from school daily. As an added benefit to the technology integration, the students have WIFI on their buses and are required to complete bus assignments. Students also have the option to bring their own device and most students opt to use their cellular devices to complete online assignments.

I teach six English II classes on an 84-minute A/B block schedule, meaning I see my students every other day. I have a total of 96 English II students. I structure my lessons according to the Louisiana ELA Guidebook, which is aligned to the national Common Core standards. I use supplemental texts as a way to increase engagement. The participants from my study are from my smallest class; English II honors. The English I instructor recommended all honors students for English II honors. The students demonstrate a varied level of reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. Based on their Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) scores from the 2013-2014 school year, 60 % percent of my students scored Basic (proficient). Based on grades from the first semester and student attitudes toward assignments, approximately a third of the students perform above grade level and are intrinsically motivated toward academic achievement. A third are at grade level but seem to have a level of motivation to improve. The last third are below grade level and seem to be complacent at their academic level. I determined these categories based on the amount of work the students completed and my own observations.

I focused on five students that I chose based on their attitudes toward writing from their pre and mid surveys result to determine if a student's attitudes evolved toward over a course of time. I asked my students to describe themselves as writers after the completion of the study. For confidentiality purpose, I used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my students. The following is their responses:

Darius: I would not describe myself as a writer because it's boring and it does not catch my attention. This does not mean I actually struggle when it comes to the subject. Writing just isn't me.

Candace: I think that I'm an okay writer. I don't like writing essays or researching anything. I think too hard when I write, so I tend to mess up. I get okay grades when I write. I make a lot grammatical errors. I am more of a free writing person; because it's easier and I really don't think at all. I just let the pen flow. Researching, when writing, makes me stress out and I tend to make a lot of errors. Writing papers is like my handwriting. When I write in print, I have to think about it, but when I write in cursive, I don't think about it. It's like free writing.

Nathan: As a writer I enjoy explaining my life and how it's going. I like for the reader to feel like they're in my shoes. I try to convey myself to the reader so they know who I am. As a writer, I also like to entertain the reader and make it funny. Lastly, it is my overall goal to engage the reader.

Amber: I feel that I am a very good writer when it's something that I have to write or when I'm proving a point. I think I'm just lazy and easily distracted from writing. But when it's necessary to I can. I used to love to write because it was new to me and I wanted to see if it really made a difference in how I talked and pronounced words. Now that I know I can write, I'm not as interested in writing.

Kenya: I am a writer who uses techniques. I like to write about things that I can give my opinion on, but I have a format that my teacher gives me. For example, last year my English I teacher gave us the acronym S.W.A.G. (State the claim, write the evidence, analyze the evidence, and give a conclusion) and this year in English II we learned A.E.C. (Assertion, evidence, and commentary). These techniques help me as a writer.

Tyrone: I don't consider myself a writer because I have a bad-spelling problem. I would be if I didn't rely on auto-correct so often. I don't like to write about anything. I see no interest in it.

## **Unit Description**

I conducted my study during a research unit. The unit was a continuation from a non-fiction research unit. Students studied *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (Skloot, 2011) in order to conduct their own medical ethics research study over various topics such as; discrimination and HIV/AIDS, human engineering, etc. In this unit, students studied medical ethics issues, evaluating sources, creating arguments, citations, and the writing process. During the second part of the unit, I required students to read *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes, 1959) over

the holiday break. The students studied a fictional character, Charlie, to write a case study to determine if the experiment conducted on Charlie was ethical. I divided students into groups; ethically right and ethically wrong. There were eight students in the ethically right group and nine students in the ethically wrong group. I selected students randomly to determine the groups. At the door, each student selected either a pink or orange slip to determine his or her group. Students did not have the opportunity to choose his or her group based on which side the student initially felt strongly toward. I selected groups in this manner to prevent students from gathering with their friend groups. I wanted to see how students worked together based on the community cultivated in the classroom, not based on previous interactions.

Both groups were given the main topics of the book such as: Rorschach test, Thematic Apperception Test, emotional distress, and animal and human testing. The students then researched the main topics to support their argument. To ensure that students were using reliable sources, I distributed a handout for students to use to evaluate their sources. The handout asked students to look at the currency, relevancy, authority, accuracy, and purpose of all the sources they choose to support their claim.

The deliverables for the project were a five-page- research paper and a PowerPoint Presentation highlighting the main arguments of the paper. Students used PowerPoint as a presentation medium to demonstrate their point to the opposing group. After both groups presented, the groups had a debate on each topic. I led the debate, probing students to a final conclusion on which group had the stronger argument. I graded the essay according to a rubric based on the following format: length, quality of sources- the sources' credibility and supported the argument, and quality of writing, including organization and cohesion.

## **Description of Teaching Style**

During this unit, I was a facilitator. I provided my students with feedback, but I did not give direct instruction. Before students turned in their final product, I offered a writing workshop, where I worked with on a paragraph from each group to model peer editing. After the workshop, I required students to edit their peers in the way I did in my model.

## **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

### **Survey**

At the beginning of my study, I administered a survey that evaluated the students' attitudes toward writing. I created ten multiple-choice questions and two short answer questions for them to answer based on their attitudes toward writing. Students were required to use a Likert scale ranging from almost always to never. The questions asked students a range of questions from "I like to write stories," to "I like to write at school," and "I think I am a good writer." The two short answer questions asked students to express their feelings toward the writing that they have to do in school and how they feel about sharing their writing with their peers. (See Appendix A for instrument)

### **Free writing journals**

Approximately a month before my research unit, I introduced the concept of free writing in journals to my students. Normally, my students came in everyday and had to complete a "Do Now". The Do Now was normally a skill-building activity assessing grammar, reading comprehension, and identifying textual evidence. I replaced the Do Now activity with free writing. I required my students to write for ten minutes at the beginning of each class period. I explained to them that I would read the journals and if they mentioned anything about harming themselves or others, I am a mandated reporter and would have to report them to the appropriate resource. I used a selected group of students' free writing to further my study of the effectiveness

of free writing. After the first two free writing activities, I began letting my students share their journals with their peers. I modeled this by reading one of my own free writes out loud.

#### Free writing reflections

On the day that I began the second half of the research unit, I asked my students to reflect on the following prompt: After a semester of free writing, describe your attitude toward writing now. In addition to the prompt, I asked students to challenge themselves by thinking about ways writing can help them to collaborate with their peers more. My students' reflections helped me to brainstorm ways that would help them to be more collaborative and also gave me insight to how their attitudes toward writing changed.

#### Mid- survey

At the mid-point of the unit, students had been free writing for approximately a month when I distributed the second survey that evaluated the students' attitudes toward writing. The mid-survey was the same survey and the pre-survey.

#### Student interviews

Based the shifts in the survey results between the pre and mid survey, I determined five themes to place students in based on their answers: non-writer become writers, doesn't enjoy writing whatsoever writers, stagnant writers, academic writers, and non- academic writers. I chose one student from each category to interview. To prepare for the interview, I examined both the pre and mid survey and also the students free writing journals. Based on the students' attitude toward writing and the contents to his or her journals, I developed my questions. I asked every student that I interviewed to describe himself or herself as a writer and to read an excerpt from their journal.

## Peer Evaluations

I asked my students a series of questions to determine how effectively each group worked together. The questions focused on students' work ethic, contribution, and attitude toward the group project. I asked the students to rank their classmates contributions to the group and themselves one through four - one represented seldom; two represented occasionally; three represented most of the time; and four represented consistently. There was an optional comment section. I only required students to comment, if they scored their peer less than three. I used the evaluations to grade students individually. (See appendix B for instrument)

## Paper Analysis

I required my students to write their papers' on Google Docs. Through the Google Docs program, I am able to track changes in the documents. To evaluate how my students approached the group project and how effectively they were able to collaborate, I analyzed each group paper for instances of collaboration and individual work.

## Post- survey

I administered the post survey after I interviewed all of my participants for my study. I wanted to examine how my students' attitudes changed after free writing and the group essay and after I interviewed the chosen study participants.

## Group essay reflection

After the group essay, I asked students to reflect on the project as a whole. I wanted them to evaluate the ways they grew as writers, and determine the strengths and weakness of the project. I used these reflections to determine the effectiveness of the structure of the project and to determine if the students found free writing and writing collaboratively effective in building a community of writers.

## Observations

During my research, I observed how the strategies I employed evolved my students' behaviors toward writing. I required that students record their group discussing the essay on an iPhone. I also videotaped and photographed the students' interactions with each other. At the end of the class period, students Airdrop their recordings to me. Airdrop is an iPhone feature to share information. I later listened to the recording to evaluate how the students worked collaboratively.

## Difficulties Encountered

One difficulty I experienced was the blocked schedule. I only had the opportunity to see my students every other day. There were some weeks that I was only able to see my students twice in one week. This was a challenge because students were not able to consistently write. Students did have the opportunity to write at home, but I only had two to three class periods a week to monitor if students were writing. This might have impacted the results, because students were unable to build a habit of free writing due to the inconsistency of their schedules.

Another difficulty was gaining and losing students throughout the semester. I began my research with seventeen students. I ended my research with fifteen students, but not all students were present throughout. This impacted my results because, in order to build a community of writers, there should be the same body of students from beginning to end. Also, since I have a small sample, the lost and gain of students impacted the credibility of my data results.

I also found that technology served as an obstacle. Although the school distributes technology to every student, some students did not have their devices everyday. The reasons include: lost, stolen, and broken. This impacts the results because students who have their devices feel they are doing a lot of the work in class. Although students without their device contributed, during class time, I observed tension between students who had to share their

devices, or given more tasks because they were able to access the Internet. This tension was displayed through peer evaluations.

### **Ethics**

As a teacher who conducts research, it is my duty to ensure that my students are engaged in material that is standard for a tenth grade English curriculum and the end-of-course assessment. In the Common Core standards, it states that students should read complex, grade-appropriate texts worth reading. Although I required students to read the text independently over the holiday break, *Flowers for Algernon* does not meet the Lexile complexity for tenth graders. When I chose the text, I found that the text could serve as a fictional representation of a medical ethics case. The skills and activities that I required students to achieve were grade-level appropriate.

When I introduced the unit, I informed my students that they would be participants in the study I was conducting. I gave students a parent consent form and a student assent form. To participate in my study, students had to return both forms signed. I also informed students that their assignments would be different from my other classes' assignments. Throughout my research, my students had limited opportunities to gain points compared to the opportunities they had before I began my research. Since I cannot grade free writing and group discussion academically, I graded solely based on participation.

Although I felt the research unit was rigorous, I also recognized at the end of the unit, that my students did not perform as satisfactorily as my other classes on the skills test that we took at the end of the unit. In the non-honors classes, I reviewed the research steps instead of having my students conduct research. This made the questions more challenging for the students in the study because they did not review research by practicing questions as the non-honors class did.



For the safety of my students participating in my study, I completed an online training course for research through the LSU Institutional Review Board. I also submitted my research proposal to the IRB office and received approval before beginning my research.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

### Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of researching tenth-grade students' approaches to writing was to determine if free writing is a strategy I can use to cultivate a community of writers in my English class. This mixed-methods study focuses on students' attitudes toward writing, approaches to free writing, and the development of free writing as a tool to cultivate community into an English classroom.

The researcher's purpose is to answer the following questions:

- How can free writing encourage social interaction in an English class?
- What attitudes do students have toward writing and what effect does free writing have over a period of time?
- What do we find when we examine students' free writing with their academic writing over the course of a nine-week unit?

The researcher collected seven data sources in the form of beginning, middle, and end surveys, observations, student interviews, student reflections, peer evaluations, paper analysis, and students' writing samples that examined students' attitudes toward free writing and social interaction amongst their peers. Qualitative data was collected in the form of observation notes, student interviews, and student reflections, students' writing samples, and paper analysis.

Quantitative data was collected in the form of beginning, middle, and end surveys and peer evaluations. Data was collected at various times during the unit (see Table 1). The researcher then reflected on the effectiveness of how free writing cultivated the sense of community in an English classroom. After the collection and data analysis, the researcher identified three themes as a result of the study. These themes included: Feeling Restricted in Academic Writing, Free Writing Allows Me to Vent, and Group Work Effort Depends on Group Members.

Table 1 Data distribution timeline

When	What	Significance
Pre- unit	Beginning survey	Determine initial attitude toward writing
During	Middle survey	Identify possible shifts in attitude toward writing
	Mid-unit reflection	Reflections on attitudes about free writing
Post- unit	End survey	Determine students' attitude shifts from beginning, middle, and end of the unit
	End-of-unit reflections	Reflections on dislikes, likes, and challenges of the group project.
	Peer evaluation	Determined the ability for groups to work collaboratively to develop a product.
	Students' work samples	Determined how students approached both free writing and academic writing
	Paper Analysis	Determined the effectiveness of collaboration on the group project.

### **Feeling Restricted in Academic Writing**

The first finding that emerged from my data collection was the theme that students felt restricted when they have to write in academic settings. One student wrote in his survey short answer, "[academic] writing is complicated because everything has to be a certain way." This type of comment was common among the participants.

The theme was also apparent when evaluating student survey results. The beginning, middle, and end surveys evaluated the students' attitudes toward writing based on a Likert scale ranging from almost always to never. Each survey was given at critical points throughout the unit: before starting the unit, before starting the group project, after the completion of student interviews, group project, and peer evaluations. Based on the survey results, students were

categorized into certain groups: non-writers become writers, doesn't enjoy writing whatsoever writers, academic writers, stagnant writers, and non-academic (free) writers.

In determining the effectiveness of free writing to help students in an academic setting, there was a pattern that I noticed during the analysis of the student surveys and interviews; students often feel restricted when required to write according to the guidelines the teacher gives. There were two items on the beginning, middle, and end-of- unit survey that specifically addressed how students felt about writing in academic settings:

5. I like to write at school.

8. I would like more time to write at school.

Tables 2,3, and 4 display the frequency of students' responses to questions 5 and 8 over the research timeline.

Table 2 Beginning survey

Scale	1- Almost always	2- Often	3-Sometimes	4- Seldom	5- Never	Mean	SD
5	1 (0.07%)	2 (14.28%)	3 (21.14%)	5 (35.71%)	3 (21.14%)	2.8	1.3
8	1 (0.07%)	1 (0.07%)	2 (14.28%)	1 (0.07%)	9 (64.28%)	2.8	3.1

Table 3 Middle-of- unit survey

Scale	1- Almost always	2- Often	3-Sometimes	4- Seldom	5- Never	Mean	SD
5	0 (0%)	3 (21.42%)	5 (35.71%)	2 (14.28%)	4 (28.57%)	2.8	1.7
8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (28.57%)	5 (35.71%)	5 (35.71%)	2.8	2.3

Table 4 End- of- unit survey

Scale	1- Almost always	2- Often	3-Sometimes	4- Seldom	5- Never	Mean	SD
5.	1 (0.076%)	1 (0.076%)	5 (38.46%)	2 (15.38%)	4 (28.57%)	2.6	1.6
8.	2 (15.38%)	0 (0%)	6 (46.15%)	0 (0%)	5 (38.46%)	2.6	2.4

The first question addressed how students felt about writing in school. As observed from the tables above, the students’ attitude toward writing varied slightly from the beginning, middle, and end-of-unit survey. In the beginning survey approximately 57% of students indicated that they “never” or “seldom” like to write in school and approximately 36% of students indicated that they “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” like to write in school. With the category “sometimes” containing the largest portion of that percentage with 21.14% in that data set. The category “seldom” contained the overall largest percentage with 35.71% out of all categories. In the middle survey, we see a 14% decrease of students who “seldom” or “never” like to write to “sometimes,” “often” and “always” like to in school. The percentage shift is the result of four students: one student moves into the “never” category and three students move from the “seldom” category. The results show the “sometimes” category gained two students; the “often” category gained one, and no students record that they “almost always” like to write in school. By the end-of-unit survey, the largest percentage is the “sometimes” category with approximately 38%. The percentage of students who “never” like to write remains consistent from the middle to the end-of-unit survey. The largest total percentage increase is indicated by the “seldom” category losing approximately 20% of students, which equates to three students. Also, one student recorded they almost always like to write in school and one student recorded that they

often like the write in school. From the data analysis of the survey results, I drew the conclusion that most students do not like to write in school over the course of the unit.

The second survey question that was related to how students feel about writing in an academic setting asked students if they felt like they wanted more time to write in school. The beginning –unit-survey indicates that 65% percent of students believe that they “seldom” or “never” want more time to write in school. Initially, three students indicated that they “almost always,” “often,” or “sometimes” feel they want more time to write in school. The largest percentage was “never” with approximately 64%. By the middle survey, there is a shift between the “sometimes,” “seldom,” and “never” categories. The greatest shift is in the “never” category with a decrease of four students. Also, three students move into the “seldom” and “sometimes” categories and no students record that they “almost always” want more time to write in school. By the end –of-unit survey, the same amount of students indicated that they did not want more time to write in school. This overall is an approximate 26% decrease from the initial survey. From the middle to the end survey, one student indicated that they “sometimes” like to write and the “almost always” category gained two students. From the data analysis of this particular question, I drew the conclusion that there were slight shifts between the surveys of students who “never” like to write to “sometimes” like to write. By the end-of-unit survey the majority of students indicated that they “sometimes” like to write.

The survey had two open-ended questions that asked students how they feel about the writing they do in school. The researcher then analyzed this response identifying common themes (See Table 5). These categories are listed below:

Table 5 Short answer survey responses

Survey	Responses
Beginning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I dislike writing in school</li> <li>• The topics are boring</li> <li>• I only like writing when the topics are interesting</li> </ul>
Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't mind free writing</li> <li>• I dislike the topics</li> <li>• It's improving my writing skills</li> </ul>
End	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Hinders us from self-expression</li> <li>• I only like free writing</li> <li>• It's boring</li> </ul>

Student Interviews

Similar to the survey short answer results, the students' interviews suggested that students feel restricted when required to write in academic settings. Student interviews were conducted at the end of the unit and consisted of five students total. One student was chosen to represent each category. The interview participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to identify a shift, if any, in the students' attitude toward writing. When asked, "Do you prefer free writing or academic writing," five out of the six participants responded that they prefer to free write.

Amber: Free writing. It depends. I think it depends on the subject that you're writing about. If you have to stick to a specific topic, you're not going to write about what you want to write. I feel like a robot, what it's called, turns into a robot almost? It's like okay I have to stay on the subject but I think this would go good in it but no; I have to stay on the subject.

One student in particular described why she preferred academic writing compared to free writing.

Kenya: Academic writing. Well I don't know how to [use voice] when writing. You [researcher] said I need to use my personality to write. I don't know how to use that so when you give me they set up, [technique] I can write like that. It helps me.

It is an interesting observation that this student prefers guidelines and techniques when she is writing because it allows her to feel correct. The techniques that English teachers have provided her have given her some sort of success that alters her approach to writing.

Darius claims that he dislikes all types of writing whether it is free writing or academic writing. When asked to read one of his free writes, Darius responded:

Boy, you [researcher] done really killed my whole day. It started off great, one of the best days of this year. Why do you have to make me write? Let me tell you a secret. If you want me to do your work without complaining, let me listen to music. Biology and Civics let me and they never heard me complain. Do we need to have a huge debate about it because you really driving me crazy. I'm kind of surprised I still have hair. Your playlist needs an upgrade.

Further into the interview, the researcher asked Darius if he ever enjoyed writing. He responded, "No." Then the researcher asked if, during grade school, he felt the same way about writing. Darius responded, "Oh no, I did, I did. I did in the fourth grade with Miss Watson." Darius discussed that the topics his teacher gave him were more interesting than what his teachers give him now. He names adventure and action as examples of interesting topics. He discussed how he hates the topics now because, "It's not fun, creative, attention catching. It's just boring." Darius described this attitude change happening in high school. He stated; "Before I came here [school] writing wasn't a problem. It's just physical we don't get a break. We just write, write, and write. I hate writing. I hate pencils now."

Darius did not feel restricted in the writing he had to do in school until high school. According to the remarks, he now dislikes not only the mental labor that has to go into write but also the physical act of writing. Darius told the researcher that the only thing that would make writing more pleasurable is being able to listen to the types of music he likes while he writes.

A student who, based on his survey results, doesn't like to write whatsoever described his views on academic writing as a punishment. Tyrone stated, "Writing was always like a



punishment to me. When we're doing a test and it had...what is it called structural responses and it was writing. I always hated it." This student's experience in academic writing has been negative. In the past, teachers have forced him to write in structures that often led to the student feeling defeated. As a result, the student associated writing with punishment.

### Observations

As soon as I assigned students the group project, they immediately began dividing the tasks among each group member. They discussed when they should have each part completed, but did not have a conversation about the key points of the books, or their own views of the case. They immediately begin to look at each task in the group project as an individual part of the project. I prompted them to discuss their opinions, but naturally students began to clump with the peer they were most comfortable with to discuss their feelings about the project's workload and content. My observations demonstrated how students approached the academic writing task differently from free writing. In observation, the students have a nature to go directly into how to complete the project according to guidelines instead of discussing their opinions. This shows evidence to why students may feel restricted in academic writing.

In this section, I examined the theme of "feeling restricted in academic writing." I discovered through survey results, student interviews, and observations that English teachers may give too many guidelines for academic writing, which can lead students to feel restricted and sometimes defeated. Normally, students are not given the space to express themselves in an academic setting. This leads into the second theme that emerged from my findings.

### **Free Writing Allows Me to Vent**

The second theme that emerged from my data collection was free writing lets me vent, which my students described as a way to release tension caused by daily life struggles.

## Free writes

Before starting the unit-group project, students spent ten minutes at the beginning of the class period free writing. After ten minutes, students were given the opportunity to share their writing with their peers by reading their journal out loud. This activity started approximately a month before students were engaged in their group project and lasted to the completion of their group project. The researcher wanted to determine if the contents of the free writing journals were consistent with what they recorded on their survey regarding their attitude toward writing and self-expression.

At first Tyrone claimed that the free writing journal was not a space for him to vent. In his first journal he recorded:

Yesterday, October 25, 2015 was so boring. Rained morning to night. I sat inside all day waiting on it to end. Not, to mention it was my birthday. I had plans but my sisters didn't want to get their hair wet.

In the remainder of the entry, Tyrone discussed the possibilities of retiring his birthday if it rains next year and stated he felt the rain was a punishment for getting a tattoo. In one of his following free writes he writes, "I need away to vent my anger." At this point, Tyrone makes it apparent that he does not feel free writing provides him that place, but in an entry approximately two weeks later he writes, "Damn time almost up already. I don't like this journal stuff, but it helps me clear the mind." In his free writes Tyrone frequently records the weight of balancing a job and being a student. In another entry he recorded:

Yesterday I worked 9 hrs with only one 30[minute break]. My job is hell I should be employee of the month. I do way more than those lazy people. They had me in the freezer for over a hour. I only get four hours to sleep daily. That's the sad part.

Although Tyrone does not associate what he writes in his journal with the terms "vent" or "self-expression" the researcher has noted some entries that might display Tyrone expressing himself.

On the other hand, in his interview Nathan acknowledges that free writing allows him to vent. Nathan consistently volunteered to share his writing with his peers by reading out loud. Nathan initially, based on survey results, did not use writing as tool to express himself. In his first entry he recorded:

I want to be a producer when I grow up but I also want to go to the NBA. I want to make people happy by making beats and making music videos for people. I'm making a company too.

Nathan continued this entry by describing the company's name, then he discussed canceling school for the day because he was tired. As the unit progressed and more students begin to share their journals, Nathan wanted to share a journal every class period. I noticed the difference between the journals that he chose to share and the journals he keep private to himself. The following is an excerpt from one of the journal that he read out loud to his peers:

I am extremely morose right now. Ms. Larry has it out for me I swear. She sent me to TOR for something I didn't do and I had to write the whole I have a dream speech and I cannot imagine my day going any better.

He continued that entry describing the incident in more detail. The entries that he chose not to discuss in class seemed to be more personal than the entries he read out loud. The following is an example of an excerpt from an entry Nathan opted out of reading:

I must be ugly because don't nobody be trying to go with the move on me or whatever, but I can't be too ugly because I was pretty ugly last year and people told me that I've glowed up or whatever sense last year.

Although Nathan seemed to be comfortable with his peers in the class, he still found the journal to be a private place where he could vent and not have the need to share it with his peers.

Candace also recorded that she initially did not use writing as a tool to express herself. Candace never read her journal to her peers, but later in her reflections and in the surveys, she

record that she now finds free writing to be a tool she uses to vent. The following excerpt is from her first journal entry:

Uhm... I really don't know what to write about. Well my name is \_\_\_\_\_ aka Dedra, Dee Dee or whatever. My mom said when I was little I was fat. School is okay. I like sports. I'm on the volleyball team, but not basketball this year.

Candace continued this entry discussing why she was not on the basketball team this year. As Candace begins to write more, I noticed her use her journal to vent about things that were happening at school. The following is an example of how Candace used her journal to vent:

I guess things are trying to go back to normal. I just don't act too normal at school. Ok, so how you thought I had an attitude with you? I don't like people like that. And I don't wanna be bothered with people like that, So I'm not. I had to get that out.

Candace continued the entry by shifting her thoughts to her handwriting. Although Candace never had the desire to share her journal with her peers, she found use of it to help her release tension from things that bothered her. Candace is the only noted student who continued writing in her journal after the conclusion of the unit.

#### Mid-unit- reflections

During the middle-of-the-unit, the researcher gave the students a journal topic that requested them to describe their attitudes toward writing after a semester of free writing. The researcher coded the journal entries to identify common themes.

The theme that emerged from the reflections was: students feel that free writing gives them opportunities to vent. My students define vent as “letting out my emotions,” “explore my emotions,” and “release when I am having a rough day.” I identified the outcomes of free writing for three students who, according to survey results, did not identify writing as a tool to express themselves.

Kenya began her reflections by writing the following:

At first when you [researcher] introduced free writing, I did not want to do it or understand what was the point. But after a semester of free writing, I've grown comfortable of doing it. I am now wanting to come to your [researcher's] class and actually write.

She began her free writing journal recording what happened in her day. After another student read her entry aloud to the class, Kenya modeled the entry and began writing a story similar to the student who shared her journal in her following free writes. She wrote in her reflection "writing can help collaboration with others because it helps us express ourselves emotionally" she then provides examples of how students in class began to display this in their own free writes.

Kenya: I noticed some people in class were shy to share their entries, but as we started writing, people got comfortable with their peers. So I don't have any suggestions because I feel free writes open my peers, so we should continue writing.

Tammie claimed that free writing "helps me express myself on a more wide plane."

Similar to Kenya, Tammie often wrote about what was happening in her day. Toward the end of the free writing exercises, she began using her free writes as a way to communicate to her classmates things she felt. During one of her free writes, Tammie expressed "I hate when students complain about the work we get in school, we are in honors. It is supposed to be challenging." She describes free writing not only as a tool she uses for self-expression, but also away to strengthen discussions. She states, "the discussions that I have on paper helps me strengthen my discussion aloud. Often, it makes my hand cramp, but it helps me to collaborate with my peers."

Nathan discussed a shift in his attitude toward free writing by stating, "I have a better attitude towards writing because it was a way for me to express myself. He often discussed what was happening in his life in his free writes. Mid-way through the free writing activity, he began

to volunteer more often to read his free writes to the class. In his mid-unit reflection, he stated, “Writing at the beginning of class was a way for me to vent some days when I was having a rough day. I really enjoy writing before class.” Nathan also described free writing as a strategy that can improve character. He stated, “I suggest people write more because it will make them well-rounded when it comes to communicating with others.” This example was displayed through his shift to completing entries just for a class assignments to using free writes to express himself and frequently share his thoughts with his classmates.

### Student Interviews

When I analyzed the student interviews, all but one student mentioned that free writing helped them to express themselves. Tyrone is one a student I identified from the survey results as a writer who didn’t like writing whatsoever. In his interview, the researcher showed Tyrone evidence of one of his free writes as an example of self-expression. Tyrone recorded on the survey results and in mid-unit reflections that he did not enjoy writing and did not see free writing as a tool for self-expression. In the following quote, Tyrone explains how his free writes are examples of self-expression. The following is his explanation of free writing and self-expression.

Tyrone: I realize that as I was writing. When I first started to write, I didn’t want to write in the journals. I don’t consider the journal being school writing. With school writing we have to write and stay on topic everything has to be perfect. When I’m in my journal, I just write how I want to write.

Following this response, the researcher defines free writing and asked Tyrone if he enjoys free writing. Tyrone responds, “I didn’t know this was considered free writing. I like it because I can get stuff off my head sometimes.” Although Tyrone recorded his dislike for free writing and noted it did not lead him to self-expression, evidence demonstrates that Tyrone, in fact uses free writing as a tool to express himself.

Based on the data presented from the survey, the researcher initially categorized Candace as an academic writer. Based off the evidence presented from the interview, the researcher discovered that Candace was instead a non-academic free writer. Candace responded to the question “What types of writing do you like to do?” with “Free writing.” She described her attitude to academic writing activities stating, “I guess I have a I don’t care attitude.” The researcher asked Candace to draw on her writing experience from grade school by asking, “ Did you like writing in kindergarten, first, or second grade?” Candace responded, “ No, unless it was free writing.” Candace enjoys free writing because “it helps me clear my mind.” Although Candace did not like to share her writing with her peers, the evidence shows that free writing led Candace to self-expression.

Initially Nathan “didn’t like it [free writing]. I thought it was dumb, but now I like it.” Nathan describes in his attitude shift toward free writing emerging from him being able to express himself. Nathan stated, “ Because if I have a bad day before I start writing. I can express myself.” When asked if he preferred free writing or academic writing, he responded, “ Free writing, “giving his reason as, “ Because I don’t like to write about what people tell me to write about.” When asked, “Do you feel like you will continue writing?” He responded, “Yes.” The researcher then stated, “even though we’re not writing in class any more? Nathan responded, “Yes”. The researcher then asked how has he changed from the beginning of the free writing activities, he said,” from not liking to write to liking to write.

In this section, I examined the theme “ Free Writing Allows Me to Vent.” I discovered through student free writes, mid-of-unit reflections, and student interviews that students tend to favor free writing over academic writing because free writing allows them to express themselves. Also students frequently define self-expression has being able to vent or having the space to

write about what is going on in their lives. Students feel that school settings don't often give the opportunity for students express themselves.

### **Group Work Effort Depends on Group Members**

The third theme that emerged from data collection was how students responded to their group members.

#### End-of- unit reflections

In this unit, after reading *Flowers for Algernon*, students were randomly selected into two groups- ethically wrong and ethically right. The students were tasked to argue if Charlie, the main character's, medical operation was ethically wrong or right. The students gathered evidence from credible sources to prove their case. To effectively examine the group dynamics and determine effectiveness, the researcher identified trends and themes in end-of unit reflections based on each groups' responses.

The common trends that emerged from the ethically wrong group were, "It was difficult to depend on other people," "I'm independent and prefer independent assignments," and "the more brains, the better the ideas."

Tanner claimed it was "difficult to depend on people" because there were "so many people in the group." She acknowledged how she saw the benefit of having more people participating, but ultimately believed she would have had a better experience if she "had to worry only about herself". Brittany stated, " I was nervous that everyone wasn't going to keep their promise and do their work." She was not looking forward to working with students who were not as serious about their grade as she was. She claims, " In the end everyone did what they were supposed to, but if I were to work with more hardworking students, then I would do it all over again." Rose also "didn't like the fact I had to depend upon other." She claimed she is so use to



doing things alone, that the group project challenged her to work collectively. Rose said her biggest take away from the group project was,

I learned that I needed to learn how to work with a group of people. I can't always do things independently. Something else I learned was that I automatically become a leader in a group. Therefore, I need to lead my group in the right reason.

Students frequently compared the group project to a hypothetical independent assignment often stating, "I had a part to do on my own and I love working alone" "I imagined doing it [project] by myself and failing because on some parts it was very confusing..." and "I would rather it [project] be an independent thing. "Jacob discussed how he felt the group should have been more organized. He claimed," I should have stepped up and do it myself, even though I didn't." This claim led to what Mary said, "I feel as if it [project] was great already, but it would've been better if it all sounded more put together instead of it sounding like it got done piece by piece." Although this was the consensus among the ethically wrong group, students also noted that as a group, with the number of people in each group, they were able to brainstorm great ideas.

Tanner claimed, "Something I did like however is that we had more brains an a longer thought process. It made the paper stronger is all I am trying to say." Mary discussed how during the debate, after writing the paper she felt "my team knew some things I didn't" giving an example of a topic that was not assigned to her when the group gave tasks and stated, "I learned what a Rorschach test was and how it effects people." Mary admits

I think different than the people in my group. Everyone sort of had the same idea with some things though. I thought different almost in deeper thought. Some things that could have made it better is if I wasn't focused on working alone and we could have probably had more ideas.

Students in the ethically wrong group consistently mentioned how they “learned how to work together” noting it was a challenge, but understanding the dynamics of their group and how they hurt or helped their project.

The ethically right group had a very contrasting experience compared to the ethically wrong group. The trends emerged from their end-of-unit reflection were “we worked together and collaborated,” “working with my group improved my attitude toward group work,” and “it [project] helped me see my classmates views.

The majority of the participants in the ethically right group agreed that their group was able to work together successfully to complete the project. Katie stated, “ I like that this [project] took me out of my comfort zone and made me work with others.” The structure of the project forced students to evaluate their peers writing. Tanya admitted to struggling to write her paragraph. In her reflection she stated, “This group project helped me to ask for help.” The researcher required both groups to present their project using Google slides. The ethically right group decided that one person, Tanya, would complete this task alone. She reflected on her experience stated:

The thing I didn’t like was that one person wanted to do the slides by themselves and when it came to the due date, everybody got mad because that person didn’t know what to put on the slides. I learned that you can’t do all the work by yourself.

Even though Tanya’s reflection discussed the challenges she experienced, other participants discussed how the project helped them build new skills. Brandon claimed:

What I really enjoyed about the assignments was how it helped us work together as an entire honors class. I gained a new skill and development of looking over and correct my classmates’ paragraphs.

This trend effectively explains how students were able to change their attitudes and improve their characters’ based on their attitudes toward how positively they felt their group

worked together. Candace stated, “ I believe that my group helped me to learn about myself and how to work with others.” Two students noted “this group project was a very different experience, because I was used to working with two other people not seven,” and “I wish weren’t working with so many people.” Although many participants said they experienced some challenges while working as a group, they described the project as “interesting,” frustrating yet exciting,” and “fun.”

The last trend that emerged for the data collection from the ethically right group was “it [project] helped me see my classmates views.” Based on the evidence from the end-of-unit reflections majority of the ethically right group agreed ”it [group project] helped me to see that each of us has different views on different things and eight different approaches.” Katie claimed, “I really didn’t dislike anything. As much as I complained about it, I really enjoyed this project. I learned about how other people view’s on material are different than my own.” Brandon often struggled working with group members prior to the group project. He stated:

I loved how polite they were with [the project], as it was like I was dreaming, seeing teenagers working together at once. I thought this school was complete trash until I worked with the people I thought I knew. The main thing this project did for me was opened my third eye.

After the writing tasks, one student wrote, “ I also loved the debate we did afterwards and how everything flowed freely. This statement was not only observable as the students debated, but allows the researcher to effective examine the group dynamics of both groups to determine why the groups responded to the project differently.

To effectively determine the effectiveness of groups, students were required to complete a peer evaluation for each of their group members. Each student had to rate their group members one through 4: one- seldom, 2-occasionally, 3- most of the time, and 4- almost always (see Table

6). The statements evaluated how effective, as a whole, students were able to work together and collaboratively. The students were asked to rate their peers based on the following questions:

1. Worked collaboratively on all parts of the task
2. Offered suggestions to improve the project
3. Volunteered to work independently on aspects of the of the project
4. Addressed conflict in the group positively
5. Complete an equal amount of work and participated fully in complete the project
6. Actively participated in the planning portion of the project
7. Respectful and polite to all group members
8. Used time wisely and remained focused

The following table displays the effectiveness of the ethically wrong and right group

Table 6 The effectiveness of the ethically wrong and right group

Ethically right		Ethically wrong	
Scale	Percentage	Scale	Percentage
Seldom	5.15%	Seldom	3.87%
Occasionally	9.32%	Occasionally	6.39%
Most of the time	31.34%	Most of the time	30.63%
Almost always	54.16%	Almost always	59.09%

As observed in this table, the ethically right group rated 54.16 % of their group members consistently were able to work collaboratively to complete the project. The ethically wrong group similarly rated their group members with 59.09% of participants worked consistently and was able to work collaboratively to complete the project. The percentages from both groups

appear comparable. Both groups agreed that approximately 85% of their group effectively worked together to complete the project.

The evidence the ethically wrong group provided for their peer evaluation was not consistent with the evidence demonstrated in the previous data sources.

### Paper Analysis

In order to determine the effectiveness of both free writing to cultivate classroom community and how successfully students were able to collaborate with their peers, I tracked student contributions according to the revision history feature on Google Docs. In this revision tracker, every student is assigned a color that corresponds with his or her name. This allowed me to determine how often students contributed to the paper. I observed each group separately to come to a conclusion on which group, based on their revision history, collaborated effectively. I also looked for trends in writing between my students' free writing and their contribution to the group project.

I observed in the ethically wrong groups' paper, that the group members wrote their paragraphs separately and pasted it into the group document, instead of initially writing in the group document. The following is an example of a student who wrote her paragraph and pasted it. The text is in green print to demonstrate one student working on the task. (see Figure 1)

Many people are very unaware of what rorschach test really do and how they could effect them but the test really produces a scarily accurate profile of your personality. Not many thought that a simple ink test could figure out who you really are. But for those who are unaware of what a rorschach test is a type of projective test used in psychoanalysis, in which a standard set of symmetrical inkblots of different shapes and colors is presented one by one to the subject, who is asked to describe what they suggest or resemble. Dr. Mike Drayton stated "However, when the test was scored and interpreted, it produced a scarily accurate profile of my personality. It knew things about me that even my mother didn't know. I've been a fan, if a rather sceptical one, ever since."

However, what people don't know about the rorschach test is that the Rorschach has also been criticised for its validity. In other words, is it measuring what it says it is measuring? Rorschach was clear that his test measured disordered thinking and this has never been disputed. But whether it accurately measures personality as well is up for debate.

Figure 1 Independent student paragraph

The student completed her part in the project, but did not get input from any of her peers. I also observed two students who made majority of the paper edits. Both students tracked more than 50 edits. In one of my observations, a student completely removed one of her peers' paragraphs. (see Figure 2)

~~will be. Life is nothing to take a chance on. Especially, when they aren't meantally correct. This group of people are vulnarble to the world as is. Human testing can drastically change your life before and after experimentation. Whenever a person in desperate need for medical help consents to be in a medical experiment, they have no idea what their outcome will be. The Washington Post states "Many prominent researchers felt it was legitimate to experiment on people who did not have full rights in society- people like prisoners, mental patients, poor blacks." When our patient, Charlie Gordon, signed up for the experiment he had no idea how the experiment would affect his life. Charlie wasn't worried about how the experiment could negatively affect his life or his body because of his state of mind. Nobody knew what would happen to Charlie during or after the experiment. Human experimentation is like taking a huge possa or chance because nobody knows what the outcome will be. No one's life should be something to take a chance with or experimented on.~~

Figure 2 Student editing example

The student did work for the overall benefit for the group, but I did not observe the conversation that discussed the removal of a paragraph, nor is there evidence that proved that the piece was worked on collaboratively.

The only examples of collaboration I observe from the ethically wrong group are when two students are working in the document, but on separate paragraphs. The image below displays each paragraph in different colors to show the students' individual approach. The first paragraph appears in green and the second paragraph in purple to demonstrate two students working in the document. (see Figure 3)

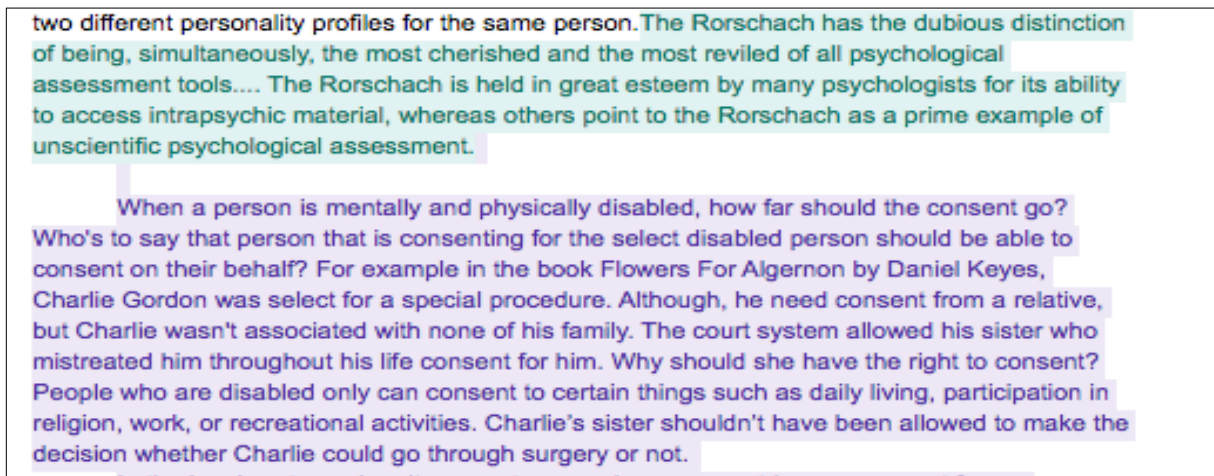


Figure 3 Two students collaboration example

I observed in the ethically right groups' paper, that most group members wrote their paragraphs in the group document. The group initially began with the layout for all group members and in the same document, the group members wrote their paragraphs. (see Figure 4)

Paragraph 1: Introduction:

"Flowers for Algernon", written by Daniel Keyes, is a book about a thirty-two-year-old man named, Charlie Gordon, who suffers from phenylketonuria and has a low IQ of sixty-eight. He holds a janitorial job at a bakery called Donner Bakery and attends reading and writing classes at Beekman College Center for Retarded Adults. He was asked by two researchers named Dr.Nemur and Dr.Strauss, to be a test subject to try a new surgical technique intended to increase his intelligence. Charlie fulfilled with the surgery because he wanted to be an intelligent adult. The surgery went successful, and when Charlie knowledge slowly starts to increases, he came to a realization that people who he thought was his friends was only around him to ridicule or make fun of him. In Charlie's case, the surgery is ethically right, because he should be able to have the right to experience a normal life, as an adult.

Paragraph 5:

In the book, the human and animal testing was one way to figure how they will react difficult situations. The maze race, for example, was a test to test their ability when they come to a dead end. Also, the race was to test their intelligence. Algernon was tested first and then Charlie. Another example,was the surgery. Both Algernon and Charlie had surgery done on them to become smart.How the maze helped Charlie was that he realized he can finish the race.

Figure 4 Ethically right essay layout

The ethically right group approached editing differently from the ethically wrong group. Instead of removing paragraphs, a student in the ethically right group asked his classmates to make sure their paragraph supported their claim. I also saw example of students editing paragraph structure, grammar, and punctuation. (see Figure 5)

through was ethically correct because he had the right to accept a to undergo surgery that could possibly enhance his intellectual state as a as the middle-aged man. However, the effects of the surgery only lasted for eight months a little while. Through the process, Charlie gained awareness of his past and present life and who he was. The surgery also helped learn a lot about life and its struggles. (EXPLAIN HOW THESE EXPERIENCES WOULD BENEFIT HIM)

Figure 5 Ethically right student editing examples



Although the ethically right group seemed to have more examples of collaboration, there are several examples of individual approach to the project. One student has over 100 editing changes alone. In one example, I observed her working with a student on a paragraph, but there is no evidence that they worked in collaboration. In the revision history, I only observe her editing, removing content, of a part of a paragraph. (see Figure 6)

around him to ridicule or make fun of him. For Charlie, the experiment that he undergo is ethically right, because he should be able to have the right to experience a normal life, as a middle-age adult. For Charlie, the experiment is ethically right, because he should be able to have the right to experience a normal life, as a middle-aged adult. (STRONGER THESIS)

Charlie took a test called, the Rorschach test, better known as the "inkblot", to determine where his intelligence stands at. The Rorschach test, created by Hermann Rorschach, is a psychological projective test of personality when subjects interpretations of ten standard abstract designs are analyzed at a measure of emotional, intellectual functions, and integration. I tested my group members, who are high achievers, to see the difference between them and Charlie. When I performed the test, they saw a bird, a dog, a hairdryer, a dalmatian, a heart, a face, an orange, and a mouse. The test was valid because it was able to help Charlie develop his

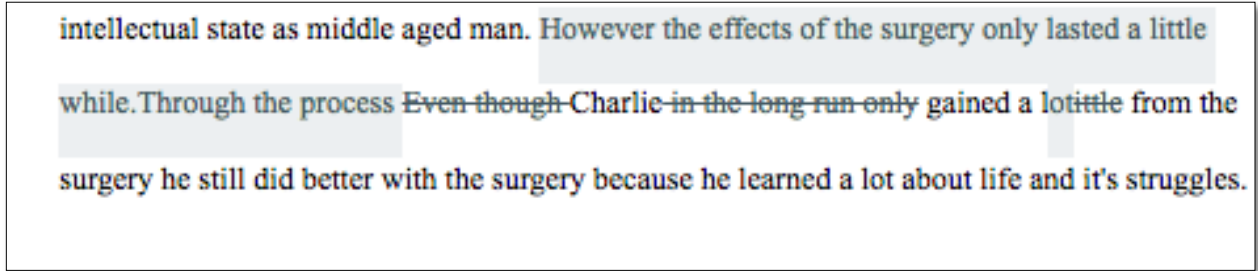
Figure 6 Independent editing example

Overall, the ethically wrong group approached the project as individuals. There is no evidence that they collaborated on the project. From the beginning, the document began as one persons paper, which eventually begin to incorporate everyone's paragraph as they wrote. The same two people consistently edited the paper and wrote much of the paper, if I considered how much was taken out through editing. The ethically right group approached the project with the idea to collaborate according to their initial start of the project. As the project progressed, I

noticed two students who did not contribute, but pasted their paragraphs into the document. The same students are tracked doing the editing for everyone consistently. I saw more of an effort in the ethically right group to work together to produce the final draft.

According to the end-of-unit reflections, the ethically wrong group discussed their struggle with certain group members and the desire to want to complete the project alone. This translates in the evidence from the paper analysis. The ethically wrong group did approach their group project by completing individual tasks. On the other hand, the ethically right group described the group project as a pleasant experience that pushed them to work with others. In observation and according to the paper analysis, the ethically right group did make some attempts in their layout and editing process to be collaborative. This effort was not demonstrated from all group members.

In this project, I also wanted to examine my students' free writing next to their academic writing. Although Nathan seemed to be comfortable with his peers during class by sharing his free writing, he contributed very little to the project and only has examples of editing his own work. (see Figure 7)



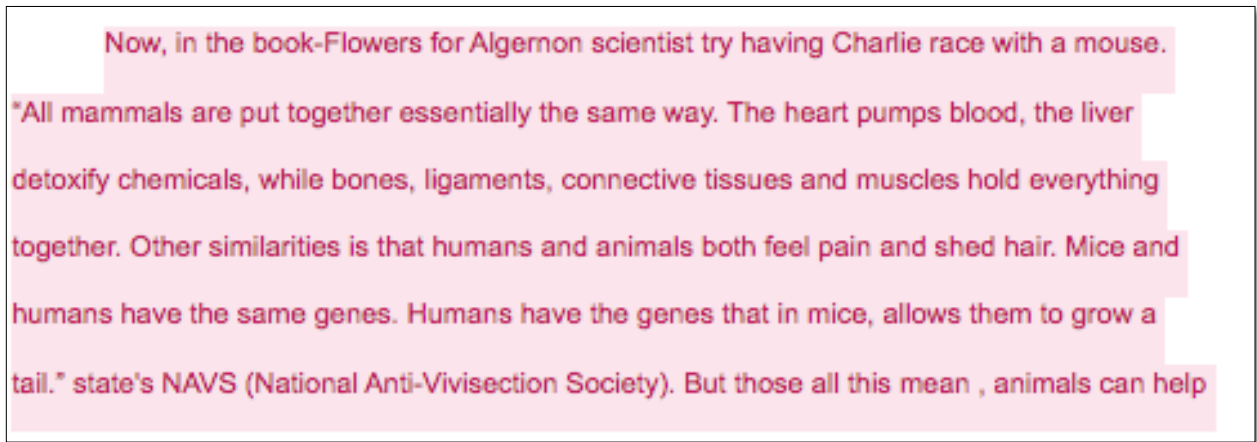
intellectual state as middle aged man. However the effects of the surgery only lasted a little while. Through the process Even though Charlie in the long run only gained a lot little from the surgery he still did better with the surgery because he learned a lot about life and it's struggles.

Figure 7 Independent paragraph

Another interesting finding in Nathan's entries is he used a high level of vocabulary in his free writes compared to what he has used in academic writing in the past. This might be because he knows he has the opportunity to read his journals to his peers.

On the other, Candace is a student who did not like to share free writes with other students, but observed and tracked, via the revision history feature, making majority of the corrections for her peers. In her free writing, Candace writes comparably more than her other group members. Another student who often shares their journal also contributed very little to the collaboration part of the project. The student completed their individual part, but did not make contribution to the project as a whole. The following is an example of an excerpt for the students' free write and their assigned paragraph.(see Figure 8)

What is love? No like seriously. What is trust? What is happiness? What's loyalty and respect? Oh I know, they're all things my ex couldn't give me. Now whoa back up, I know I'm too young to even be talking about love, but aren't we all people?



Now, in the book-Flowers for Algernon scientist try having Charlie race with a mouse. "All mammals are put together essentially the same way. The heart pumps blood, the liver detoxify chemicals, while bones, ligaments, connective tissues and muscles hold everything together. Other similarities is that humans and animals both feel pain and shed hair. Mice and humans have the same genes. Humans have the genes that in mice, allows them to grow a tail." state's NAVS (National Anti-Vivisection Society). But those all this mean , animals can help

Figure 8 Student assigned paragraph

This student's free writing is a lot similar to her academic writing based on choice of vocabulary and the voice in the writing.

In the section this section I examined the theme “Group Work Effort Depends on Group Work Members. “I discovered through end-of-unit reflections, peer evaluations, and a paper analysis that students often feel a sense of personal responsibility when they approach group tasks. Naturally, students begin to assign sections for individuals to complete, instead of approaching the group project as a group. This leads students have either negative feelings toward their group member because all participants did not complete his or her individual part of positive feelings because they have successfully completed their individual projects to contribute the project at large.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I identified the common themes of my data: “Feeling Restricted in Free Writing,” “Free Writing Allows Me to Vent,” and “Group Work Effort Depends of Group Members”. Through data analysis of beginning, middle, and end-of-unit surveys, students’ mid and end-of-unit reflections, students’ work samples, peer evaluations, observations, student interviews and paper analysis, I found that although free writing is effective in helping students’ express themselves, in my study it did not effectively translate into cultivating community or enhancing students’ academic writing styles.

## Chapter 5- Conclusion

### As of Now

At the beginning of my research, I was searching for a solution to a deficit I find all too familiar-my students' struggle with writing. I reflected on my own experiences as a writer and tried to put concrete reasons for how I grew to enjoy the challenge of writing. I knew that a huge part of my growth as a writer stemmed from free writing and being able to share my writing with my peers. I set out to figure out how to instill that desire in my students and enhance the learning experience for my students.

Initially, when I observed my students approach writing, I felt overwhelmed. I did not understand how to develop a passion for a skill that in my opinion was an organic process. My English teacher told me to write what I wanted in a composition notebook. I instantly begin to rely on my composition notebook to understand everything around me. My students did not mimic my behavior. When I introduced free writing, I heard an immense amount of groans and grunts toward what seemed like “busy” work to my students.

In this unit, I had the opportunity to grow with my students. Their journals gave me the opportunity to understand them not only as my students but also as people with real emotions. Often times, in academic settings, there are not places to discuss feelings and daily issues. My students transitioned from writing generically by recapping their day to discussing personal challenges that affect them daily. By the end of the unit, I no longer heard detested groans toward writing, but I heard anxious inquires, “Ms. Tate are we free writing today? Can we please free write? I have a lot to get out.” Free writing gave my students an outlet that is so essential for them to understand themselves and their environment. During the semester, I felt the most valued as a teacher because my students not only completed a task for a completion grade but also embraced writing in an academic setting.

After completing this research, I began another unit. My students and I are now engaged in decoding Shakespearian language through Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Due to time constraints of state testing, I have decided not to implement free writing into this unit. I still find opportunities for my students to express themselves in other ways such as discussions and sharing the journal topics I assign with their peers. Ideally, I would have wanted to continue free writing but as state testing approaches, I am pushed to ensure my students have the skills necessary to be successful. Unfortunately, free writing is not one of those skills. For future practices, I plan to implement free writing at the beginning of the school year in hopes that the community in my classroom forms more organically instead of the forced community I tried to create in nine weeks.

### **How Free Writing Encourages Social Interaction**

Overall, free writing did not encourage students' social interactions organically. As shown in the data analysis of the mid and end-reflections, some students found value in sharing their journals out loud with their peers, but this interaction did not happen naturally. The teacher asked students to share their journals and the same students consistently volunteered. The majority of students found free writing helped them vent but did not describe it as a tool they find useful in understanding their classmates. While some students recorded they appreciated their peers sharing because it allowed them a slight glimpse into their peers' lives, most students found value in the simple, private interaction with their thoughts that free writing provided.

### **Students' Attitudes Toward Writing**

Initially, according to survey results, the majority of students recorded they disliked writing in school, don't find it as a tool to express themselves, and don't believe teachers should give them more time to write in school. Students contributed some of their reasoning to: having too many formats and guidelines, the topics are boring, teachers use writing as a punishment, and

writing makes my hand hurt. By the end of the unit, some students shifted their attitude to “sometimes” wanting more time to write and school and particularly wanting opportunities to free write.

### **The Effect of Free Writing Over Time**

As shown in the mid-reflections, some students wrote at the beginning they did not see the point of free writing. Similar Macrorie’s experience when he first introduced free writing to his students, many of my students’ free writing journals began with them describing their confusion on what they should write about or introducing his or herself. As recorded in the mid-reflections, some students shifted to valuing free writing as a tool of expression and appreciated the time we spent free writing in class but the majority of the students indicated that they either “sometimes” or “never” wanted more time to write in school. Overall, students enjoyed free writing because it was a less stringent task than I required them to do normally but naturally most students don’t free write on their own or want more time to write in school.

### **Examining Students’ Free Writing With Academic Writing**

When examining students’ free writing with their academic writing, I noticed students were more fluid and open in their writing. For example, one student was more prone to using more advanced vocabulary words in his free writing compared to his academic writing. The cause of this might be due to the fact that he felt more comfortable in his free writing because I did not distribute a grade for accuracy. In academic writing, students tended to write formulaically, providing evidence for their claims they were making, but not providing the commentary necessary to support their arguments. Overall, students approached free writing and academic writing very differently.

## **Implications**

As a result of this teacher-research project, I will identify ways to be less intentional in creating community in my classroom. Based on the conclusions of my study, my students responded to certain task simply because I asked them to do the task. Although I did feel my students were more open with me about their personal problems, I cannot say I cultivated a culture of community in nine weeks. In fact, I believe it is quite a challenge to do such in a limited amount of time. As a result, I plan to implement free writing at the beginning of the school year just as a tool students can use to be self-reflective. I also found value in creating a space where students felt confident enough to share their journals with their peers. I want to integrate more opportunities for students to share not only their free writing but also their academic writing. In order to successfully integrate these opportunities, I will have to implement free writing and sharing as a part of how I build culture at the beginning of the school year.

Another implication I consider will enhance my practice as a teacher is making the assignments I give my students more authentic. In my study, I discussed how I helped me as a writer gain confidence to share my writing with my peers, but I also mentioned how I used my writing to change my school community. In my research, I did not give my students that opportunity. The investment of this project stemmed from my students wanting a good grade. If I would have made my project an opportunity my students could use to inform their peers at school, the results from this study could be different.

The last thing I consider will enhance the field and my teaching style is incorporating assignments that allow for self-discovery. For my research project, I gave students guidelines that outlined the exact format of every piece of their project. This resulted in students dividing the tasks instead of collectively determining how to approach the project. If I gave students a



general topic and allowed them to determine the presentation, this possibly could have significantly changed the results of my study.

### **Recommendations**

My study gives one perspective from one group of students in my English II classroom. My study might leave readers wanting to identify writing strategies that do cultivate community. My study mentioned peer editing as a tool that can be used to encourage students' interaction. While peer editing was an aspect of my study, a researcher might find it beneficial to study how to implement peer editing as a strategy to develop a culture of community.

Additionally, another way this research could be examined further is by assessing how technology plays a role in collaboration amongst students. In this study, students used Google Docs to write, but much of the writing was either copied and pasted or worked on individually in the shared document. A researcher might want to consider how teaching students how to effectively use Google Docs as a collaboration tool might impact student writing and the development of community in a classroom.

### **Summary**

This teacher-research project was implemented into a sophomore English Language Arts classroom in order to determine if free writing is a strategy that can be used to cultivate community in an English classroom. In conclusion, free writing alone does not cultivate community, but free writing can be used as a tool for self-reflection for students. From the beginning to the end of the unit, the students' attitudes slightly shifted from not enjoying writing at school to wanting more free writing opportunities in school. When examining academic writing next to free writing, most students separate the two writing styles, being more fluid in free writing and formulaic in their academic writing. Through this research, I determined that although free writing is effective in helping students express themselves, in my study, with the

time period permitted, it did not effectively translate into cultivating community or enhancing students' academic writing styles.

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## Appendix A- Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** The following survey will help me collect data on your approaches to writing. Please read each statement and circle the number that communicates your feelings about writing. Here is the scale:

- 1= Almost Always
- 2=Often
- 3=Sometimes
- 4=Seldom
- 5= Never

	Almost Always 1	Often 2	Sometimes 3	Seldom 4	Never 5
1. I like to write.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Writing is a tool I use to express myself	1	2	3	4	5
3. I like to write stories.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I like to write on Facebook or other social media.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I like to write at school.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I think I am a good writer.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I like to write with others	1	2	3	4	5
8. I would like more time to write at school.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I think it is important to know how to write well.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I like to share my writing with others.	1	2	3	4	5

**Short Answer**

1. How do you feel about the types of writing you have to do in school?

2. How do you feel about sharing your writing with your peers?

## Appendix B- Peer Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Peer Evaluation form

According to these categories, give each of your group members a rating. If you score a group member less than three, you must give a valid explanation.

- 1- seldom
- 2- occasionally
- 3- most of the time
- 4- consistently

- 1. Worked collaboratively on all parts of the task
- 2. Offered suggestions to improve the project
- 3. Volunteered to work independently on aspects of the project
- 4. Addressed conflict in the group positively
- 5. Complete an equal amount of work and participated fully in complete the project
- 6. Actively participated in the planning portion of the project
- 7. Respectful and polite to all group members
- 8. Used group timely wisely and remained focused

Group Members	Category rating	Comments
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	
	1- 2- 3- 4- 5- 6- 7- 8-	

## Appendix C- Project Description

### The Case of Charlie Gordon

#### Project Overview:

Imagine you and your classmates are researchers during Charlie's experiment. You will present a case study to examine the ethics of Charlie's case. This activity is called a case study because it requires in-depth research. The class will be divided into two groups- the pink group and the orange group. The pink group will prove how Charlie's case is ethically wrong and the orange group will prove how Charlie's case is ethically right.

#### Project Requirements:

- Minimum 5 pages (group essay)
- Minimum 5 sources
- Evaluation of sources used (use source sheet)
- Presentation- minimum 7 slides

#### Case Study Outline

- **Title**- a thoughtful title that captures the essence of the case study
  - **Abstract (Summary)**: one-to two paragraphs summing up the study. This answers who, what, when, where, why, and how. The summary introduces the project, questions, and hypothesis (where you state that the case is either ethically right or wrong.)
  - **Description of participant**: Character analysis of Charlie to give readers background information about the participant
- Analysis of study: a break down of the reasons why the case is ethically right/wrong. This covers the following topics
- Rorschach test validity
  - Patient's consent
  - Human testing/ animal testing
  - Emotional distress
  - Wild card- your group will determine another way to prove your argument
- **Conclusion**: a concise statement of how your analysis proves your groups' hypothesis
  - **Presentation**: Both groups will present their findings. At the end of both presentations, there will be a debate to determine the conclusion of the case. Due February 2

#### Project Approach:

This is a class project, meaning that it could be completed during the class period. There is a possibility that you might have to do outside work, if your group does not use their time effectively. I want you to use online tools to create your project such as Google Drive, Google Slide, and Padlet for prewriting. The entire purpose of the project is to work together as a team to come to a conclusion. At the end, all participants will take a peer evaluation before I determine grades.

## **Appendix D- Interview Questions**

### Interview Questions

1. What are your favorite activities to do in an English class?
2. How do you feel about writing?
3. Do you write outside of school? In what form? If not, why not?
4. How do you feel about free writing?
5. Do you prefer free writing or writing academically? Why?
6. What motivates you to write?
7. What did you learn from the group project?
8. How your attitude changed toward writing since we started free writing?
9. Did you like writing when you were younger? Why or why not?
10. When you get a writing assignment for English class, what is your initial reaction?



## Appendix E- IRB Certification



## **Vita**

Adrienne Tate is a native of Port Arthur, Texas and currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received a Bachelor's of Art in Journalism/Strategic Communication with a specialization in Public Relations. She has taught in Baton Rouge and surrounding rural parishes. As alum of Teach for America, Adrienne works relentlessly to provide educational opportunities for economically disadvantage students in her community. She has a strong belief in the possibility that all students will receive an excellent education regardless of environment and upbringing. She was accepted into The College of Human Sciences and Education majoring in Curriculum and Instruction- English education. She anticipates graduating with a Master in Education in May 2016. She plans to continue teaching and working in education reform.