

Writing Outside of School

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

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Writing Outside of School

Young people learn to write outside of school as well as in it. They participate actively in writing like this: A six-year-old in an after-school daycare program draws pictures of princesses and writes names like SNO WIT and CINDRLA to identify them. A fifth grader in a community center club teams up with two friends to compose a script for a play they will perform. Two middle schoolers keep and share online journals in which they write reviews of music and films. A teenager joins a group of his peers at 826 Valencia and reads his poem aloud. A college student who belongs to an environmental group posts a blog about the lack of recycling in the dining hall. Another college student writes regularly for an online zine focused on her favorite TV show.

Research shows that extracurricular or out-of-school writing draws on and adds strength to youngsters' social, cultural, and linguistic resources. Students can expand their social networks and negotiate complicated relationships through extracurricular writing. Students who come from homes where school is not highly valued can use writing to create connections between the two. Out-of-school writing can:

- Increase students' feelings of competence as writers
- Broaden audiences and purposes for writing
- Create continuity between home and school writing
- Reduce students' disaffection with school

In recognition of the importance and value of writing, the National Council of Teachers of English is establishing a National Day on Writing on October 20, 2009. On this day an electronic gallery, featuring writing by people of all ages and from all levels of education, will open. This gallery will display the wide variety of writing, including students' extracurricular writing, done by contributors across the nation, giving new and heightened visibility to writers and writing that researchers have been studying over the past two decades. To learn more about the National Gallery of Writing, see <http://www.galleryofwriting.org/>.

Contexts of Writing

Students learn to write in many contexts outside school.

The Internet, after-school programs, youth-focused organizations, and digital media provide spaces in which many students write regularly outside the classroom. In these contexts students often develop an understanding of audience, learn how to use the conventions of specific types or genres of writing, become more confident as writers, and develop effective ways to represent themselves. Receiving responses to writing they have put on the Internet helps students to imagine audience needs more clearly. Collaborating with others, receiving suggestions for revisions, and seeing models to emulate enable stu-



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dents to expand their repertoires for writing. Out-of-school writing gives students many choices and this, in turn, helps them feel confident and create identities for themselves as they write.¹

The ubiquity of digital technologies for writing means that students of all ages are drawn to compose with them. The elementary student who turns to *Webkinz* after school, the middle schooler who sends text messages to friends, and the young adult who writes stories online—all of these individuals are drawn into writing with technology, even though they may not name their activities as writing. In the 21st century, facility with digital texts is increasingly essential, and the digital medium, with its images, audio, and text, engages students at the same time that it helps them develop many ways of representing themselves and their ideas in writing.²

Further research on extracurricular writing will enhance the visibility of the resources students bring to school.

Studies conducted during the past two decades have shown that students bring to school many resources or “funds of knowledge” that remain invisible in the classroom. Students who show little engagement with school-based writing can be highly motivated by out-of-school writing projects, developing skills and insights that remain unknown to their teachers. The student who puts her head on her desk during class may compose excellent poems that she reads at her church. The student who disrupts class may write incisive dialogue for an after-school theater group. Extracurricular writing often draws directly on the writer’s home culture, giving positive reinforcement to students who may feel disaffected with school.³

Teachers of writing can be more effective when they understand and build upon students’ extracurricular composing.

Research shows that learning about writing in students’ home cultures leads to significant improvements in school-based writing instruction. Teachers benefit from learning about the purposes, types, and languages of the writing their students do and observe outside the classroom. Understanding extracurricular writing enables teachers to build upon skills students already have rather than dismissing students as deficient.⁴

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Recommendations for Policymakers

- Advocate for the development of spaces for extra-curricular writing, such as after-school programs that foster writing, family literacy programs that teach parents how to encourage their children to write, and organizations that provide computers for school-age writers
- Support research that will provide further information on how extracurricular writing can support school-based writing
- Fund professional development for teachers who need to learn more about how they can incorporate students’ out-of-school writing skills in the classroom

Endnotes

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