“Untold Stories to Tell”

MAKING SPACE FOR THE VOICES OF YOUTH SONGWRITERS

Wendy R. Williams

Studying out-of-school songwriting reveals exciting possibilities for English language arts classrooms.

Although it is a school night, the high school auditorium is packed for a talent show. The emcees introduce the next act. To the center of the stage, a young man moves and then lowers his head, listening intently. A recording of a Holocaust survivor plays over the sound system: “The world is not learning anything...racism, anti-Semitism, the starvation of children...day in, day out, week after week, and year after year, people kill each other...” Gradually, a simple yet strange guitar line fades in. It has a haunting quality. Then the beat starts.

Suddenly, the young man on stage wakes. With full force, he launches into a fast-paced rap about the Holocaust: “The boys were taught to avoid bein’ caught / they would not use restrooms, they assumed / there would be less doom if nobody ever knew / the truth, they were the first to die / They knew you were a Jew if you were circumcised.” He gestures for emphasis, almost nonstop, as he paces around the stage in sneakers and a track suit.

Although the performer is getting a workout, he appears relaxed and smooth, light on his feet and absolutely in his element.

Line after line is delivered with clear enunciation, an impressive feat considering the number of words per second. The crowd of high school students, teachers, and parents cheers after the first stanza. His last line seems to resonate with the crowd: “We don’t learn from our mistakes, all we do is repeat ‘em.”

“Whoa! Where did this guy come from?” someone whispers when the song ends. This is the first time they have seen this high school senior perform, even though some of the audience members have known him for years.

Sitting there in the dark, among this crowd, I cannot help but quietly wonder about the young man with the rap about the Holocaust—about the path that led him to this moment. Did school encourage or discourage these talents?

The answer matters to me not only as an English teacher but also as a former amateur songwriter. During my own youth, my affection for songwriting was seldom embraced by teachers, let alone nurtured in an English class. Apparently, this experience is not uncommon.

Why Study Songwriting?

For the first six years that I taught at a high school in a major urban city in the Southwest, our school did not have a talent show, so I decided to organize one for May 2010. Dozens of students at the school

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performed, among them singers, dancers, actors, and musicians. One year after that show, inspired by Paris's (2009, 2010, 2011) work on youth literacies, I conducted my own study of youth songwriting. One overarching research question and three subquestions guided my investigation:

What can ELA teachers learn about writing from two youth songwriters?
1. What motivates youth songwriters to write?
2. How do youth songwriters compose their texts (tools, processes, etc.)?
3. In what ways do school experiences support youth songwriters?

For this study, I recruited two rappers I met through the talent show: Bradley—from the vignette—and James. Pseudonyms are used for all names.

Research on Youth Literacy

In-school and out-of-school literacies have been widely examined within literacy studies for the past thirty years (Dyson, 2005; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Winn, 2010). In particular, the idea of third space (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004; Soja, 1996) is a useful construct for understanding youth literacies. The basic premise is that there is a school space, an out-of-school space, and a space where these two spheres of life overlap. To teach in the third space is to blur the distinction between in-school and out-of-school learning.

Alim (2007) has argued that students should have a role in shaping curriculum, and school walls should not divide spheres of learning. Additionally, students should be viewed “as the sources, investigators, and archivers of varied and rich bodies of knowledge rooted in their cultural-linguistic reality” (emphasis in original; p. 17). Songwriting can certainly serve as a powerful archiving tool. Through it, students record not only the issues that affect them but also the language in which they think about these issues.

Concerning the language of students, Morrell (2005) has explained that “critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation” (p. 313). Furthermore, Kinloch (2005) has demonstrated the need for teachers to respect the language of students’ cultures, homes, and interests.

Mahiri (2004) has shown how street scripts, works that writers produce in response to their lived experiences, support the language of students. For example, these scripts might take the form of plays or lyrics and discuss violence or other problems the author has witnessed in his or her life. An authentic voice adds to the power of these works.

Spoken word poetry (Fisher, 2005, 2007) is a form that allows young people to discuss issues in their own language. Through this performance poetry, the artist can be critical of the problems in the community while simultaneously expressing optimism and helping audiences imagine new futures (Sutton, 2004). Songwriting, which is closely related to spoken word poetry, can also be critical, cathartic, and visionary. Songwriting can even foster resiliency, as Kinney (2012) has found.

Some scholars have investigated the effects of using songs in classrooms, mostly through students’ analyses of professionally published material. For example, Hill (2009) studied the effects of a hip-hop literature course in one high school. Some of the students in the class had “painful encounters with forces of inequality and marginalization that had not been previously articulated or critically examined” (p. 72). Kirkland (2008) also advocates for the study of hip-hop lyrics in the English classroom “to help students make sense of the world and make meaning of their lived situations” (p. 74).

Along with Hill and Kirkland, I see the potential for using published songs in classrooms. I also wonder how schools might bring students’ own songwriting into the third space. My study adds to previous scholarship by considering songwriter motivation, writing practices, and school experiences and then imagining new curricular possibilities for secondary English classrooms.

Songwriter Participants

Bradley and James were both 18 years old and college freshmen when I recruited them for this study. Although I was an English teacher at their high school for seven years, I did not meet them until April of their senior year, when they auditioned for the talent show. They performed
one duet for that show, as well as one solo song each.

After graduation, Bradley kept in touch with me through e-mail, periodically sending music updates. He saw me as a sponsor (Brandt, 1998) of his work because I had hosted the talent show. I eventually selected him to participate in this study of youth songwriting based on the sophistication of his songs, including his use of allusion, rhyming, and vocabulary. Shortly after Bradley joined the study, he recommended his former songwriting partner, James, who uses similar techniques.

Bradley is a creative-writing major at a university that is located about 200 miles from where he went to high school. He describes his racial background as a mix of 20 different ethnicities, including Korean and Italian, but sums himself up as an “Asian rapper.” He says, “It’s more interesting hearing what [other people] think I am” (interview, March 17, 2011).

Teachers describe Bradley as polite, hardworking, quiet, and internally focused. In interviews, Bradley made repeated references to being Christian. In fact, his religion is a significant part of his identity, and to ignore that detail is to miss a major motivation for his music. Bradley sometimes performs songs at his church, and he can imagine himself doing missionary work someday.

James, who is white, is an art education major at a university about 20 miles from where he went to high school. One former English teacher who still has some of his book posters remembered that James “saw everything in the context of art” (interview with Ms. Flores, April 27, 2011). In addition to winning a prestigious art contest while in high school, James has experienced some success as a songwriter. He recently signed a contract for a record deal and now records in a professional studio.

One former teacher remembered James as outspoken, practical, and smart. He is someone with presence. It is no coincidence that James was a camp counselor and advisor to freshmen when he was in high school. James likes to help others, and he looks forward to being a teacher, even as he pursues a music career. [Note: To honor their potential music careers and maintain their anonymity, I do not cite song titles in this study.]

Data Collection
I used a case-study approach (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011) for this study and gathered data over the course of one year (February 2011 to February 2012). I conducted four in-depth interviews (Brenner, 2006), two with each songwriter participant. These semistructured (Merriam, 2009) interviews were audio recorded and each lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Interviews were held in locations of the participants’ choosing, either coffee shops or university facilities. The interview protocol included 36 questions: (a) 10 background items (What are your interests and hobbies?), (b) 19 songwriting items (Talk about the vocabulary you choose for your songs.), and (c) 7 education items (How has school affected your songwriting?).

To gain perspective through multiple sources, or to achieve triangulation, I also interviewed two of their former English teachers. In April 2011, I met with Ms. Flores, who taught sophomore English to both Bradley and James. I took notes at this brief, unrecorded interview.

In February 2012, I conducted an e-mail interview with Mr. Smith, who lives out of state. I added Mr. Smith to the study because Bradley repeatedly mentioned this junior-year English teacher in interviews. Teacher interviews addressed memories of the songwriters (How do you remember Bradley?) and class activities related to songwriting (Did you assign songwriting?).

I also collected 101 artifacts, works produced by the participants. These artifacts were mostly written lyrics or recorded music (MP3 songs) but also included promotional material (announcements of concerts or albums, performance footage, and links to their artist webpages) and other writing (religious testimonies from Bradley and poetry advocacy pieces from James).

Because I encouraged Bradley and James to send along any writing they wanted to share with me over the course of the study, there was some variation in the pieces I received. Typically, participants e-mailed artifacts immediately after an interview, but I occasionally wrote to them to request material, or they sent me things as part of a mass e-mail to supporters. (See Table for a complete list of artifacts collected.)
Data Analysis
As I worked with the corpus of data, I used grounded theory and constant comparison methods (Charmaz, 1983; Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for an inductive and recursive approach. Systematically analyzing the different data sources required several stages. I used open coding with the songwriter interview transcripts (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Merriam, 2009), and then I sorted coded items into categories.

As I next read over the teacher interviews, I was particularly on the lookout for confirming or disconfirming evidence, a check against the songwriter interviews. I again coded and sorted, using existing categories and adding new categories as necessary.

Then I turned to the artifacts, noting significant themes, details, and techniques as I viewed, or listened to, each piece multiple times. After writing notes for all 101 artifacts, I analyzed the artifact notes together, again coding, sorting, and combining.

The categories that resulted from the songwriter interviews, teacher interviews, and songwriter artifacts support three robust areas: (1) songwriter motivation, (2) writing practices, and (3) school experiences. In the sections that follow, I will share findings from each area.

Songwriter Motivation
To understand the motivation behind Bradley’s and James’s songwriting, I asked them about their writing purposes and examined their music for recurring themes. In interviews, they discussed multiple writing purposes, including writing to communicate, to relate to others, to help others, to preach (Bradley), to create awe or inspiration, to fulfill themselves, to escape, or to vent.

James joked about writing to get girls, but he also mentioned writing to annoy an ex-girlfriend. I noticed that Bradley and James rarely discussed writing to entertain others, as if that alone was not enough. In one interview, I asked James if writing helped him in other areas of his life. He responded,

Writing, as a guy, I don’t like having a diary. I will never carry a diary, so I write music. I write music to get things off my chest. I write music to get a message across. I write music to relax myself, to calm myself, to get anger out... it definitely helps with clearing your head out while at the same time it will fill your head with more, which is very frustrating. But, yeah. It helps a lot. Not to mention, you get ladies all day—like, here’s my poem I just wrote for you. What’s up? (interview, June 16, 2011)

His answer is interesting on many levels. Notice that James suggests songwriting is more masculine than diary writing. Also, James enumerates several writing purposes in his response, including writing for therapy (it “helps with clearing your head out”) and writing to learn (“while at the same time it will fill your head with more”). With so many reasons to write, it is no wonder that these two young men are prolific songwriters who have written multiple albums.

Their motivation to write is also apparent in the themes of their songs. One theme that recurs in both artists’ works is a desire to make the world a better place. Consider the following song excerpt, in which Bradley argues that acceptance of all people is a crucial first step in improving society:

This message is for illiterates and intellectuals
To liberals, conservatives, straights and homosexuals
If we’re ever gonna live together, and benefit this world
It must start with you, men and women, boys and girls

Bradley argues that, despite our differences, we need to work together. Other songs show empathy. In one song, Bradley writes, “It hurts inside when you’re not treated as equal / Keep that in mind next time you wanna humiliate people.” Fed up with racism,
James argues, “Now here’s a thought, that all the kids should be taught / We’re equal no matter what color skin that you got.”

Often their work grapples with issues such as racism, bullying, gang violence, and rape—real problems present in their communities. At the same time, they confront social injustices occurring within larger systems. For example, James launches into powerful criticisms such as this one: “It’s a lie to say we’re equal in size / ’Cuz if you’re white you’re rich and if you’re black you die.”

James also faults parents for not turning things around: “I despise all the pigeons who believe it and swallow it / And teach the crap to [their] kids, who just take it all in / And now they’ve already ruined the next generation.” Songs act as a platform for these young adults to speak up and talk back. Their desire to improve the world reverberates throughout their music.

Additional themes in their songs reveal other motives. Bradley’s post–high school work is very much religiously motivated. His first solo album is dedicated to God, and all 15 tracks have religious messages. Choruses include lines like “We have been chosen to show you that He loves you” and “He will return.” In this album, it is clear that Bradley’s main goal is to preach.

James, on the other hand, gets autobiographical in his works. When he writes, “She lost one to a Chevy, and the other to prison,” he is writing—from the perspective of his mother—about the loss of his youngest brother, who was run over by a car, and the loss of his older brother, who is in prison. Expressing anger over his father’s absence, James states, “The greatest thing you ever did for me was up and leave,” and he gives great stress to this line in the recorded version of the song (it is louder and carefully enunciated). These examples show how James uses lyrics to document life experiences, blurring the distinction between song and journal. The themes in both artists’ songs are fairly consistent with the writing purposes they discussed in interviews.

Examining Bradley’s and James’s songwriting motivation suggests much about songwriting and third space. Perhaps most important, these two songwriters care deeply about the issues they write about outside the classroom. Their writing has purpose. Inside the classroom is a different story. In school, they do their work, but they are much less engaged. As studies have shown (Moje et al., 2004), bringing students’ out-of-school practices into the classroom can lead to increased motivation and performance. Making space for students’ out-of-school literacies in the ELA classroom is vital.

Through Bradley’s and James’s writing, we can also see how songwriting could be used for critical English education (Morrell, 2005), curriculum that empowers students in conversation with social issues. Whether lyrics are written on songwriters’ own time or are analyzed by students within a class (Hill, 2009), songs can be a useful medium for the important work of social critique.

Teachers may also be interested in James’s perception of gendered writing. In Robb’s (2010) surveys of writers in the middle grades, she discovered that boys are less likely to discuss their feelings in journals: “More than twice as many girls (67.3%) write about their feelings in journals than boys (30.3%). Boys tend to write about their lives” (p. 11). Male students might enjoy an option to express their feelings in lyrical form instead.

Finally, teachers may be interested in Bradley’s and James’s many writing purposes, especially writing to learn. As Gallagher (2006) has written: “The act of writing itself creates new thinking” (p. 21). Making clear the many benefits of writing, such as writing as therapy and writing to learn, might motivate students to embrace writing identities. Paying attention to students’ writing motivation seems immensely useful to teachers.

**Writing Practices**

If I’m having a conversation, like with you right now, and lyrics come to my mind, and there’s something I can’t pass up, I will literally stop and find a piece of paper and write it. I’m not as bad as [Bradley], but I’m pretty close. (interview with James, June 16, 2011)

As James demonstrates in this excerpt, he is always on call as a songwriter. Inspiration can strike at any moment, so he tries to be prepared. This section examines some of Bradley’s and James’s writing practices, including their writing tools, time, and space as well as their writing methods.

Their writing tools reflect their seriousness as songwriters. When they leave the house, Bradley and James usually carry a notebook and pen, just as a professional writer might carry a writer’s notebook (Rief, 2007). When ideas strike at work, James writes them on the back of restaurant tickets and later slips these into his thick black book of lyrics.
They prefer composing on computers, however. Bradley stores new words and rhymes on his laptop and files away lyric fragments that are not ready to be songs. James writes on his computer because it has everything he needs: music, dictionary, and Internet for research.

In addition to carefully selecting their tools, these songwriters make time to write each week. “I keep my schedule open so I can just work on music,” Bradley said (interview, April 3, 2011). James also sets aside time to write and will stay up as late as 4:30 a.m. to finish a song.

Still, they respect that their control over creativity is limited. “Inspiration doesn’t have a schedule,” James said (interview, June 16, 2011). Bradley agrees, adding that occasionally he is not ready for a song: “Maybe today it won’t be the moment where I’m ready to say that. Maybe I gotta learn something else before” (interview, March 17, 2011).

A third way they prepare to write is by situating themselves in the right environment. In fact, I noticed that their preferred writing environments mirror their personalities. Bradley, who is more introverted, writes lyrics alone in the university library.

James has a different approach. He generally likes to “be in the real world” when writing. James believes that noisy places are good for writer’s block and that quiet classrooms are “the worst” (interview, June 16, 2011). He also thinks his writing space influences his writing. Both songwriters seem to carefully consider their writing tools, time, and space.

The songwriters also discussed their writing methods. When they sit down to write, they do not outline. Instead, they get the first line of the song down, and the rest progresses from there. Often they do not know where they will go. James said,

Start with a line. Go with it. Don’t plan too far ahead...[see] what works well that rhymes with that last line....It’s a stepping stone....It’s not like you need one bridge to get to the end. You need rocks to get across the river. Each one is just as important as the last. (interview, March 30, 2011)

Bradley agrees: “Once I started it...the song just wrote itself because I just had to rhyme with the previous line, you know?” (interview, April 3, 2011). Both remarked that this preference to jump in and write the first line sometimes conflicted with their high school experiences.

Although these songwriters were often required to outline or do other prewriting in school, scholars acknowledge multiple ways of generating ideas and text, including discovery drafting (Bullock & Goggin, 2010). Romano (1987) also supports “personal writing processes that are productive” (p. 83). Bradley’s and James’s writing methods appear to work for their songwriting.

The process of writing lyrics is mostly a solo endeavor for Bradley and James. Even when they were in a group with a third rapper back in high school, they prided themselves on each writing the parts that they rapped. They wanted their words to be their own. However, it is worth pointing out that putting their lyrics to music often involves collaboration. They bring in back-up singers, use others’ beats, and perform with other rappers, for example. Also, they get feedback by maintaining artist webpages and posting songs and videos. A similar mixture of independent work and collaboration could be replicated in the English language arts (ELA) classroom.

These songwriters’ writing practices suggest much to ELA teachers about songwriting and third space. To begin with, motivated writers like these two make time to write, and they may stay up late for their voluntary writing. They also have strong preferences regarding their writing tools, settings, and processes. Given this, ELA teachers might inquire about students’ out-of-school writing practices, look for ways to differentiate instruction, and strive to craft rewarding and meaningful assignments. For example, students could choose a nonfiction book on an artist or topic that appeals to their out-of-school pursuits. Students might form writing groups, according to their interests, and meet periodically during class to share their work. Creating a third space does not have to be tedious. It involves learning about students’ voluntary writing and looking for ways to welcome those practices into schools. A third space blurs distinctions between in-school and out-of-school learning.

Students may need assistance bringing their out-of-school identities, practices, and materials into a third space. To help, peer-response sessions, so useful for generating feedback on a piece, can also serve as a scaffold for entry into a larger third space. Sharing in pairs is a safe way for students to test out their work, a type of micro–third space, which can ease the transition into the larger venue of the classroom or school.
School Experiences

This last findings section shares how Bradley and James were influenced by their school experiences and how they, in turn, inspired at least one teacher. Bradley, in particular, recalled several positive school experiences.

In Ms. Flores’s sophomore English class, both songwriters studied the book *Night*, Elie Wiesel’s gripping record of Holocaust survival. Bradley was so moved by the book that he wrote a song about the Holocaust, which he performed in the talent show. Fragments of this song can be seen in the opening anecdote, as well as in the following excerpt:

Picture your best friend standin’ next to you  
Subject to death in less than a second or two  
I can’t fathom what it’s like when nobody’ll help  
Like havin’ no voice with untold stories to tell.

I find this excerpt interesting because Bradley leaves a trace of himself as storyteller in these lines, comparing the absence of help to the silencing of stories. Perhaps even more fascinating, however, is that Bradley composed a song about the Holocaust, fully researched, outside school (i.e., not for school credit). Vivid literature can impact students in powerful ways.

Another school highlight for Bradley was studying vocabulary. He remembers writing rap lines instead of sentences with vocabulary words and performing short vocabulary skits with friends. One English teacher noticed Bradley’s fondness for vocabulary and gave him the book *Vicious Vocabulary* “because [Bradley] always picked up that book and leafed through it before and after class” (e-mail interview with Mr. Smith, February 28, 2012).

Another positive school experience for Bradley was Mr. Smith’s bell work, writing prompts designed to get students to write a lot in the first five minutes of each class. Mr. Smith allowed Bradley to respond to these prompts in lyrical form. Though this modification seems small, it was an important one for the student.

Mahiri (2004) has supported giving writers a choice in format: “To really hear their voices, we have to tune into the actual mediums and contexts that they appropriate for expression” (p. 19). Acknowledging students’ preferred forms can bridge in-school and out-of-school literacies.

Despite these positive experiences, Bradley and James found school frustrating. They both noted that their schooling included too much routine and repetition. James said, “If I’m told to do something I’ve done at least a hundred times since first grade, I’m not going to want to do it” (interview, March 30, 2011). He cited bell work as dependably dull.

Bradley struggled with overly structured writing assignments, and he still dislikes writing formal research papers, which is ironic because his rhyme patterns are highly structured and he conducts plenty of research for his songs. Overall, both felt that school was not designed to support their songwriting.

In one instance, however, they created a third space themselves. Bradley returned to his former sophomore English teacher, Ms. Flores, to deliver an album that he and James wrote. Ms. Flores recalled her response to their music: “That was more than I heard [Bradley] talk all year” (interview, April 27, 2011). It completely changed her perception of them. As a result, she decided it was necessary to expand the scope of her poetry unit and allow students to write lyrics as part of that unit. “They made me more aware that our kids have gifts and talents that we’ll never see,” Ms. Flores reported (interview, April 27, 2011). Knowing these songwriters gave her a deeper appreciation for students’ out-of-school endeavors.

Although this exchange happened between a former student and teacher, it is nevertheless an example of a student’s out-of-school literacy practices entering the school space. In the third space that resulted, both parties gained something: Bradley gained confidence and a sponsor; Ms. Flores learned about youth songwriting.

Considering Bradley’s and James’s school experiences may give ELA teachers some ideas about songwriting in the third space. Some ways to bridge songwriting with ELA curriculum include allowing students to respond to novels with songs, fusing songwriting and new vocabulary, and being flexible with the format of journals.

I specifically asked Bradley and James for advice to pass along to teachers, and they suggested letting students choose topics within an assigned category (e.g., categories such as the past, a secret, an aspiration, a greatest love, a regret, a current issue). Comparing English assignments to those in art, James recommended encouraging freedom within a
structure: “If you were to exemplify your best...writing in two pages, that would be the greatest thing” (interview, March 30, 2011). (See Figure for a way to use this suggestion in class.) Indeed, much work in English education (Gallagher, 2006; Graves, 1994; Robb, 2010) supports their call for choice in writing.

Discussion

Bringing songwriting into schools is not a new idea. For example, Kaiden and Walker (1985) documented how collaborative groups composed raps with new vocabulary. Cooks (2004) used both rap and essay writing and then engaged students in a discussion about the different conventions of each form. During a Canterbury Tales unit, Lynch’s (2007) class composed a rap CD. During a unit on activism, Singer’s (2006) students used songs. These examples illustrate the wide variation with which songwriting can be used, from reinforcing vocabulary and distinguishing writing genres to engaging with literature and taking a stand.

Using songwriting in the third space can have many benefits, including validating students’ out-of-school literacy practices. Bradley reported that preparing for the talent show gave his songwriting focus and seriousness. It also gave him confidence, especially when students he did not know approached him after the talent show to express their admiration.

In a third space, songwriting can galvanize ELA curriculum, drawing on elements as diverse as rhyme, rhythm, wordplay, style, storytelling, point of view, meter, metaphor, personification, symbol, title, hook,

FIGURE Bringing James’s Ideal Writing Assignment to Life: The Writers’ Circle

One way I made space for songwriters in my own classroom was with a writers’ circle. Sitting in a big circle, my high school sophomores and I each shared a final draft of a two-page piece of writing with the class. Students had selected their own topics and genres.

Their works were interesting, varied, and meaningful, and they included an essay about Facebook, a poem about a father’s incarceration, a humorous science fiction story, a song about a brother’s suicide, and a rap about inspiration that also alluded to our magical realism unit. While many memorable works were shared in that circle, students regarded the songs as something special.

To ensure student feedback on each piece, we rolled balls across the circle to select two people to comment aloud after each reading. Since presenters brought two copies of their work, I was able to write comments on one printout while they presented from the other. Scoring each piece was simplified with a holistic six-trait rubric.

An important function of the writers’ circle is that it creates an audience beyond the writer and teacher. Fulwiler (1987) has argued that student writers should compose for wider audiences. Furthermore, National Writing Project and Nagin (2003) reported, “An effective assignment goes beyond the use of a ‘pretend’ audience and offers the student a genuine opportunity to communicate to a real audience” (p. 48). A writers’ circle is a great venue for communicating meaningful writing to authentic audiences.

Several times, student feedback in the circle addressed improvements made since peer-response sessions. “I like how you changed…” was a common response. It seems that peer-response sessions, which consisted of 20–30 minutes of reading a rough draft and then giving feedback with an eye toward the six traits, actually served as an entry point into the third space. Writers could test out their out-of-school material safely, with just one other student at a time.

The writers’ circle is one way to make space in the ELA classroom for songwriting. See the Take Action sidebar for additional suggestions for supporting songwriters in school.
repetition, attitude, and audience (Bradley, 2009; Braheny, 2006; Davis, 1992; Pattison, 2009). These elements could be taught in minilessons, perhaps within a writing workshop format (Atwell, 1998), and students could practice using concepts in their choice of medium, perhaps in a song, story, or blog. As these examples show, third space can be used as a bridge to provide “opportunities for success in traditional school learning while also making a space for typically marginalized voices” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 44).

Moje and colleagues (2004) have also demonstrated that third space pedagogy can support students and teachers in interrogating and reenvisioning curriculum together. One example can be seen in Bradley’s Holocaust song. Both a research product and a rap, it weaves together facts, critique, personal connections, and lyrical sophistication. It is a hybrid form representing both in-school and out-of-school learning, and it raises interesting questions about the best ways for students to demonstrate learning.

When students are able to bring their out-of-school literacies into the classroom, the curriculum becomes more relevant. We saw this benefit when Ms. Flores adjusted her poetry unit in light of what she learned about the songwriting of her former students. Learning in the third space is meaningful for teachers as well as students.

Some teachers may hesitate to embrace songwriting. Since the Common Core State Standards emphasize efferent reading and responding, teachers might see songwriting in the ELA classroom as superfluous. However, Bradley’s Holocaust song is rich in content. In fact, the work demonstrates that careful efferent reading can culminate in creative expression accessible to real audiences. Songwriting and efferent reading can work together.

Another concern teachers may have is that not all students will be interested in songwriting. One way to handle this situation is to expose students to many forms of writing and, when it is appropriate to the course objective, allow students to select the form they will use to demonstrate their learning. Sweeney (2010) has suggested, “Rather than require all students to write a five-paragraph essay, teachers can assign a written piece meant to persuade, but the piece may include video images, music, and the student narrating a persuasive rap” (p. 127).

Cooks (2004) has argued that students “must learn not to think of writing in a hierarchical structure but rather to think of all types of writing as being

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Take Action

**STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION**

**Some ways to encourage songwriting in class:**

- Help students track their writing territories (Atwell, 1998), adding new topics as they occur.
- Use journals or a writer’s notebook (Rief, 2007), allowing students some choice in format.
- Analyze published lyrics together.
- Read interviews of famous songwriters. See Songwriters on Songwriting (Zollo, 2003) for examples.
- Study literary elements through minilessons (Atwell, 1998) and practice using the elements in writing/songwriting. Minilessons might cover allusion, metaphor, simile, symbol, repetition, rhyme, leads, or titles.
- Respond to literature through a choice of projects, including songwriting.
- Compile creative writing portfolios and artist statements explaining choices made.
- Write to promote writing. As the Table shows, songwriting generates additional writing, including album inserts, promotional announcements, video scripts, and artist websites.
- Hold a writers’ circle, as explained in the Figure. Each student brings a polished two-page piece—any topic, any genre—to share aloud with the group.
- Share songs, as Lynch’s (2007) students did, through a class CD. Some online alternatives include posting to a closed class wiki or using an open site for musicians, such as www.reverbnation.com.

**Some ways to encourage songwriting on campus:**

- Host a talent show. Perhaps reach out to other groups on campus. Theater students could run the stage and emcee the event, student council could sell tickets, and media classes could make commercials.
- Consider adding a “lyrics” category to your school’s poetry contest, perhaps even accepting recorded submissions.
- Start a songwriting club. This group could meet monthly and share works in progress.
equally valid” (p. 76). Exposure to multiple genres, and the conventions of each, can empower students. Adding songwriting need not happen at the expense of the academic essay.

The challenge for teachers is to learn about students’ out-of-school writing and to find ways to advance that writing while simultaneously meeting curricular goals. To teach in the third space is to embrace students’ identities and interests and to consider whether school is supporting students as much as it could.

This study shows that Bradley and James divide their writing selves according to the physical space they occupy, whether in school or out of school. Such tension suggests potential for a hybrid of the two, a third space, where learning is both relevant and exciting. As Moje and colleagues (2004) have emphasized, “a commitment to third space demands a suspicion of binaries” (p. 42). In a hybrid space, teachers and students imagine new curricular possibilities together.

As we have seen in this study, investigating songwriting motivation, writing practices, and school experiences can give ELA teachers new insights about writing instruction. Work remains to be done with multiple youth songwriters in high school classrooms, examining the impact of songwriting instruction and events. After all, my study is limited by its small size, the variation in artifacts collected, and the use of retrospection to comment on high school experiences.

I will close by quoting the lyrics of a young adult writer. Indeed, lyrics themselves can pose the best arguments for making space for songwriting in the ELA classroom. Two lines from Bradley’s Holocaust song could be read as speaking on behalf of songwriters in schools. Recall that Bradley writes, “I can’t fathom what it’s like when nobody’ll help / Like havin’ no voice with untold stories to tell.” In the third space, these voices of youth songwriters are heard. And they are cultivated.

References


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**More to Explore**

**CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES**

**READWRITETHINK.ORG LESSON PLANS**


**ONLINE FORUM FOR SONGWRITERS**

- BandCamp: [www.bandcamp.com](http://www.bandcamp.com)

**SONGWRITING GUIDES**