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Feedback in Online Writing Forums: Effects on Adolescent Writers

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Adolescents are writing online. A cursory look at the web reveals that teenagers are well-represented: in blog posts, social media updates, profile pages, comments on YouTube videos, responses to news articles, and websites about their interests, teenagers are writing. Williams (2009) has examined these pervasive contexts and proposed several motivations for adolescent online writing, some of which include constructing identity, connecting socially, harnessing the power of collective intelligence, and expressing emotion. While writing teachers of the past were hard pressed to craft assignments that reflected a real audience to whom students could write, now "it would be foolish to assume that a secondary or university student would lack experience in writing for varied audiences" (Williams 2009, 30). In the current research study, the specific kind of adolescent writing under consideration is writing posted in a social media context designed specifically for writers. In such a context, writing is not shared in order to vocalize opinions or convey content; rather, forums are designed as environments where writers can upload their writing for other members of the site to read and provide feedback in response. Writers anticipate an authentic audience, i.e. actual readers who themselves identify as writers.

This paper features an examination of students' experiences of submitting writing to online communities in order to shed light on how making writing public in a community, and how receiving feedback from "writing peers" affects students' self-conception as writers. One particular writing community, called *Critique Circle*, was chosen for consideration because of its unique combination of features, two of which include a guarantee that writers will receive a definitive number of critiques, and that critiques must live up to certain standards. The research study questions to be explored include: a) Who participates in online writing communities? b) Why do people participate in online writing communities? and c) What do the members of online writing communities report about the effects of their participation in such communities?

The answers to these questions may determine what it is about writers and about online writing communities which encourages voluntary writing, and unsolicited requests for feedback on writing; the answers may also shed light on whether writing improvement is a product of participation in an online writing community, and what factors lead to this improvement. If an online writing community is a place where writers learn, then its characteristics and procedures may constitute a model which can be useful

in developing an informal pedagogy of teaching writing. This informal pedagogy, used in the context of school writing classes, may serve to develop and encourage adolescent writers.

Literature Review
Digital Writing

DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl and Hicks (2009, 7) define digital writing as "compositions created with, and oftentimes for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet." As adolescents engage in digital writing in its many forms, their activity represents a "thoughtful, complex, and critical set of practices," (Williams 2009, 192), and a massive amount of learning about literacy. Over the last ten years, the opportunities for adolescents to write online have exploded exponentially, in line with the increase in the availability of online writing tools, wireless access, a variety of devices for writing, and multiple means for sharing writing; these changes reflect not only how we compose text, but our very conceptions of writing, and of writers themselves (DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl and Hicks 2009).

The digital writing under consideration for the purposes of this study takes place in one specific environment where adolescent writing is found, i.e. the online writing community. Such a community can be characterized as an informal learning context, an affinity space, and a training ground. The online writing community resonates as an informal learning context when compared with a framework outlined by Callanan, Cervantes and Loomis (2011). These authors distinguish informal learning as removed from any connections with didactic teaching, and devoid of any official assessment process which could result in crucial repercussions, i.e. grades which determine whether a person passes or fails a course. Key elements of informal learning include social collaboration, and deep meaning making. Fundamentally, engagement in informal learning springs from the learners' own interests and ambitions, independent of any external expectations (Callanan, Cervantes and Loomis 2011). The online writing community can also be designated as an affinity space (Gee 2004; Black 2008). In such a space, "people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class" (Gee 2005, 225). The common ground which draws a community of writers together online is their desire to share writing and get feedback on their writing.

Most of the members in online writing communities are amateur writers, or budding professional writers who are looking to hone their craft. One subgroup of *Critique Circle* is called the CC Thick Skin Club, and consists of members who welcome brutally honest critiques. As one research participant who is a member of that club wrote, "I don't want flowery, 'good-for-you!' fluff. I want both fists on the chin, full-on opinions on my posts. If it sucks, I need to know." While not all members wish for harsh critiques from fellow writers, most see the online community as a sort of training ground where their writing can be shared in first a limited context, revised and enhanced, and then shared in a wider context. They seek feedback from those whom Williams (2009) has dubbed "beta readers." Beta readers have access to a text before it is released to the wider public. Their job is to provide responses which can inform writers about potential revisions which could make the writing better before full publication, or perhaps, to

prepare it for publication. Writers and their beta readers in an online community share text, responses and ideas, but also, often develop long-term social connections, and sometimes deep friendships with one another (Williams 2009).

The common characteristic of all online writing communities is the provision of a platform for writers to submit their writing for the purpose of getting feedback. This study is concerned with the motivations for seeking such feedback, and the results of receiving such feedback. The concept of writing as a social practice where feedback from others is integral to the writing process is certainly not new. In 1973, Elbow described writing as "a transaction with other people. Writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else's head. If you wish to improve your writing you must also learn to do more business with other people" (Elbow 1973, 76).

Feedback

Since Elbow's 1973 writing, which emphasized reader-based feedback as opposed to criterion-based feedback, research concerning both types of feedback and their effects on writing has continued (Peterson 2010; Riel, Rhoads and Ellis 2006, Topping 1998; Zheng 2012). Summarizing the power of feedback, Butler and Winne (1995) claim that "feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies" (5740). Feedback gives writers information about where their readers are led astray or puzzled by any number of factors including lack of adequate information, disorganization, undeveloped concepts, or incongruous word choices (Keh 1990).

Benefits of Feedback

Feedback on writing is important, as established by Hattie and Timperley (2007), who demonstrated its effectuality on student writing achievement in conjunction with a variety of other factors; notably, certain types of feedback were attributed to more potent positive effects than others. Writers experience feedback as a force which guides their approach to writing, and their plans to achieve writing goals (Locke and Latham 1990). Feedback is the fuel that keeps the writing process moving forward (Keh 1990).

Teacher vs. Peer Feedback

As compared to peer feedback, teacher feedback has been highlighted as sophisticated, knowledgeable, trustworthy, professional, and empathetic (Gielen et al. 2010); teachers are said to have a particular, innate knowledge of what kind of feedback works most effectively. This is partially due to their experience delivering feedback, and with their thorough awareness of the success criteria for the writing assignments they craft (Gielen et al. 2010). It is possible, however, that students do not always fully appreciate the virtues of teacher feedback. Consider the Nystrand and Brandt (1989) study which found that students classified teacher feedback as judgmental, and that corresponding revisions focused primarily on vocabulary and the arrangement of words and phrases. Peer feedback, in contrast, was viewed by students as a collaborative process in which they were active communicators. Revisions based on peer feedback were

perceived by writers as opportunities to re-think their work in light of how their readers experienced it, and to reconsider their own purpose for writing; writers who received feedback from peers tended to exhibit a more positive attitude toward writing (Nystrand & Brandt 1989). Furthermore, peers, by virtue of the fact that they tend to outnumber teachers, may be able to provide greater amounts of personalized, timely feedback to a few of their colleagues in the same time period as a teacher could provide to everyone in the class (Topping 1998).

These perspectives of teacher feedback and peer feedback highlight some of their unique potential benefits; it is irrational to categorically declare one kind of feedback either ideal or terrible, since so much depends on an individual teacher, or on an individual peer who is giving feedback in a specific circumstance. The current research study concerning an online writing community showcases a distinct context in which the unique benefits of both peer and teacher feedback might be realized at once.

Online Feedback

The context of this study, i.e. a distributed online community, calls for a unique definition of the "peer" in peer feedback. For the purpose of this study, peers will refer to a group of writers who have gathered online in an affinity space (Gee 2004). In accordance with the earlier discussion in this literature review, affinity space peers do not identify along lines of age, race, or social class, but as a group with the common interests of writing, sharing writing, and improving writing. Connecting online with a group of writers for the express purpose of obtaining feedback brings to mind the "teacherless writing classes" first suggested by Elbow in 1973, and reiterated in a subsequent edition of the same book in 1998. The students of teacherless classes are writers who meet regularly with a group of committed others to receive feedback on their writing. Decades later, the concept of meeting online with a digital writing community is Elbow's vision, amplified. Admittedly, one of the crucial advantages of the teacherless writing class is the ability to observe physical reactions to writing, and this is not possible in the context of an online writing community. Still, a key tenet put forth by Elbow (1973), i.e. that social construction leads to good writing, is the heartbeat of *Critique Circle*, as well as other online writing communities. The primary limitation of Elbow's teacherless writing class is geographical constraint, since he proposes that writers meet together in a one physical location, weekly, in order to discuss writing. The online writing community is not subject to such restrictions. The distributed nature of the community provides a measure of convenience since traveling to meet with fellow writers is no longer necessary. The previously unrealized possibility of connecting with writers who do not live in close proximity is now fulfilled in the online context. In addition, the online context has the distinct advantage of worldwide membership which adds a fresh, multicultural flavour to the feedback soup.

Most research about online feedback has been done in the context of reciprocal peer feedback communities set up for learners engaged in a common course such as a MOOC (Massively Open Online Course), or smaller online course. Examples of tools used to facilitate peer feedback in course environments include Sword, (Scaffolded Writing and Rewriting in the Disciplines), created at the University of Pittsburg, Eli, developed at Michigan State University, and CPR (Callibrated Peer Review), from the

University of California. All three platforms are designed for use in classrooms, either face to face or online classrooms, where students are striving toward the same coursework goals. Within *Critique Circle*, the online environment being considered in this study, the members are not part of an online course, nor are they working toward the common goal of completing comparable assignments. While members may have some common goals such as getting their work to be noticed by publishers, or making a living as writers, their paths toward these goals are extremely different. Divergence characterizes the genres, topics, and trajectories of the writing in an online community, and none of that writing will undergo standardized, formal assessment. The unifying factor which all *Critique Circle* members have in common is a love for writing and a desire to see writing progress.

Methodology
Context

A brief review of a number of online writing communities was first conducted in order to uncover their characteristics, features and processes for facilitating feedback. Upon investigation, six particular aspects of *Critique Circle* (*CC*) were found to suggest potential applications in educational contexts, and therefore, it was chosen as the primary context of this particular research study. The community is found online at www.critiquecircle.com.

Critique Circle represents a vibrant community which has been active online for over ten years. Currently, the activity on the site includes between 900 and 1300 writing entries submitted per month, and between 4500 and 5500 critiques submitted per month. At the time of this investigation, the site has over 3000 active members and has facilitated the submission of over 80 000 stories, and over 400 000 critiques in total. *CC* is also noncommercial and free. The site is not associated with any specific publishing company, and there is no fee to join or to experience the core feature set of the site. First designed in Iceland by Bjarnason, Geirsdottir, and Bjarnadottir as a small writing website called rithringur.is, it was later re-developed in English, so that the trio might share their vision for an online writing community with an expanded audience (Bjarnason 2013). There is an option for paid membership which gives users access to some extra features, and the chance to support the creators by offsetting operating costs, but the free site offers a rich experience where members can submit their writing and receive feedback, have access to all of the writing tools on the site, and communicate with other members on the site.

CC is also characterized by an attitude of respect. On the website, eight general rules and eleven behavioural rules are listed, which appear to be arduous reading at first glance, but these rules effectively articulate the kind of community values that are central to the operation of *Critique Circle*. Most of the behavioural rules are about matters of respect--respecting other writers' right to privacy, right to be treated fairly, and right to have their own opinions. Moreover, the mutual respect that members offer one another extends beyond attitude. *Critique Circle* has the word "circle" in its name for a reason. In the *CC* community, it is impossible to receive feedback on your own work unless you give feedback to others. It "costs" three credits in order to submit a piece of writing for feedback, but when a new member joins the site, they begin with only two credits. This necessitates that newcomers critique the writing of someone else, earning them one more

credit so they may use their total of three credits in payment for submitting their first piece of writing. This pattern continues so that with each piece of writing a member receives feedback on, they themselves have critiqued three other pieces of writing. This cycle is beneficial to writers since it has the potential to heighten appreciation for the critiques others provide, develop their skill at providing feedback, and ensure their own writing receives critiques. Furthermore, becoming a critic of others' writing may in fact benefit writers just as much or more than simply receiving critiques (Lu & Law 2010). The research of Lu and Law (2010) showed that "students benefit more as assessors than assessees, particularly with regard to comments that identify problems and make suggestions" (270).

Critique Circle offers support for writers beyond critiques of their writing. A suite of available tools includes a personal notebook for organizing and visualizing writing, writing templates, and a name generator. Also featured on the site are a series of forums where members can post messages and receive responses from fellow members. Messages are organized into forums according to subject areas such as "Character Interviews," "Publishing," "Research," and "Brainstorming." The numerous forums help members develop ideas, flesh out characters, discuss plots, deconstruct genres, share resources, and begin and maintain friendships. The site features over one hundred FAQ's, divided into categories such as "Giving Critiques," "Submitting Stories," and "Features and Tools." One question identified as frequently asked is: "Q. What if I'm offended by a critique I received?" The answer is striking, and conveys an attitude which seems to pervade the site.

A. You may want to take a moment to think about why you are offended. It can be painful to hear criticism of something you have written, but does it seem that the critiquer is trying to point out something to improve upon, even if a bit bluntly? Most critiquers' intentions are to help the writer by pointing out the flaws, not to hurt your feelings. This learning process can sometimes bruise your ego, but usually improves your writing skills by pointing out weak spots.
(Retrieved from http://www.critiquecircle.com/faq.asp?all=0&cat=4#31)

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited through the posting of an invitational message in a forum for teenagers within the online writing community, *Critique Circle*. The five teenage participants who volunteered to participate in the research study will be referred to by their pseudonyms: Adventura, Darkvaar, Genevive, Tragic, and PiratedShip. They will also be referred to as the core participants. These core participants, four female and one male, write between two times per week and every day, and range in age from 12-17. Beyond Critique Circle, additional participants from other online writing communities were recruited to fill out the online questionnaire. Invitations posted within Wattpad, Writers Network, Protagonize, Elfwood, and WEBook generated replies from eleven more participants. Although these participants are not considered core participants, and were not asked to participate in follow-up interviews, they did fill out the online questionnaire, and their responses were used for comparison and corroboration purposes. This group will be referred to as auxiliary participants. Also part of the

auxiliary group are two members of *Critique Circle* who filled out the online questionnaire, and who are aged 20 or older. All participants, both core and auxiliary, were asked to read an informed consent letter and indicate whether they had read the information and agreed to participate in the study. A parent letter was prepared in the event that the parents of potential participants were interested in knowing more information about the research study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data source consisted of an online questionnaire, developed in consultation with a small group of teenagers. Part 1 of the questionnaire asked participants about their self-perception as writers; Part 2 of the questionnaire asked about motivation for and experiences of posting writing in an online community; Part 3 asked specific questions about the learning participants have experienced as a result of being part of an online writing community. Data were also collected by means of a follow-up interview which was conducted through either private messages between the researcher and the core participants, or by phone, based on the choice of each participant. Questions for these follow-up interviews were formulated on a case by case basis to elicit examples, and further explanations of participants' initial answers to the questionnaire. A cursory investigation of some other online writing communities also informed the study, for comparison and validation purposes.

The data analysis process began with synthesizing the information gathered in Part 1 of the interview questions, to determine any common characteristics of people who join online writing communities. Related questions in Parts 2 and 3 of the questionnaire were collapsed, and similar responses for all questions were tallied. Unique responses to the questionnaire were also noted. Responses were examined for emerging themes which shed light on the role that online communities have in developing writers, and in changing writing.

Results

Characteristics of Critique Circle Members

The majority of active users on *Critique Circle* have not specified their gender; among those who have, female members outnumber males by approximately 1.75 to 1. Perhaps as a reflection of this imbalance, of the eighteen participants who filled out the questionnaire for this research study, only two were male, one identified as gender fluid, and the rest were female. This limits the ability to generalize to principles which reflect the experiences of all genders. The age distribution of members in CC is also skewed, reflecting a saturation of participants aged 21-25.

The members of *CC* include amateur and professional writers. An interesting finding of this study is that not all members of online writing communities solicit feedback on their writing. Some members of such communities join simply to provide feedback to younger writers, or to writers who are at an earlier stage in developing their craft. For example, one auxiliary participant explains that she joined to help beginning writers, having had decades of experience as a professional editor. She describes her style as "blunt 'n brutal honesty, that I tinge now and then with humor, to soften the blows." In another online writing community known as "Wattpad," Canadian author Margaret

Atwood is a member; she posts on her profile page that she has been writing since 1956, having seen many changes throughout the years, and she is interested in how the feedback provided in an online writing community has the potential to increase a writer's confidence.

All *CC* members are interested in seeing writing improve. In fact, the five core participants all expressed the desire to be published authors. There is general consensus among the auxiliary participants as well, since seven out of nine who answered the question also expressed the desire to publish their writing. Concerning writing strengths, one of the five core participants did not list any strengths, while the other four all listed one of their writing strengths as "thinking of ideas to write about." All writers who answered the question identified between four and six strengths, indicating that they have some confidence in their ability to write. The one participant who did not list any strengths mentions his young age and inexperience, and also directly indicates his belief that he is not a good writer.

Adventura

Adventura self-identifies as a writer since age 12. She has been a part of *Critique Circle* for four years, and writes two to three times per week outside of school; her goal is to spend the rest of her life writing and publishing novels, which fits with her reported writing strengths which are thinking of ideas to write about, and coming up with interesting plots and titles for her writing. Since Adventura is homeschooled, she looks to the online writing community as a place to learn about writing where she is not on her own. She describes one of her reasons for being a part of *Critique Circle* saying, "I am still learning and CC is still churning out new things for me to learn." She has the desire to convey her thoughts more effectively, and expresses how she does not find it easy to write in a style she would not choose to read.

PiratedShip

PiratedShip loves to write poetry, but does so mostly when she is feeling sad and lonely. She has a dream of writing a book as great as *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, but is terrified that she will never do it. She would write more if she wasn't so busy; as it is, she mostly writes school assignments and fanfiction, as well as poetry. She is currently a member of *Critique Circle* and FanStory, and in the past was active on Wattpad. She effectively uses sophisticated vocabulary in her writing, and incorporates details; she views organization as one of the areas she needs to work on, describing the way she writes by declaring, "I just throw things on the page." She reports that teachers do not have time to provide detailed feedback on her school writing assignments.

Darkvaar

Darkvaar has been a writer for the last four years. This writer has recently finished the first draft of a novel and plans to edit it to prepare for publishing. Joining *Critique Circle* is one step in that strategic process. Showing a desire for serious critiques, Darkvaar exclaims, "I WANT advice because I WANT to rewrite because I WANT my story to be better." Although all types of critiques are welcomed, Darkvaar feels that "spelling and grammar is a rather quick fix that I can manage," and wishes for

reader insight into other things about the writing. Darkvaar writes on a regular basis, and is good at expressing emotion and surprising readers.

Genevive

Genevive writes every day toward her goal of becoming a New York Times bestselling author. She writes action, adventure, teen, and young adult stories. While she wishes that *CC* was more graphically appealing, she appreciates helpful feedback from other members. She welcomes serious critiques of her writing, asserting that when it comes to critiques, "the harsher the truer." Some of Genevive's writing strengths include developing characters, coming up with great titles, and surprising her readers.

Tragic

Tragic seeks feedback on his work as a means toward reaching his goal of becoming a published author and teaching writing at a University or College. When asked what he considers to be his writing strengths, he indicates that he does not have any. He writes every day, working on determining what is important as he writes. Engaging in discussions with other members of *CC* gives him chances to find out where he should focus his thoughts and what he should emphasize in his writing. He reports that the feedback on his writing he receives from teachers is nonexistent.

In summary, these data show that the majority of participants enjoy writing, have confidence in their writing ability, and have future goals concerning their writing. The small sample size and skewed gender sample will not allow for confirmation that this is a pattern in the broader online writing community. However, it does allow for an initial consideration of such a community and the kind of members it attracts. The emerging picture of goal-oriented, confident writers who enjoy writing seems well-suited to the landscape of the *Critique Circle* community.

Writers' Preferences: Serious Critiques

All the participants in this research study who submit their writing to an online forum have an explicit desire to become better writers. They share the belief that receiving serious critiques of their writing is important for moving them closer to that goal. Core participants "sometimes" or "always" revise their writing based on feedback received within *Critique Circle*. Darkvaar always revises accordingly, asking, "Why else would I put it up?" Adventura describes her method of looking for consensus among a number of critiques, and based on that, chooses how she will edit her writing.

When asked about their response to a gentle critique, core participants describe how they do not take them into account, or do not consider them legitimate critiques. All the core participants report feeling good when they get a gentle critique, but indicate that they do not submit writing in order to feel good. Tragic goes so far as to avoid reading gentle critiques until a day when he is discouraged, only referring to them when he needs to boost his self-confidence. Gentle critiques simply do not give the participants enough fodder to effectively help them revise their work. Harsh critiques, on the other hand, might also be viewed negatively by the core participants. PiratedShip is the only participant to report feeling sad when she gets a harsh critique of her writing, while the other participants are affected by the attitude with which such a critique is delivered. If

the critiquer conveys superiority and an insistence that their way of looking at the writing is the only way, writers are likely to ignore the feedback. There is a consensus among the core participants that if a harsh critique contains helpful suggestions, and explanations, it can be useful to them.

To summarize, the participants like to get feedback--serious, honest feedback, but they reserve the right to make their own choices about whether to edit based on the feedback or not. Feedback that is repeated by more than one critiquer is more likely to result in revisions. As for the specific kinds of feedback that is desired by members of online writing communities, the following data were collected from all seventeen questionnaire respondents. Figure 1 illustrates participants' opinions about the kind of feedback that is important to them, with "reader responses" being rated as extremely important by most participants.

1 = unwanted   2 = not important   3 = important   4 = extremely important
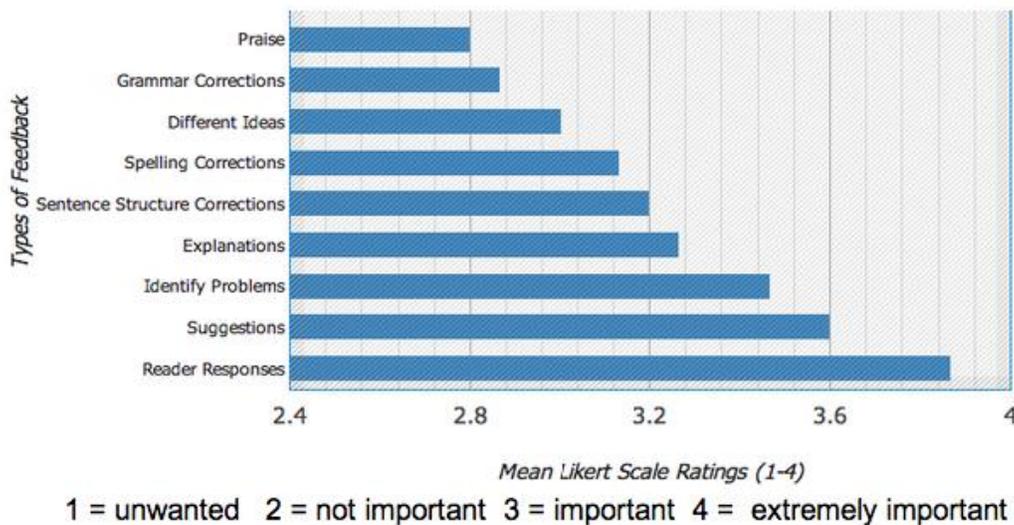
Figure 1: Types of feedback desired by Critique Circle Members.

Interestingly, the core participants are divided on the matter of praise, with three saying it is important, and two saying it is not important. A wider look at the auxiliary participants reveals that six participants rated praise as important or extremely important, while three said it was not important. From this limited data set, it is impossible to determine one definitive answer to the question of whether participants in online communities value praise, although we can see a slight tendency toward this. Perhaps, even though writers desire to have their writing judged, it keeps them from getting discouraged if they get a bit of praise now and then.

Writers' Experience of Change

"Have you changed as a writer since being part of an online writing community?" When asked this question, fifteen participants answered yes, while two responded with "sort of." This overwhelmingly positive response suggests that, at least in this limited research study, the online writing community plays a significant role in the

lives of developing writers. Core participants report a variety of changes, identifying themselves as more mindful writers, more mature writers, and more prolific writers since being part of *Critique Circle*. Three core participants feel they have a better grasp on the complexity of writing, and of the vast amount there is to learn about writing; two participants expressed a greater understanding of the facets of writing. One participant explains how she has "improved as a writer as well as developed my own unique style. I also feel I have developed a good sense of self in the sense that I am able to take criticism much better, and much more objectively." Another participant refers to the multicultural, multi-perspective of the nature of feedback receiving, saying, "I have learned about how other people in other parts of the world feel… literally." Referring to the socially constructed nature of writing, one participant writes "that it's really a group effort sometimes. You're the writer, but the readers are what cheer you on. I realized that writing without an audience is like not writing at all."

All participants express faith in the online writing community to facilitate growth in writing confidence and ability, except for one. Maia, who is a member of the site to provide guidance for young writers, is wary of non-professional writers providing feedback to others. She questions whether the peer feedback in an online, primarily social community, can turn everyone into published authors. The results of this study show that publishing their writing is, indeed, a goal of most of the participants. However, the questions of this research study are not focused around whether the site can churn out published authors. Rather, the questions about the effects of the online community are focused on what writers report about their own progress, and how they perceive their personal writing growth. Most participants in the study are convinced, not that their writing is publishable, necessarily, but that their writing has improved. They feel their outlook on writing is more sophisticated since joining the online community. The chance that some of them will never make a living as writers does not take away from the fact that they are all currently, writers, and will continue to be, throughout their lives.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, teenagers are writing online, in blog posts, social media updates, profile pages, comments on YouTube videos, responses to news articles, and websites about their interests (Williams 2009). As they continue into adulthood, they will likely continue to write in order to make their voices heard, and to contribute to the global knowledge community, and to connect with others. Of course, this study is limited by a small sample size, restricting the ability to generalize; yet, it is an encouraging prospect to consider how an online community might contribute to the advancement of writing in the lives of teenagers. This study is also limited due to the fact that the data is self-reported. Further research could examine the actual writing submitted to the online community over time, to detect patterns of changes in writing. A follow-up study, to be undertaken by this author, involves looking in depth at three writing samples, as well as three critiques posted by each core participants over time, and to evaluate them using a pre-determined rubric and coding system (Lu & Law 2012). This further study represents an opportunity to show whether writing actually improves, and if so, what type of feedback potentially has this effect.

T/W

Discussion and Implications for Classrooms

Learning to write is a continual, differentiated process that is enhanced through social connectedness, deeply embedded in notions of current adolescent culture, and enmeshed with technological applications (Dennen and Jones 2006; Williams 2009). Writing teachers who acknowledge these realities can honour the literacies students develop outside of school in various media contexts as literacies to be celebrated and expanded upon inside of school. It is important, therefore, that writing teachers be aware of the existence of online writing communities, and the possibility that their students may be part of one. A teacher who shows an interest and affirms a student's involvement in such a community makes a meaningful link between the informal learning done outside of school, in the online community, and the formal learning done in the writing classroom (Lai, Khaddage and Knezek 2013). If students are unaware of online writing communities, a writing teacher can introduce the phenomenon, possibly sparking some students' interest in joining.

The five main findings of this research study, revealed through the context of the *Critique Circle* environment, inspire an informal pedagogy with five elements: student choice, positive feedback, establishment of writing goals, "future feedback," and authentic audience. The term "informal pedagogy" is used to refer to a set of principles derived from an informal learning environment that may be applied in a formal learning environment. Observing informal learning as a model to inform classroom practice has been undertaken by Green (2008), in the context of music education, and Lai, Khaddage and Knezek (2013), in the context of mobile applications to support learning; it will now be undertaken here, in the context of the secondary writing classroom (Grades 9-12).

Data in this study suggest three characteristics which coincide with teenagers who engage in online writing communities; they enjoy writing, have confidence in their writing ability, and have firmly established future goals for their writing. It is safe to doubt that all the students in any given writing classroom uniformly share these same characteristics. But there are ways a writing teacher can leverage the classroom environment to foster these characteristics among their students.

Student choice

First, the writing teacher may enact an informal writing pedagogy featuring student choice. Students who are given the opportunity to choose their own topics to write about are more likely to enjoy writing (Lai, Khaddage and Knezek 2013), as CC participants do. Giving students the chance to choose which genres to specialize in also provides a greater chance for them to enjoy the writing process. In addition, giving students the opportunity to choose which pieces of writing they would like to submit to the teacher for formal assessment also fosters an atmosphere somewhat like that of the online writing community, which maximizes writers' autonomy. This practice necessitates that students write a lot, as CC members do, and at least more than the bare minimum, in order that they can choose from among their pieces. Allowing students the choice about whether to revise their writing based on the feedback they receive is another way that the characteristics of CC can inform classroom practice (Stagg Peterson 2010).

T/W

Positive Feedback

Opportunities for student choice in the classroom which may foster an enjoyment of writing may also inspire students' confidence levels. A second informal pedagogical principle which can support students' confidence as writers, is the provision of positive feedback. Communicating to students about the successful elements of their writing will inspire students' confidence in their ability to write, reflecting the confidence that CC participants show. In fact, some writers who lack confidence may benefit from only positive feedback being offered. This may go against a teacher's instinct to correct each error and make suggestions throughout a student's writing. It also goes against the desire of CC writers who are adamant that positive feedback only is not helpful. Once a student writer has developed enough confidence to actively seek serious critiques of their writing which include suggestions for changes and improvements, then such critiques are helpful; until that point, they may simply discourage students, as opposed to helping them. Another way to foster students' confidence is to allow for opportunities to revise work repeatedly before handing it in for assessment. In this way, feedback can be experienced more like the feedback within CC, where it is not connected with marks.

Setting goals

Thirdly, informal pedagogy informed by the informal CC community includes encouraging students to set writing goals. CC members have explicit writing goals; likewise, writing students should be encouraged to formulate their own writing goals in light of an authentic audience. Their writing goals are likely to be more diverse than simply publishing novels; for example, writing goals formulated with an authentic audience in mind may include: write blog posts in an online video game forum to help new players, write and post persuasive essays concerning the dangerous chemicals contained in cosmetics, or write an apocalyptic account of a future zombie attack on a website, along with instructions for surviving.

Including opportunities for student choice and for receiving positive feedback, as well as for the setting of writing goals, creates an informal pedagogy within the writing classroom which may encourage the development of a group of writers with similar characteristics to those found in the online writing community. The current research study revealed that those online writers desire serious critiques of their writing, and value reader responses to their writing. In response, the informal pedagogical principles of "future feedback" and authentic audience are proposed.

"Future feedback" is a term that can be used to describe the feedback that writers within CC receive, in that it is useful for some future purpose, i.e. to inform changes and improvements to the writing under consideration. If students in a writing classroom receive feedback on a writing piece, but then have no reason to critically consider that feedback, and implement changes based on that feedback for future consideration, either by the teacher, or some other audience, then that feedback could be considered "dead end" feedback. Peterson (2010) shows how providing feedback before writing is finished is effective for improving student writing. It is this concept of writing being "finished" that can determine whether feedback is functional and profitable, or whether it is virtually meaningless.

T/W

Authentic Audience

Finally, writing teachers may employ an informal pedagogy featuring authentic audience. CC members want to know what effect their writing has on real readers. This can be facilitated in the writing classroom if the teacher focuses on giving reader-based feedback, i.e. describing their responses to the writing, in addition to, or instead of criterion-based feedback (Peterson 2010). It can also be facilitated by providing opportunities for peer feedback. Ideally, peers will not be limited to the students in that classroom, but will represent a wider audience, perhaps the students' school, Board, or even a worldwide audience. If mechanisms were in place to facilitate a school-wide form of Critique Circle, or Board-wide, students would benefit from feedback that comes from a variety of sources. If such online systems are not in place, perhaps Critique Circle itself could be used as a platform for writing students to submit their school assignments for feedback. So, then, along with providing a model for the writing classroom, the online writing community itself may be a resource which can be used in the context of a writing course to maximize feedback, provide feedback that covers a range of perspectives, and contribute feedback focused on reader response. The writing classroom of today need not be constrained to defining the "peer" in peer feedback as a group aligned along age or grade level categories; rather, writing peers from a variety of ages and writing levels can provide a worldwide audience for writing students. The connected classroom of today can extend learning beyond the immediate context, and into the world (DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl and Hicks 2009).

If there are online tools, already developed, which are free, and which can facilitate learning in ways that offline learning cannot, we should use them, and focus on how to use them, in educational contexts (Lai, Khaddage & Knezek 2013). In order to effectively make use of such online tools, an understanding of the differences between formal and informal learning is needed, and an acknowledgement that blending of the two can potentially maximize learning. The challenge is for teachers to understand how informal learning can inform formal pedagogy, and not be threatened by it, but to embrace it (Lai, Khaddage & Knezek 2013). The online writing community is an informal learning context in which students may develop lifelong literacy habits and positive attitudes toward writing. As one participant in this study described writing, "It's a great outlet for emotions and thoughts you can't express freely. It's also a free trip to another world too. Your world. Something you created and it's amazing." Understanding and harnessing the potential of the online writing community may inspire more free trips to imaginary worlds which empower adolescents and advance their writing.

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