When Writers Imagine Readers: How Writing for Publication Affects Students' Sense of Responsibility to Readers

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Introducing Our Writing

We imagine you, Reader. You, in plural form. You might be a college writing instructor or a high school English teacher, male or female, new to education or not so new. You read this book—and this chapter—for your own reasons. Maybe you have courses to teach and want guidance, new ideas. Maybe you are riding a train as you read this on your way to work. In fact, that's how these very sentences are being composed: That colon you just read was placed in bluish ink at the 66th Street –Lincoln Center stop on a downtown number 1 train in Manhattan. That period was dotted at 59th Street.

We can only imagine you based on our experiences as readers. But it is this imagining that guides these words, that makes us write here at all. We write with purpose: This is for publication. Publication changes the way we write. You are on our minds, though we will probably never meet. Your absence makes you very present indeed. In the pages that follow, we wish to share with you some thoughts and experiences we've had with various students in New York City who, like us, wrote for publication. We think writing for publication is as much about imagining readers as it is practicing writing. ("Writing" was written, again in indigo ink, several subway stops later at 18th Street.)

What You Are about to Read

We have composed this essay around three anecdotes from Kerry's experiences working with students to write for publication. On an island in the East River between the Bronx and Queens, incarcerated students craft what we can only call auto-oral histories of their lives before and beyond prison. In another classroom, students in the South Bronx profile elders from their community, interviewing them and involving them in the writing process. Finally, more than two hundred blocks downtown, in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, tenth-grade students create a handbook for their school's advisory program, writing about issues they as urban adolescents confront deeply and daily. We'll explore what happens when writers imagine their readers. We hope that writing for publication as we share it here might open new ways to think about writing in your own classroom. That is, after all, Reader, all we can hope to imagine.

About "We" and Our Work

We would like to offer a brief description of "we." Tom is an English teacher at a public high school in Manhattan. He has worked mostly with ninth- and twelfth-grade students. Over the years, he has woven various media into his curricula, including the recording of rap music. Recently, he's been exploring the nature of re-reading in adolescent literacy practices. Kerry, a former secondary school English teacher, is a curriculum consultant for the Student Press Initiative (SPI), a literacy and professional development program at Teachers College, Columbia University. In addition to these full-time professions, we are both doctoral students in English education.

Founded by Erick Gordon and mentored by Ruth Vinz, SPI was created on the belief that students take their writing more seriously and craft, revise, and edit more earnestly when writing for authentic audiences and real readers. By "authentic" and "real," we mean readers who extend beyond the teacher and classmates. When students write for others—when they know their work in going to be read by many sometimes unknown eyes—they see themselves and the process differently. Partnering primarily with New York City public schools, SPI collaborates with classroom teachers to co-create writing curricula that culminate in professional publication of all students' writing. These books are then shared with other teachers and students in high schools around the country. With the understanding that they are writing for an audience of hundreds, if not more, the stakes become higher, and the students begin to see their writing as a very real representation of themselves. They are driven to their best possible work. They see themselves as writers.

Although Tom has worked with SPI in his own English classroom, the three classroom anecdotes presented here come from Kerry's work. (The names of individual student writers have been changed.)

Writing for Publication: Three Classroom Stories

Student at Horizon Academy, Rikers Island

When I have a son someday, I'm going to explain my life to him, all the things I've been through. Tell him, "Son, you don't need to go through this. Just do what you've got to do. Go to school and finish. And just think about yourself." I'll always keep reminding him nobody's better than him. He's the best because, if

he thinks that somebody's better than him, he's going to want to be like them.

He's going to fall into the traps that I fell in. So if he'll grow up saying that he's the

best, he'll think he's the best. He won't need nothing in life. That's all I'll tell him.

—Excerpted from *Killing the Sky: Oral Histories from Horizon Academy, Rikers Island*

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Heavy metal gates slammed shut with echoing clangs and the rattle of keys. The cinder-block halls were well lit by florescent bulbs and streaks of gray winter sunlight that slipped through small windows high on the walls near the ceiling. As we walked down the corridor toward a door marked by black letters reading "school" and "escuela," my colleagues and I talked quietly, finalizing the work that needed to be done that day. Along with a few others, we made up the SPI team responsible for this project: In collaboration with two teachers at Horizon Academy on Rikers Island, we created curricula, interviewed student-inmates and worked with them to create their oral histories that would become a book titled *Killing the Sky 2* (the first *Killing the Sky* was created a year earlier with a different group of students).

SPI has partnered for four years with Horizon Academy, one of the Department of Education/Department of Corrections high schools located on Rikers Island, the largest jail in New York City. Consisting of five sites around the island, Horizon Academy serves student-inmates over the age of 18. Each site provides optional schooling for inmates, and most of those who take advantage of it are seeking their General Equivalency Degree (GED).

We entered the school—an L-shaped hallway that provided access to two main classrooms and a few small offices—and greeted the correctional officer who sat at a desk directly inside the entrance and next to a metal detector that students walked through

when they entered and exited the space. After checking in with the teachers, we moved into one of the classrooms where a group of young men sat in wooden chairs, waiting for us. "Hey, it's the book people," someone announced. "We weren't sure if you were coming." We often began our weekly visits with apologies for being late—getting through security and onto the island regularly took longer than we expected and sometimes caused us to lose time with the students.

"Are you ready to get to work?" I asked Phat Boi, a young black man dressed in a loose-fitting white t-shirt and jeans. I had brought with me the transcript of the interview I conducted with him a short time earlier. "Today, we need to read through your transcript and focus mainly on a couple of things. The first is to decide what parts of your story you want to leave in and what you want to take out. Then, we should talk about what is missing . . . what you want to add to your piece so that your story is saying what you want it to. Do you know what I mean?" I handed Phat Boi his transcript, close to fifteen pages, and he took from his teacher a small, yellow, regulation pencil with a tiny lead tip and no eraser.

For a few minutes, Phat Boi and I revisited an earlier conversation and talked about what he wanted his story to say and who he imagined reading it. I showed him how to draw circles around the parts he wanted to keep and to cross X's through the text he wanted to remove. Hunched over, Phat Boi folded his body so that his face was close to the paper, his left arm curled around the edge of the desk. As he began to read, he held his pencil poised above the pages. Around us other students worked on their stories as well. The room fell quiet except for the soft flip flip flip of pages and the scratch of lead against paper. I quietly waited to talk with Phat Boi about the revisions he had made.

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Student at the Institute for Media and Writing

> The first time I considered the question, "Do you have to go to college to be successful?" I asked myself, "How should I know? I'm not in college!" But this question was a concern of mine. I wondered sometimes, if I don't go to college, can I get a good job? I also thought of my grandmother. She was young at the time in history when African Americans didn't have rights and didn't have the same privileges that I now have. Every time she asks me, "Are you making your grade?" I tell her yes and she smiles.

> —Excerpted from *For Every Voice, a Different Truth: An Advisory Handbook*

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"But *everything* is important!" Shaniqua wailed to me on a crisp afternoon in late February. The winter sun streamed in through high windows and spread across the classroom floor. "I can't take any more out!" Shaniqua and I were seated together at a long rectangular table in the center of the room, an open laptop drawing our gazes. Classmates buzzed around us while Erin, their teacher, jumped from table to table, student to student, as she commented on drafts and held whispered conversations about word choice, conclusions, and sentence structure. "I know," I said in low voice so as not to add too much to the rising and falling hum that filled the classroom. "This is often the hardest part," I looked at Shaniqua and then back at the laptop. "Sometimes it's easier to write a lot, and much harder to edit a piece of writing down. It means you, the writer, have to make some tough decisions." "But I've edited so much already," she countered, "I don't know what else to take out."

Shaniqua and her tenth-grade classmates—about 80 in all—attended high school in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. Their school was considered a "small learning community" and was part of New York City's reform movement, which included the restructuring of large schools into smaller ones. This was the first year that Shaniqua's class and their teacher, Erin, were partnering with the Student Press Initiative. Beginning in September, the students had spent the better part of six months working on their project: identifying and researching "teen issues" that they felt were relevant, conducting interviews, researching and taking copious notes, and eventually writing pieces that came together in a curriculum guide to be used in advisory classes. The students' collective frustration with their own experiences—and sense that things could be done differently— drove this project and gave shape to their book. A driving motivation was that when they were done, they would have collectively written a text to be used by teachers and students in other classes in other schools; they were authors writing for an audience of their peers.

Shaniqua's draft was about a hundred words over the limit Erin and I had set. Since each student's piece was going to be published, we felt that there should be some consistency in length. But Shaniqua wasn't going to give in that easily. She had worked so hard on her piece and was resistantly digging her heels in when I suggested that we take another look and edit out some more. "Okay," she sighed. "I'll read it through again, but I'm not taking out anything I don't want to." We leaned in closer to the slightly blue glow of the PC and I smiled. I loved how she owned her writing, how she fiercely defended each and every word. This was hers, after all, and she had labored long and hard over it. The students had been drafting and revising for well over a month, and these last days were to be spent making final edits as the publication deadline loomed near.

Shaniqua knew what was at stake. Her name was going to be on this, and lots of people were going to be reading it. "Fair enough," I said. And then Shaniqua began a painstaking edit—thinking about each word, cutting out bits here and there, shifting sentences around. This was easily her tenth revision.

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Student at Millennium Art Academy

> My first job when I was younger was as a busgirl at a restaurant called Bickford. The only thing I could do, because of racism, was to bus dishes off the table when the customers was finished eating. Clear the table off, and clean, and then you would have a corner to stand where you would wait for the next person to finish eating. They you'd take the dishes off and do the same thing all over again. . . . I started working . . . wow! How old was I? . . . 13, I think about 13.
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> —Excerpted from *Speak to Us of Work: Bronx Oral Histories*

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Hector and Ms. Perry sat across from each other separated by a small desk, the type one expects to see in a high school classroom. Between them sat a rather clunky black tape recorder and a blank audiotape. Hector carefully labeled the tape "Interview with Ms. Perry by Hector Ruiz" and then the date. He consulted a half-sheet page of typed of directions and, pausing slightly, awkwardly leaned toward Ms. Perry and searched for a place to clip a tiny microphone. Ms. Perry, for her part, extended her lapel and Hector secured the mic and leaned back. After glancing at the directions again and making sure that the microphone was plugged in and the tape was rewound, Hector sat up with his list of interview questions securely in his hand. "Are you ready, Ms. Perry?" he asked. At that same time, scattered around the school—in the rare empty classrooms, the

principal's office, the back of a science lab—Hector's classmates also leaned over clunky

tape recorders and asked "Are you ready?"

Hector attends a small high school in the South Bronx. The school, located within

a larger building, shares space with five other small schools all in about their fourth or

fifth year. He and his classmates are part of a program that invites elders from the

surrounding community into the classroom once a week. The school partnered with the

Student Press Initiative on a project that worked closely with the program and culminated

with the publication of the students' writing. In this case, the students—all in eleventh

grade—interviewed and ultimately wrote the oral histories of the visiting elders, one of

whom was Ms. Perry. The overarching goal of this experience was to focus both on the

students' writing and also on their relationships with the elders. In fact, for the first few

months of the project, the elders—Ms. Perry and six others—spent their time with the

students telling stories, sharing pasts, playing games and participating in other activities

that were designed to break the ice as well as break through age-based stereotypes. Once

relationships were formed, the students broke into groups and were matched up with one

elder. Each student then was charged with the task of interviewing and crafting his or her

elder's oral history.

Hector raised his voice to be sure that the recorder picked it up and then asked

Ms. Perry his first question, "Where were you born?" Listening intently, Hector watched

as she answered and then, when she paused, he asked another question. Hector's paper

had a list of questions broken into levels. It read "Level 1s: ice-breakers; general

background questions. Level 2s: questions that make up the heart of your interview; what

you want to know. Level 3s: too personal; do not ask!" Under each level, Hector had

carefully written out his questions. He glanced at his watch as he moved into his "level 2" questions. "What was your worst job?" Ms. Perry knew Hector and had provided him with background information so that he could create his questions. She knew that Hector would write her oral history and that it would be published in a book. She chose her answers with care and spoke in a loud, clear voice. She was in her mid 70's.

To prepare the students to write the oral histories, the project teachers and I developed curricula that introduced students to the genre of oral history writing, which including reading a collection of oral histories. We also taught students how to craft interview questions and take notes, as well as ways in which to listen and respond during an interview. Once the interviews were completed, students devoted two months to intensive work transcribing and ultimately crafting the oral histories.

A few weeks later, after Hector had listened and re-listened to the interview tape and transcribed those parts that he felt would best capture Ms. Perry's story, the two sat together again. This time, they were hunched over a draft of Ms. Perry's oral history, which Hector had spent the past weeks writing out, editing, and crafting. It was time for him to share it with her, to see what she thought and where perhaps he needed to do more work. It was important that his portrayal of her was an accurate one. Ms. Perry moved back in her chair and held Hector's pages close to face, her eyes magnified by thick-lensed reading glasses. "Oh my," she said. "I forgot I told you that story!" Hector sat waiting, a pencil in his hand. "What about where you grew up, Ms. Perry? Is that spelled correctly? Is there anything in here that doesn't sound right to you?" The conversation went on for about half an hour, and Hector was left with scribbled notes in the margins, a few crossed out words, some spelling corrections. "I'll revise this and will show you the

new draft next week, Ms. Perry," he said to her as the bell rang, ending class for the day. Ms. Perry smiled as Hector patiently held her arm and guided her out of the room and into the bustling hallway.

Writers Imagining Readers

Writing for Publication Can Improve Writing Skills, Meaningfully

We imagine that you may be wondering what writing for publication, as we're representing it, means for the nuts and bolts of teaching writing. To be clear, we think good writing—whether you call it "college-level" or mature—must go to great lengths to imagine its readers and engage them. We're not focused on skills, per se, here. Our focus is on what leads student-writers to feel a sense of responsibility to the reader. Crucially, this focus on how the student-writer sees himself or herself isn't separate from writing skills and test scores that concern many of us as teachers. Nevertheless, we would like to speak briefly and clearly to this point. While writing skills were naturally and *meaningfully* folded into the writing curricula that comprised the above projects, let's look at how the student-writers' work fits within the New York State English Language Arts standards.

When Kerry describes her work with Phat Boi, "For a few minutes, Phat Boi and I revisited an earlier conversation and talked about what he wanted his story to say and who he imagined reading it. I showed him how to draw circles around the parts he wanted to keep and to cross X's through the text he wanted to remove," the student-writer is revising his work with a specific audience in mind (University of the State of New York) and editing out clutter for more fluid writing (1.2). Or Shaniqua, who "began a

painstaking edit—thinking about each word, cutting out bits here and there, shifting sentences around" is engrossed in matters of diction and syntax alteration (2.2). And Hector, whose writing is in direct response and collaboration with Ms. Perry, exemplifies speaking and listening (3.1) and writing for a specific audience (4.2). Each of those standards contains more specific components. It helps to see the student-writers' work alongside these components:

Student-Writers, Writing for Publication	NYS ELA Standards
Writing with specific audience: mom and girlfriend (Phat Boi), other high school students (Shaniqua), and Ms. Perry (Hector)	1.2: revise and improve early drafts by restructuring, correcting errors, and revising for clarity and effect; use standard English skillfully, applying established rules and conventions for presenting information and making use of a wide range of grammatical constructions and vocabulary to achieve an individual style that communicates effectively
Revising for clutter, syntax, and diction (each student-writer)	2.2: write original piece in a variety of literary forms, correctly using the conventions of the genre and using structure and vocabulary to achieve an effect
Listening intently and critically to the words of a speaker, both another person (Ms. Perry and Hector) and oneself (Phat Boi)	3.1: make precise determinations about the perspective of a particular writer or speaker by recognizing the relative weight they place on particular arguments and criteria 4.2: make effective use of language and style to connect the message with the audience and context

We emphasize that this juxtaposition is hardly exhaustive. Each project has pages and pages of curriculum, discrete lessons, and various forms of assessment—all essential to writing for publication.

Also, it's worth noting that the scores on a New York City writing assessment went up significantly after students at Media and Writing published their work. Though the teacher didn't gather empirical data to support a correlation, she has shared with us many times that students' improvement is related to their writing for publication. While,

of course, we need to acknowledge that *many* factors are at play here, it would also be foolish to dismiss the impact the publication experience had on the students as writers. It's not hard to imagine that the success they felt by becoming published writers built their confidence, as did the months they spent preparing for and finally drafting, revising, and editing their pieces. It's possible to believe that since they lived with the writing process so deeply and for so long, it failed to intimidate them, as it does for so many of our students. In short, perhaps there is more to writing than skills. As one composition professor suggests, heart and empathy are imperative to "college-level" writing—we would add that writing skills follow the writer's heart, not the other way around.

"College-Level" Writers Have Empathy for the Reader

In her essay on interdisciplinary perceptions of college-level writing, Schorn polled professors from various academic disciplines and asked them to describe "college-level" writing. Some called for grammar-grammar-grammar; others spotlighted cogency in argument, while others demanded style and voice. She described the responses as unsurprising and not correlating necessarily to any particular field. However, Schorn pointed out, toward the end of her piece, that there is also a subtler thread. She quoted a professor of Germanic languages who heralded the imperative for students to step outside of self-centeredness. In addition, one professor of business "takes pains to say that the one thing that denotes 'adult-level' to her mind is empathy with the audience. Not just awareness of the audience, but 'the ability to reflect the needs of the audience' and 'leave behind the self-centered focus' of the immature writer" (337). It is empathy, Schorn

wrote, that marks one's writing as "college-level." We might add it is the extent to which the writer has imagined the reader as audible, present, and breathing that effects empathy.

As Schorn suggested, the relationship between writer and reader is more complex than it seems. They can't be facilely divorced. When a writer reflects on the needs of the reader, we suggest, a kind of transformation occurs. Consider Shaniqua, who reflects on the needs of her readers. She imagines her readers to be peers whose concerns she is responsible for representing through printed words. There is realness to her readership, a social closeness. Shaniqua's declaration that "everything is important" is not just adolescent stubbornness. It emphasizes her sense of responsibility to her readers. Whereas a stubborn student *wouldn't* edit another word, Shaniqua *can't*. *Wouldn't* conveys ego; *can't* suggests empathy.

Imagining the needs of a reader requires patience as well as empathy. It is something we seldom teach about. For Shaniqua, her readers were somewhat familiar, though not known exactly. When Hector and Ms. Perry sat across from each other separated by a small desk, both in the interview and in the revision conference, the roles of reader and writer bled into each other. Hector didn't have to imagine who his primary reader was—she sat right next to him—but he did have to open himself empathically. Ms. Perry's presence, her need for help in attaching the microphone, her trust in Hector to help craft her own history, and her spoken words all made her much more than a reader. She was alive and audible. She didn't just hold Hector accountable like his teachers might have; she held him responsible. For Hector, the sense of responsibility resounds even in his words, "Are you ready?" Writing with your reader is an immediate human relationship. It makes each word on the page a pact that both partners will

indelibly etch onto the page's blankness together, forever. While we imagined you, Reader, at this chapter's beginning, we couldn't hear you or see the marks of life on your face. Hector was able to ask Ms. Perry if she was ready. And he couldn't begin without her.

At Horizon Academy, imagining readership was very powerful in shaping the stories told and how students like Phat Boi wanted to represent themselves—what "selves" they wanted to put out there for others to see and read. The knowledge that their words—the stories of their lives—were going to be published and read by others, both people they knew well and those they had never met, had a significant impact on the seriousness with which the students took their writing, as was often evidenced in the revisions they made. Phat Boi, for instance, left in a part about his mother finding drugs in his bedroom but removed the single line "I lied to her." Later on, he chose to add an entirely new section about his girlfriend:

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I fell in love with this girl. She was the most beautiful girl I ever seen. I knew her for a while but I never said anything to her. But one day, I just asked her if she wanted to go out with me and she said yea. From there, she changed my whole life around. And 'til this day I am still in love with her.

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It's worth noting that as he shared with Kerry his penciled-in revisions, Phat Boi admitted that he included the section on his girlfriend because "if I would have never put her in the book, we would have had problems." Phat Boi thought about his readers and

made very conscious choices to be "read" the way that he wanted to be, as a loving boyfriend and honest son.

Forgetting Writing and Reading Again

We find much meaning in Schorn's description of "college-level" writing as writers seeking to understand their readers in deep and authentic ways. In addition, we suggest that when writers imagine their readers empathically, they also learn something essential about the nature of writing. As theorists have expressed in different ways, the act of writing is imperfect and ephemeral, even though the printed word seems authoritative and permanent. This tension between the act of writing and the printed word is important to meditate on because our student-writers—whether they have read literary theory or not—seem deeply aware of it. The writer's work ends at publication. Whether we attribute this to the death of the author (Bathes), the inherently flawed nature of written language (Derrida), or the anxiety any writer feels in trying to measure up to predecessors (Bloom), writing for publication carries with it an immense consequence: Once in print, a writer's words are out of his or her control. Perhaps, along with empathy for the reader, it is the finality of publication that impresses upon the student-writers the need to write with care. Throughout the anecdotes in this essay, students express an awareness that, once their words are print, they can't take them back. The books will remain in circulation, read by unknown eyes, long after the student-writers submit it to their teachers. The role of the writer is temporary; the role of readers is perpetual. Once their writing is published, all writers can do is read it, just like everybody else. All writers return to readership.

Each of the student-writers grapples with the loss of control that comes with writing for publication. Writing for publication means knowing you will relinquish control over your own written representations, and, as in the cases discussed in this essay, the representations of others. Each student, after having imagined the realness of his or her readers and then revising and editing ad nauseam, had to finally let the work go. As the writing process gained momentum—from the introduction of the work to the final few days of frantic detailing—student-writers invariably feel the approach of the final printed end. We hear this in Phat Boi's decision to add in the section about his girlfriend, or Shaniqua's move to continue making changes until the very end. And, of course, Hector's responsibility to represent Ms. Perry in a way that they could both be proud of. Once the texts were in print, their work as writers was done. They return to the rank of reader, with a sensitive ear for the responses of others. It's with his role as author behind him that Hector heard one elder exclaim of his profile, "They did a good job. . . . They even got the lies right!" In addition to the elder's wit, he uses another word that is significant: *did*. We have to imagine that the student-writers' work carried with it many lessons about reading and writing, but perhaps most important, that they knew they had done the best they could. Upon publication, students' work belongs to the world, including the bookshelves of unknown readers.

We, Too, Read Again

We wonder what sort of sense we have made, Reader. We hope that the points about writers needing to imagine their readers as breathing human beings came through. Equally important is that students confront the limits of authorship: It lasts only so long.

Also, we imagine that the time we took to link the work of the student-writers to state standards might have opened up some of you to the possibility of writing for publication. Neither of us—Kerry or Tom—forecasted it in our early meetings about writing this essay, but the more we imagined you, the more necessary its inclusion became. We wonder if we should have said more about other ways to publish; you don't have to bring in outside consultants to do so (the Internet has myriad options for many budgets, and we welcome emailed questions: tom@tomliamlynch.org and kerry.mckibbin@gmail.com).

In wondering, we wandered to the limits of our own imaginations. While we believe deeply that mature writing requires the writer to imagine the reader, we must also confess that there is a limit to imagination. Not that we know what that limit is. Perhaps at the limit of the writer's imagination begins the ordinary iambs of the reader's heartbeat. As our own eyes follow these concluding words, we keenly try to listen to the sounds surrounding you—the conversations of others nearby, the movement of your fingertips on the keyboard or mouse as you scroll through these pages, the slight leap in your breath's tempo seeing the essay's end so near. We hear nothing. And still, we respond to the soundlessness the only way we can: by accepting that our time as writers is closing for now and by marking our return to readership with a period.

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