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# Tracing Writing Techniques from High School to College: Writing as Discussion for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

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Tracing Writing Techniques from High School to College:  
Writing as Discussion for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Connor Mullins

Honors Thesis

University of New Hampshire

Spring 2018

## WRITING AS DISCUSSION

A special thanks to my advisor, Alecia Magnifico, for sticking with me through this crazy process. I'd also like to thank Josh Gagnon and the wonderful students of Upward Bound that was I was able to talk to. Without them, all this research would not be possible.

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### **Abstract**

Students from low-income backgrounds are finding themselves more disenfranchised with school as they progress through their high school careers. This thesis presents the notion that generating a positive form of extrinsic motivation within in the classroom can orient students to become intrinsically motivated towards schooling and writing. In interviewing six students within an Upward Bound program, I found that the approaches the program took during their summer session helped generate an interest for writing within students. By creating a community that cared for each other and brought writing instruction to focus on communication, students found themselves enjoying the process of writing far more than within their high school classrooms. In the summer program, students felt writing discussion to be critical and honest, and as a result were motivated to share their writing with peers who would not judge them at the end of the day. This form of intrinsic motivation was also seen to carry over into the upcoming academic school year for the students. As such, if teachers can then look into attempting to bring similar approaches to writing instruction into their classrooms, students may become more motivated to write, sustaining an interest that can help carry them through school.

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### **Introduction**

As I near the end of my senior year of college, I have come to the realization that I will soon be teaching full-time. Soon, I will also be creating the lessons that I will teach for my students. Yet at the same time, I am also aware of the new challenges that seem to be arising within the field of English education. It is more important than ever for students to learn how to effectively communicate through the spoken word and the written word. Students need to understand how to prove themselves in today's world. For me as a future educator, these are the challenges that I will need to address when it comes my time to teach.

What is also important to me, as a future educator, is the audience that I will be teaching. Personally, one of my goals is to teach students from low-income backgrounds. Because of this, I approached my thesis with the goal of figuring out how I can teach students with lessons that they enjoy. But, what I came to realize was that my approach of figuring out the lessons to teach my students was from the wrong angle. Instead of trying to develop individual lessons, I realized that what these students needed to develop was a sense of communication within their writing. More so, students needed to be motivated through this communication. Within the literature, writing has always been taught through the lens of intrinsic motivation and seen as an internal process (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Nolan, 2007; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, Prendergast, 1997; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Writing instruction has taken up that form of internal process, with students individually writing to present themselves to their teacher. What I came to find talking with students who are a part of Upward Bound, was that students needed external communication to motivate themselves to enjoy their writing. Literature appears to touch upon the notion that communication around writing is helpful for students to become further motivated about their writing (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Magnifico, 2013; Nolen, 2007; Pintrich,

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Marx, and Boyle, 1993). However, what the literature fails to discuss is how much of an impact this approach can have for students from low-income backgrounds. As such, the goal of this paper is to attempt to highlight how approaching writing through natural discussion can lead to motivating students to enjoy writing. I am also particularly interested in highlighting how this approach is important for students from low-income backgrounds, motivating them to move towards higher education and seize more opportunities.

### **Literature Review**

#### Introduction

This this literature review, I have attempted to mimic the process I went through to understand what motivation is and how motivation ties into writing. As such, the literature review will be as follows. First, a discussion on motivation ranging from intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, to what student interest means. I will then focus on the topic of writing, attempting to define what writing means within the classroom, to instructors, to students, and outside the classroom. Afterwards, I will make a connection between writing and motivation, understanding the interplay between the two. The topic will then shift towards understanding why it is important to create positive communities for students. I will also spend time discussing my target population as well.

#### Motivation

Motivation as it relates to both students and writing is a broad field. At its base form, motivation can be defined as being “*moved to do something*” (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Educators have come to value motivation as a tool that promotes the long-term development of how a student learns, coupled with the promotion of student self-esteem (Belmont and Skinner, 1993). Deci and Ryan (1985) came to find that motivation can be tied to curiosity, persistence, learning

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and performance. Much of the research within the field of psychology has been centered around the intrinsic understandings of motivation (Weiner, 1990). At the same time, educational research has focused on the extrinsic understandings of motivation (Belmont and Skinner, 1993).

Intrinsic motivation is the understanding that a student completes an action out of enjoyment for the action, and because the action is inherently satisfying (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vallerand, Blais, Brière, Senécal, and Vallières, 1992). Within intrinsic motivation, three motives can be identified, both inside and outside the classroom. These motives propose that students will act to know something, accomplish something, and experience something (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Vallerand et al., 1992). Wigfield and Eccles (2002) further this understanding of students' intrinsic motivation within their research, connecting to the tasks that a student may face within the classroom. They too divide their discussion into three main areas. The first are the motives students will exhibit within the classroom; these motives can range from goal orientation to their needs, values, and interests (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Wigfield and Eccles, 2002). The second is the difficulty of the task a student must complete, and their self-perceptions in regards towards the task (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Wigfield and Eccles, 2002). The third is how the student approaches managing the task they are facing, and the steps they take to complete the task (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Wigfield and Eccles, 2002). For a student to maintain motivation towards the task, these motivational traits must be fulfilled.

Interest is a trait that can stem from these above traits. Commonly, interest is referred to as "the topic of a person's engagement" (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007, pg. 114). Interest can reflect the interaction a student has with a subject on a personal and social level (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007). Hidi, Krapp, and Renninger (1992; 2002) have also identified two kinds of interest: situational and individual. Lipstein and Renninger (2007) referred to situational interest



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as “the shifting of attention to some content in the moment” (pg. 117). This attention can be directed at a sudden subject that students may wish to learn more about. This interest does not last long; it is usually maintained only until a new subject grasps their attention. Sometimes this interest can be sustained, often when the student repeatedly interacts with the subject . Individual interest is the continuation and strengthening of interest. It is a subject that the student will interact with over time . This interest can be either naturally fostered by the students themselves – as it pertains to a subject that they are predisposed to – or can be fostered by the teacher. These different forms of interest can be utilized by the teacher to help students generate motivation within the classroom. By fostering student’s situational interest in a subject, such as writing, students may become individually interested in the subject, motivating themselves to pursue the subject further.

As interest can be extrinsically influenced, it is then important to consider how extrinsic motivation may arise within students as well. Unlike intrinsic motivation, which tends to pertain to a narrower variety of behaviors, extrinsic motivation is far broader (Vallerand et al., 1992). Extrinsic motivation and the behaviors that accompany it are commonly engaged “as a means to an end,” with outcomes that may not directly impact the student (Deci, 1975, Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1992, pg. 1006). Unlike intrinsic motivation, through which students partake in an activity because it interests them and is enjoyable, extrinsic motivation may not be enjoyable. Students can be extrinsically motivated and still show resistance to the task that has been assigned to them. For example, a student may not show interest towards a subject in school, but will be extrinsically motivated to do well in the class because of their academic grade. Students can also be extrinsically motivated and enjoy the task at the same time, showing a willingness to be motivated (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation has been found to play

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a large role in how much intrinsic motivation a student can exhibit, “as the freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes increasingly curtailed by social demands and roles that require individuals to assume responsibility for nonintrinsically interesting tasks” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, pg. 60). This observation follows closely with how lessons are taught in school. They are not necessarily designed to be intrinsically motivating for students, and instead rely on the various social pressures of extrinsic motivation.

The conversation can then be brought around to the topic of fostering external motivation for the student in a healthy way. Psychological research on student motivation connects to the intrinsic traits that can be found within students — such as an optimistic view towards a sport — and identifying how these traits play a role with how students are motivated (Belmont and Skinner, 1993). However, it is also important for researchers and educators to look at how the overall classroom structure – both socially and academically – can have impacts on students’ learning and motivation (Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993; Stodolsky, 1988). Student motivation can be greatly fostered by classroom structures, and conversely, student motivation can be negatively impacted when a classroom ignores the students’ attitudes and beliefs (Belmont and Skinner, 1993). Some such behaviors could be “guidance, modeling, enthusiasm, provision of choice, sincere praise, reinforcement, and curiosity-, dissonance-, and interest-induction” (Belmont and Skinner, 1993, pg. 571). The student can perceive when a teacher is invested in them, often looking for signs of affection, attunement, dedication, and reliability from the teacher to shape their perception of the classroom and the topics covered. When the teacher becomes distant from their students, or less involved with what their students need, the student too becomes more distant from the class (Belmont and Skinner, 1993).

### Writing

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Coming to understand what writing means for students and educators is a broad subject, with multiple meanings. For the purposes of this paper, three forms of writers have been highlighted. The first is the image of the professional writer. This writer is the one who motivates themselves internally to write, who writes for enjoyment, or who writes for their livelihood (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007). There is then the image of the student writer, who, like the professional writer, may also write for enjoyment, but commonly writes for the classroom and for the instructor (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Magnifico, 2013). Finally, there is the image of the social writer, who writes for social communication and to informally connect with those in their direct or online environments (Magnifico, 2013; Nolen, 2007).

Writing within high school education has also been defined by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) as “designed to prepare students for life outside the classroom,” and to allow students to “learn to use cogent reasoning and evidence collection skills that are essential for success in college, career, and life” (2018). This definition for writing plays the largest role within the classroom, as it outlines the backbone of what writing teachers must instruct and which genres of writing teachers have the freedom to instruct (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

Yet, it is still important to consider what writing can mean for students, both within the classroom and outside the classroom—formally and informally. Writing in the classroom has come to follow an almost standard flow of instruction that many students may pick up on. When approaching an American English class, the preconceived notion is that the structure will follow that of a textbook, oftentimes relying heavily on the textbook (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, and Prendergast, 1997). Students present their information through various worksheets, or through recitation, allowing their teachers to quickly assess them. This approach also enables the teacher

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to maintain control over their classroom. Commonly, when students are asked a question, they are usually expected to repeat what someone else has already said. These students are then evaluated on what they have written, with the teachers noting if the students have correctly repeated the provided information (Nystrand, et. al., 1997).

Students often engage with writing because their schools require them to (Hayes, 1996). Some students may write to help express themselves or to communicate (Bruce, Collins, Rubin, and Genter, 1978). They may also write to take verbal communication and transcribe it so that a reader may understand what was talked about (Bruce, et. al., 1978). If asked about their views towards writing, a student might respond with the notion that writing is a means to an end, a way to fulfill their instructor's expectations (Nolan, 2007). A teacher may approach writing as a formative way for students to further develop their self-efficacy or as an essential part of a student's meaning-making process (Boscolo and Hidi, 2006; Nolan, 2007). Writing is also useful within the classroom as it allows instructors to assess their students' understanding of a subject matter (Durst and Newell, 1989).

However, writing has a social context as well. While within a formal setting, students may write to showcase to their instructors how much they understand about a subject matter or how to effectively communicate. An informal setting will have different structures. Students may write outside of a formal setting to entertain their peers around them (Nolan, 2007). They may even write to remind themselves of a task they need to complete later or as a message to their parents informing them of their current activities. Students are constantly writing to each other in forms of text messages and sometimes because of their working situations. Writing may also have use across different cultures, and how the voice of a student may sound within the culture they live in outside of school may be structured in a different way than the voice they employ

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within school (Nolan, 2007). These social contexts through which students are writing informally, i.e. not within a classroom, could be considered as more influential on how students approach writing. Some studies have recorded that students find themselves more engaged with their writing in these situations, such as through composing letters with pen pals or writing to an online forum. Students who find themselves engaging in these kinds of situations tend to learn more about the conventions of writing and have more instances of internal motivation (Magnifico, 2013).

### Writing and Motivation

So then, the connection between writing and motivation can then be drawn on how the students perceive themselves as writers. As highlighted earlier, writing for the students may be split into two identities, the formal and informal. For students, their formal identity may be how they see themselves as a writer within the classroom. Their informal view may be based off the kind of writing that the students may not actually consider writing (e.g. text messages). For the most part, writing within an academic setting has commonly been taught individually, with the expectation that writing will become an activity students will sustain through individual interest (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007). However, it has also been seen that students' interest and intrinsic motivation begins to wane over the course of a long writing assignment (Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993; Vallerand et al., 1993).

There are a few understandings as to why many students develop a lack of motivation to write. One such understanding is that writing, as it is taught academically, is presented under complex terms that many students find disengaging (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007). It has also been understood that the rigidity of writing within an academic structure has further ostracized these students (Boscolo and Carotti, 2003; Boscolo and Hidi, 2007). As highlighted earlier, for

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students to be motivated towards something, the reward for that motivation must be pleasurable (Belmont and Skinner, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2000). The task must also be manageable so that the students can conceptualize themselves completing said task (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007; Wigfield and Eccles, 2002). When students find themselves disengaged with the writing, and are perceiving the writing they are partaking in as difficult, they will have a harder time motivating themselves to write.

Because writing occurs within a classroom setting, students are also subjected to writing within a social environment. They will have the extrinsic factors playing in on how they write as well. As noted earlier, the social setting through which a student will be situated can impact both their motivation towards a topic and their interest towards the topic (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The classroom itself can be considered a social setting through which students will consistently engage with daily (Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993; Stodolsky, 1988). Because of these factors, students are still extrinsically motivated to write through the setting and potentially the pressures within the setting. Some such pressures may be the pressure of getting a good grade for their writing or providing a satisfactory answer for the teacher (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It can also be because students are attempting to showcase themselves to peers (Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Some students can enjoy these pressures, while others may find them daunting. The extrinsic motivation that is taking shape within the classroom can be either positive or negative.

More often than not, students develop a negative viewpoint towards writing, rather than fostering a healthy relationship. Teacher, however, expect students to be willing to write within the classroom, so that they may achieve positive grades and good evaluations. While it has been stated that external motivation can make an impact on interest, leading towards internal

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motivation, forcing a student to write will not foster the pleasurable outcome that internal motivation should provide (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Ryan and Deci, 2000). It has also been seen that the “limited function of academic writing is increased by its being separate from the other school subjects” (Boscolo and Hidi, 2007, pp. 4).

That is not to say that students are not enjoying writing at all. To reorient our focus back to students within the classroom, it has been seen that students are more motivated to write and engaged with their writing if the assigned topic is interesting to them or if the topic plays off their interests (Hidi and McLaren, 1990; Lipstein and Renninger, 2007). Students have increased motivation towards writing when their instructors have helped present how writing could be utilized and have given students a sense of responsibility towards their writing. Even students who reported on writing as a painful experience for them admitted they would extensively send emails or text messages outside of their school world (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007). Teachers who showed their students how useful writing could be through texting or emails, found more reports of improved motivation towards classroom writing overall. Students have also shown more engagement with writing when it is something that is creative (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Magnifico, 2013). For instance, Magnifico (2013) notes that students will often engage with writing when they are engaging with a community that seems to appreciate what they are writing about and encourage new pursuits . Students will often write extensively on online forums they are participating with, or in the games they play, because they enjoy those games, and do not often see this writing as the same as writing in the classroom .

### Creating a Positive Classroom Community for Writing

The classroom environment plays a large role in how students perceive themselves as writers. As noted earlier, the classroom has an impact on students’ motivation (Pintrich, Marx,

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and Boyle, 1993). This impact can be traced to the community that is developed over the academic year. As Nolen (2007) writes,

...all primary classrooms are communities. Children spend six or more hours, five or six days a week, interacting with teacher and peers in a physical space. Relationships and identities are negotiated, power is established, norms are developed or set. Over time, the social fabric of the classroom community is woven. The nature and importance of various school subjects is established through the specific ways in which teacher's structure student engagement in particular kinds of tasks. (pp. 244)

It is through these interactions that the identities of the students are formed, and the development of the student's "self" occurs (Vadeboncoeur and Portes, 2002). The students' perceptions of themselves as writers is also developed within this classroom community. Because of these developments within students, how the classroom community is created has huge impacts on students' perceptions of writing (Nolen, 2007).

Traditionally, writing in the American classroom has been observed as an answer to what the teacher has asked. This approach to writing has been found to place large amounts of stress on the students (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Nolen, 2007). Because the classroom community plays such a large part in how students perceive themselves as writers, many of these stressors are external to the student. Students are attempting to both prove themselves to their teachers, but also to their peers through their writing. They are facing the perceived notion that they could be rejected from the classroom community, should they "fail." As such, students may find themselves turning away from writing, as it is more stressful than enjoyable (Nolen, 2007).

It is then important for teachers to make strides to create a community that can avoid these stressful external factors. Teachers should remember that students will ultimately turn to



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look at them for further instruction on how to proceed, especially when it comes to writing (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Nolen, 2007; Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993). It has been seen that when teachers see students as uninterested towards a subject, they do not put as much effort towards working with these students to generate interest (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007; Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle, 1993). As a result, when the student then eventually turns to the teacher for help, they perceive the teacher to be lacking interest in them. The student may then model themselves after the teacher, also presenting a lack of interest. If the teacher approaches the subject with a sense of positive interest, the student may then mimic that sense of positivity (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007). By engaging with the activities that the student wants to pursue, or creating the situations that will allow the student to engage with the classroom community, more interest may be fostered. The teacher also has the option to, from the start, work with their students to define “good writing.” Teachers can stifle competition among students by highlighting the importance of what other students have written and, in turn, promote collaboration (Nolen, 2007).

It also important for teachers to strive to create positive classroom communities for learning overall. By striving to develop a community that presents care for the students, the classroom can provide a “protective power” for the students (Murphy, 2016). Any potential worries about life outside of school have the possibility to be mitigated by this community of care (Alexander and Entwisle, 1996). This community of care may address issues that surround individual students. Progression of writing skills can also occur for writing in this community of care, as students have the potential to see writing as a way of connecting with their peers (Murphy, 2016). These communities allow for the teacher to help students develop skills for reflective planning, or for problem solving situations in a logical and emotional format (Blair,

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2002). Teachers can help to develop classroom communities into places where students may come to see the school as a place where they desire to learn.

### Student Perceptions

Though the role of the teacher is important in creating these classroom communities, the students ultimately help lead to the success of these communities. For this reason, instructors should be sure to listen to their students. In terms of writing, it is important to be in constant communication with students, so that the teacher can figure out who the students are as writers. Because students take varied approaches when it comes to writing, how they each personally complete the paper is important to them (Nolan, 2007). If instructors can remember to listen to the individual needs of each student when it comes to writing, students may also find themselves motivated to write. Too often, students perceive themselves as “independent actors” who feel as if they are just passing from one class to the next, without any real connection with their teachers (Murphy, 2016, pp. 173). This lack of connection has been seen to lead to students feeling disconnected with their school work and the activities with the classroom. Students have been seen to perceive that the individuality of writing within the classroom only further isolates them from other students. By striving to listen to what students have to say, teachers can help cause a decrease in students’ lack of association (Murphy, 2016).

### Upward Bound

Because the focus of research was to understand how students from low-income background perceive writing, and how to motivate these students, it was important to focus on what the literature states about these students. For the purpose of my research, I reached out to the UNH Upward Bound program, interviewing the program’s student population. As such, this

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section examines literature has been reviewed to gain further knowledge about the Upward Bound program overall.

It has been repeatedly seen that there is a strong relationship between students and their GPAs, standardized test scores, credits earned while in high school, and difficulty of the courses taken in high school, in relation to their success rate and attainment of a college degree (Sams-McPhaul, 2017). It has also been seen that the benefits that come from receiving a college degree have been disproportionately skewed towards white middle to upper class teenagers (Carr, 2013; Adelman, 2004). Data from the 1990s has shown that the students who come from these middle to upper class backgrounds are twice as likely to move onto postsecondary education (Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young, Tuttle, 2004). More so, students from low-income backgrounds rarely match the growing qualifications for college (Myers, et. al., 2004; Sams-McPhaul, 2017). Similar studies have also shown that students who come from different backgrounds than that of the middle to upper class present lower enjoyment rates with schooling (Adelman, 2004). Students who are immigrants to the United States are often hindered by schooling as well. For example, if we look at the common reasons behind hindrance for Latino students, they tend to stem from negative experiences within the classroom, a disconnect between cultural world views of U.S. schools and the students' families, and lower expectations over all (Rodriguez, Rhodes, and Aguirre, 2015; Suizzo, Jackson, Pahlke, Marroquin, Blondeau, Martinez, 2012).

The Upward Bound Program (UB) works with low-income and first-generation college-bound students to help them succeed in high school and move onto college. The program was started in 1964 as a part of the Economic Opportunity Act during the United States government's administration's War on Poverty (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). As a program, UB strives to provide:

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...fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves: high school students from low-income families; and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education. (U. S. Department of Education, 2018)

At least two-thirds of the population of students that participate with UB must come from a low-income background, while there has recently been a growth of students who are first-generation college students. Some come from backgrounds where their families possess limited English skills (Myers, et. al., 2004). In a profile created by the U. S. Department of Education, 79 percent of UB students came from both a low-income, first-generation backgrounds, 16 percent of students were first-generation only, and 5 percent of students were low-income only (Cahalan, & Curtin, 2004). Many of these students join UB between ninth and tenth grade, and typically remain with UB for up to two years (Myers, et. al., 2004). While in UB, the students often participate in several projects:

...academic instruction in mathematics, laboratory sciences, composition, literature, and foreign languages. Tutoring, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, work-study programs, education or counseling services designed to improve the financial and economic literacy of students; and programs and activities previously mentioned that are specially designed for students who are limited English proficient, students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, students with disabilities, students who are homeless children and youths, students who are in foster

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care or are aging out of foster care system or other disconnected students. (U. S. Department of Education, 2018).

These projects strive to increase high school achievement and preparation for students participating in UB (Myers, et. al., 2004). These programs have been found to lead to a rise with low-income, first-generation students graduating from high school, applying to postsecondary educational institutions, navigating various financial aid programs, and graduating from, or remaining enrolled, in a postsecondary institution (Coverdale, 2009; Myers, et. al., 2004). Often, these programs were found to double these traits (Coverdale, 2009).

### **Methods**

Because my research was focused on students from low-income backgrounds, I approached the UNH Upward Bound program for help. As discussed within my literature review, Upward Bound is a program that focuses on working with students from low-income backgrounds. In collaborating with the UNH Upward Bound program, I would be able to get in direct contact with the student population that I was looking for. The UNH Upward Bound program is one of two within New Hampshire. This program works with students from six high schools across four communities within New Hampshire. All the students within the UNH Upward Bound program make up twenty percent of the low-income high school students in New Hampshire. For this Upward Bound program, students are provided the chance to continue working in high school classes over the summer. Upward Bound structures their classes to mimic the ones that students will be taking in the coming year. At the end of the summer, students are evaluated based on the work they have completed, and they are also graded on homework and papers that are assigned during their summer classes.

### **Participants and Interview Process**

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To address the questions that I had, I reached out to current high school seniors who are also a part of the University of New Hampshire Upward Bound program. I also reached out to alumni of that program who were juniors and seniors at the University of New Hampshire. Altogether, I talked with five high school seniors and one college junior. To keep their information secure, each of the students choose a pseudonym for themselves. The five seniors I talked to were Pam, Dwight, Tina, Kevin, and Bob. The college junior I talked to was Holly.

For each of the students, I sat down with them to have a recorded conversation about writing. Each conversation was slated to last no longer than an hour. None reached past an hour. During each conversation, I asked students questions from the same document. These questions were structured to have students explore their memories of school writing, providing me with information about what they remembered. I roughly followed the questions that I had prepared, but would skip questions if a student had already answered, or would add questions if there was an interesting discussion that could be had about what a student had previously said.

### Data Analysis

After recording each conversation, transcripts from each student interview were written up. Data analysis then focused on what motivated these students to write, along with determining what about the environments the students were in stood out to them, and was helpful. Analysis also focused on exploring connections between what the students had said, and seeing if there were common threads across each interview. To interpret this information, qualitative “open coding” was used (Saldaña, 2009). After “open coding,” I moved towards implementing “thematic coding” and descriptive coding to identify the common traits and passages within the transcriptions (Gerber, Abrams, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2017; Saldaña, 2009). Here, I coded for the students’ discussions on what motivated them to write, identifying the motivational factors

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that came into play. I took care to understand the meanings the students placed on the writing they produced. I also highlighted repeated phrases, or word usages that were brought up during the discussions with students. My findings from the coding process are written in the section following, and my interpretation of those findings is then brought up later, in my discussion section.

### **Findings**

#### Introduction

The following sections explore the information gathered from talking to students about their preferences towards writing, experiences with writing within the classroom, and experiences with writing within the UNH Upward Bound summer program. In this section, I have gathered the information that presents that the way Upward Bound approaches writing instruction for their summer program. This approach creates a stronger sense of community and in turn a more positive form of external motivation that directly impacts students' internal motivation towards writing. This approach that Upward Bound takes differs from that which the students have commonly seen within their classrooms. These findings suggest that discussing writing in Upward Bound impacts how students view writing, generating an internal form of motivation that extends into their normal academic year.

#### Writing Between the Two Environments

For many of the students, there was a disconnection between the writing that occurs within Upward Bound and the writing that occurs during the academic year. This separation between the two environments of writing was seen across both student populations; students who were currently in high school, and still utilized resources provided by Upward Bound, noticed a difference and the college student who did not utilize resources provided by Upward Bound still

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highlighted a difference. The distinction between the two forms of writing can be summarized through two viewpoints. In Upward Bound, writing that occurred was more personal to the students. The students were often asked to explore who they were themselves and then discuss that information. In high school, students were commonly asked to write papers that they perceived as distant from themselves. As a result, as Pam puts it:

I've never really been, like, a big English person, not gonna lie, I'm more of a science person, and stuff. And so, like, for me, I write just to get it done, and to get the grade, but I don't really enjoy writing. So, it's just, I do it to get it done. [sic]

To Pam, writing within the classroom is always foreshadowed by the grade. She commonly found herself not enjoying the writing she was doing. There were some benefits to the writing done in school, with Pam later stating, “[In school,] we had to do papers that we didn't want to have to do, and as much as you don't want to do it, it enhances your research skills...” Yet, even here, Pam spends time discussing the benefits that school provided to her for researching. When approaching writing, Pam highlighted that the writing in Upward Bound was more fun, and enjoyable, and that “the papers were about things we actually cared about [sic].” Writing, as seen by Pam, was something that in school, was rarely associated with being “fun.”

These sentiments were also echoed by Bob, who felt that writing in the school environment was far more technical, yet that the Upward Bound environment was more approachable. Part of this belief stems from that fact that Bob felt many of the essays he wrote with Upward Bound were “personal essays.” Through this personal connection, Bob highlighted that he learned “more about writing through that [summer] class.” This knowledge came from how the teacher approached instruction in how to write sentences, with Bob saying, “[the teacher] helped us focus on our best sentences, and that helped in a way that we could make



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most, or all of our paper like that one sentence.” To Bob, this sense of exploring their writing for the strongest traits and extending those traits into the rest of the paper is lost within school. Instead, it is replaced by descriptions of the technical aspects of writing. When asked what they remember about writing techniques or concepts from high school English classes, Bob responded with discussions on grammar and the MLA format.

### Writing as a Community Based Discussion

This sense of exploration that was highlighted by Bob was also reflected in many of the students, with their enjoyment of writing in the Upward Bound program coming from how the conversations around the writing was structured. They felt that they could share what they were writing about and that their peers would reciprocate with helpful and insightful information. For many of the students, these were peers who they can turn to at any time to discuss their writing, both at Upward Bound and in an academic setting. This discussion was different than the traditional peer review that occurs within the classroom, however; it was something that appeared to extend beyond reviewing the work. This kind of discussion involved just talking about the writing, relying heavily on how the community feels.

To Kevin, talking with his fellow students was extremely helpful when it came to reviewing the work that he had done. During his previous summer, Kevin worked with the teacher to produce his college essay, an extremely important personal essay to Kevin. Kevin and the other seniors felt that the approach the teacher took was very productive in having them create their essays. But, one of the most important components of this process to Kevin was how peer review was approached, with Kevin stating:

I also feel like peer editing is a lot better in UB, because there’s not like, she didn’t give us forms, or she didn’t give us a lot of forms [that said], “You need to this, and this, and

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this,” but it was more like a read it and discuss it. And I also feel like peer editing in UB is a lot more critical, because we know we can give each other these comments, but we won’t hate each other at the end of the day for it. [sic]

Kevin presents the belief that, because the students are not tasked with the more traditional form of peer review—the teacher asking for the students to follow steps—the process was instead more of a natural discussion. As a result, the students saw the editing process as “a lot more critical.” Another large part was how well the students knew each other within the classroom. At the start of that summer, each of the students were assigned randomly to their English classes. Because of these random assignments, the teacher was tasked with creating a community that allowed each of the students to feel comfortable discussing their essays. By organizing the classroom community to be discussion based from the start, the students were able to open up to each other easily. This viewpoint was presented by the students many times. To return to Kevin, when asked about writing techniques or concepts that he learned from classmates within high school, Kevin immediately replied that they did not often hand their papers off to classmates within their high school classes. Kevin then explained his reasoning, stating, “I dunno, I usually find that, when I hand my paper off to a peer, they’re not very critical of it, because they’re just like, this was amazing, and I’m like, ‘Okay’ [sic].” Notice here the usage of critical. In the academic context, sharing writing within his classes was not helpful to Kevin. He felt that his classmates were often not critical of his papers because the conversation around the papers was not natural.

This notion of discussion being more helpful for peer review is further reinforced by Tina’s experiences that past summer and within school. Within an academic setting, Tina found

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herself not enjoying peer review, much like Kevin. Tina further elaborated on her feelings behind peer review, though, stating:

I also feel like it depends on the classes you take, or the people that's in the classes, because there could be on stranger who's not afraid to tell you, or to give critical things, and, yeah. And, there's people who are like, "oh yeah, that's really good," but, they're not really telling truth. [sic]

To Tina, she felt that it was through the nature of the classroom that allowed for peer review to be critical. If the classroom community was set up in a way that fostered critical discussion, like the Upward Bound classes, then it was helpful. If the community was not set up in the proper way, then it was not helpful. Unlike Kevin though, Tina presented more of a willingness to share with others overall. When asked about writing concepts that Tina felt she had taught herself, or improved upon herself, Tina replied with a list of different writing components, stating, "but it's also editing, and like, reviewing, and like, rereading, and also just getting other people suggestions about it. Because, I feel like, they might suggest things that you might have not thought of. So, always reach out [sic]." While Kevin presented an aversion towards sharing his work, Tina recognized the benefit of reaching out to peers. However, even during this list, Tina said that she only reached out to peers for further ideas, or to get suggestions about her writing, hopefully to have a conversation about the writing. This type of approach was developed during her time in Upward Bound; as Tina later stated, "I feel like it definitely helped me... And I feel like, in Upward Bound, we also do many discussions on writing, and what we wrote, and stuff like that really helps me open up, and discuss the class in the fall [sic]." Because the writing community over the summer was one that was productive, critical, and open, Tina could take what skills she had developed into the next school year. Tina also felt that the conversations were

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helpful because “they’re just more honest.” Tina expanded on this idea, stating, “I like honesty. I’d rather have somebody be, give me constructive criticism on my writing, instead of being like, ‘oh it’s all good, you don’t need any help,’ and it’s like, ‘I always need help though’ [sic].” This viewpoint of always striving to produce the best writing she possibly could was something that Tina attributes to having been fostered by the Upward Bound community.

Holly, the college student, also reciprocated these feelings towards discussion as well. When asked about preferences towards writing, Holly stated, “I really find the peer review part of, like, when you write, really helpful [sic].” She continued with this idea, saying, “I just felt [that] usually having another person look at your stuff, and usually having them say, ‘Oh you didn’t say this, you didn’t say that, oh you should include that,’ is, like really helpful for me.” This process of asking other people for help was essential for Holly, who felt she could not fully move forward with a paper unless she had talked with others about what she was intending to write about. This belief of reaching out to others appears to have roots with the writing from Upward Bound. Holly, who also admitted that she did not enjoy sharing her writing with others, found the approaches of talking helpful when in Upward Bound. The community based discussion, and the sharing and collaboration of forming a goal acted as a great form of external motivation that then extended to impact her internal motivation.

### Writing Through Teacher Support

The approaches taken by the teachers were not only important for the students forming a community, but were also important for creating a connection between the student and the teacher. Often, these connections were something that many of the students felt were missing. When questioned about the practices their teachers commonly took when providing feedback within their classrooms, many of the students could identify moments in which they felt their

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teacher feedback was not helpful for their needs. This usually stemmed from a very impersonal approach taken by their teachers. When their teachers would take a more personal approach towards feedback, students found themselves feeling more confident towards their writing.

Students often found themselves the most detached from their papers when teachers would not take different approaches towards explaining expectations for the paper. They also found themselves growing detached from what they were writing about when teachers did not explain what was incorrect, instead just marking the paper for review. In Tina's case, she was reminded of an instance where one of her teachers wanted her to complete a twelve-page paper for the class. This was the first time Tina had been assigned a task like this one, so she had been feeling uncomfortable about writing the paper. However, in her experience, the prompt that the teacher provided did little to help. To Tina, her teacher "failed at giving us [instruction on] formatting [the paper], and giving us a layout of [the paper], and I was definitely confused, and having a hard time writing it." Because the prompt that had been provided to Tina was designed to convey what the teacher wanted teach to the whole class, Tina felt that her needs were being ignored. Had the teacher instead taken the approach towards "being more detailed, and... reaching out, and asking each individual student" about what they needed to understand to complete the project, she would have felt more confident. Pam had a similar experience when she talked about a time her teacher did not appear to want to explain further. As Pam put it, for her paper:

[When the teacher]... explained, it was very confusing, and when you went to ask for help, [the teacher] would just repeat exactly what [they had] said before. And then, like, when [the teacher] was grading papers and stuff, if [they] found one error, [they would] be, like, "Oh, it's wrong," and then hand it back to you, and then you'd fix that one error,

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and then there'd just be another one right after it, and [they would] hand it back to you.

So, like, [the teacher] never finished fully grading the papers, [they] just kind of go until [they found] one error, and then make you redo it again.

From the start of the assignment, the teacher had clear intentions on where they wanted the paper to go, but was unable to successfully communicate this information to their students. When Pam returned for help, the teacher was still unable to explain in terms that Pam could understand. As a result, Pam was left feeling frustrated with the teacher, and feeling she was not as good at writing as she could be.

When teachers took initiative, students tended to feel more confident about themselves as writers. To Dwight, this occurred during his junior year, when his teacher actively reached out to him to make sure she understood his writing, but also to make sure that Dwight was headed down the right path for writing. Prior to that year, Dwight commonly found himself feeling dejected when it came to writing in the classroom. As he put it, "I honestly don't show my papers to anyone but the teacher." Even then, Dwight later went on to explain that he rarely enjoyed providing his paper to his teacher. But, when his junior year teacher sat down to talk with him, Dwight found his opinions towards discussing writing shifting. As Dwight stated:

Yeah, that a just, sort've like, really sitting down and talking to me. Not a lot of teachers just wanna, like... I'm sure they would if I approached them, like, "Hey, I need help," but she kind of made that approach to me, and I didn't, so that was super helpful, uh, cause I suck at asking for help. [sic]

By taking the time to reach out and discuss what was going on the writing, Dwight's teacher was very helpful. In reflecting on this moment in the past, Dwight learned a lot more about his writing, and about what is helpful. He could recognize that he should reach out for help more

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often, instead of just floating by. In reaching out to others, Dwight came to understand what helped his writing the most. By having his teacher approach him to talk, Dwight felt that he had been helped immensely.

These feelings were shared by all the other students either within Upward Bound or within their high school classes. When teachers took the time to reach out to students on the level of just talking about their papers, their perceptions of themselves as writers increased immensely. Like Bob had stated earlier, when the teacher took the initiative to look at each of the students' best sentences and expand upon what the students had written, rather than attempt to correct what the student had written, the students felt more comfortable with themselves as writers. A form of positive extrinsic motivation was created for the students that allowed them to continue writing in a format that they enjoyed.

### Discussion is Natural

For many of the students, when talking about peer review within the classroom, they all highlighted moments where the peer review failed. As Kevin stated, "I dunno, I usually find that, when I hand my paper off to peer, they're not very critical of it, because they're just like, this was amazing, and I'm like, 'Okay?' [sic]." It is also important to reflect on Bob's surprise when he was given the instruction to conduct peer review without any forms in Upward Bound. These students showed apprehension when talking about peer review within the high school setting, and many of the times they felt the peer review was either not critical enough, or not helpful. They would find the peer review to be a waste of time, or they would wind up like Dwight, who had an apprehension towards showing his papers to his teachers. These students' identities as writers were not being reinforced.

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At the same time, when talking about writing within Upward Bound, many of the students felt that a crucial part of their identities as writers developed through the discussion.

Later, Dwight said that:

...it's more relaxed, and like, open, and more, I dunno, I like that kind of style that they've had, uh, it was my first-year teacher... was wicked awesome and there was just like, it's kind of like... I dunno, everyone was free to just talk about and discuss a paper, and stuff like that... [sic]

This shift from not wanting to share his papers to enjoying talking about his papers stems from the ideas that Dwight mentions within his quote. The conversation was relaxed and open, not forced. For these students, the Upward Bound classroom environment was structured in a way that a natural discussion occurred amongst everyone. When the students were in an environment where writing instruction was framed as an internal set of processes, their teachers' requests to talk with peers threw the students off their game. But, when the students were placed in an environment where writing instruction was framed as external communication, they came to understand the benefit of having conversations with their peers. The discussion was a natural extension of the writing process for the students, and because of that, the students saw the benefits, and they could carry over what they had learned into the school year.

### **Discussion**

Having now read through the findings, a clear difference can be seen between how Upward Bound approaches writing and how the traditional classroom approaches writing. This difference can be seen to have a huge impact on how the students perceive themselves as writers. The external environment of Upward Bound, the community that the program creates for the students to work within, can be seen to directly impact the students' internal motivations towards



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how they approach writing. Thus, the theoretical contribution is around the meaning of “extrinsic” motivation when it relates to writing. Because the community is extrinsic to the student’s self, it feeds back into each student’s internal desire to write and improve.

Traditionally, when it comes to writing instruction within the high school classroom, such a process would normally be described as “intrinsic” motivation. But, what these findings present is that when students find themselves in an environment that allows for literate discussions about their writing to occur, their intrinsic motivation is increased. This information is useful especially for coming to understand how to teach students from low-income backgrounds. As we have seen in data from Upward Bound programs (Cahalan, & Curtin, 2004; Coverdale, 2009; Myers, et. al., 2004; Sams-McPhaul, 2017), low-income students rarely have these experiences with classroom writing, and as a result, they don’t have the opportunity to see writing as a skill that can help them move on to college. In response, it is important for teachers to understand ways of fostering interest and motivation within these students.

Extrinsic motivation, as described in the literature review, is complex. Because so many factors can come into to play, the definition of extrinsic motivation often seems as if it is shifting. However, a connecting thread between the definitions is that the environment that students are within plays a huge role (Deci, 1975, Ryan and Deci, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1992, pg. 1006). As we have seen within the findings, the community that is created within Upward Bound promotes discussion and the inclusion of students’ sharing their ideas. In approaching writing as a peer discussion, students return to see writing as a form of communication with others. Their papers are no longer seen as a disconnected piece of information. In turn, they do not feel disconnected from writing.. Instead, they begin to see that being a writer is an extension of themselves, just another way for them to share their ideas with others around them. They are

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socially engaging with their writing, reinforcing the idea that writing is much more than just answering what the teacher wants.

By engaging with the students on a personal level, the teacher also plays a huge part in shaping students' opinions towards writing. Traditionally, within the classroom, teachers are figures that loom over the students. They are only there to correct errors, and as a result, students commonly avoid bringing up their writing topics with the teacher, aside from seeking if the choices they have made satisfy the assignment. In the writing and motivation literature (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007; Pintrich, Marx, Boyle, 1993), researchers have suggested that students perceive teachers' interest in their work and that they try to mimic the language of the teacher. These practices, though, may detach students from owning their writing. We can see this in student's reluctance to share their papers with anyone else but themselves. Because writing is being taught as an internal process, students are not learning to communicate and feel isolated within the classroom. When teachers reach out to the students on a personal level, this isolating structure can be destroyed. Within Upward Bound, the teachers were always approaching the students to talk about the paper, to help them better explain what they wanted to say on the page. Because of this approach, the teacher was no longer the figure that loomed behind the students' shoulders. Instead, the teacher was seen as a peer, working to reinforce what the student wanted to say. In a sense, the power can be considered to have been placed in the students' hands. This style of teaching is a huge factor in helping students warm up to the idea of discussion for their writing. Because the teacher is actively modeling interest towards what the students are writing, the students are also focusing more on their writing as well. This style of teaching, while more common within Upward Bound, is applicable to both environments. Consider the example of Dwight, who fondly remembered his teacher reaching out to him.

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The final piece of information is that students found feedback around writing was most helpful when the discussion that occurred around the writing was natural. Students are asking each other genuine questions that they have about the writing, or they are stating their genuine opinions about the writing. By not providing a form that dictated the students' responses, students are able to speak on their terms, in their own words. This approach helps to further reinforce the idea that writing is social, and a form of communication. Within the classroom, students feel that their writing, and their discussion around their writing, is filtered. This filtering further deters the students from approaching writing as a conversation that can be had with others. Instead, it becomes a task that their teaching is looking to eventually grade, further reinforcing the concept that grading—not writing—is the take away.

### **Conclusion**

So, what do these findings imply? I know that for myself personally, these findings have presented a new way that I can approach writing instruction. Especially for students from low-income backgrounds, it is important to work with them to make sure that they are able to take all the opportunities to succeed in life. As a teacher, it is important to be there for these students, helping guide them down paths that will lead to them to success and with the ability to communicate with those around them. But when many of these students are feeling disenfranchised with the school environments they are within, then teachers need to look at something to change.

The way that the students from Upward Bound presented their knowledge of writing can be helpful for teachers to implement into their classrooms. By having conversations with students, teachers can motivate their students in new ways. Creating that positive environment for students to succeed can help nurture that communication. To these students from low-income

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backgrounds, it the notion of being recognized for who they were as people that impacted their writing. During Upward Bound they could forget they were students who wrote and instead viewed themselves as people who wrote as a natural extension of their personality. If this concept can be brought into the classroom, then teachers may find that all of their students may come to enjoy writing.

However, I do understand that this research is still in the beginning phases. There are more steps that I need to take to further understand how this approach can be implemented into actual classrooms. I need to now talk to teachers to understand how they feel about such an approach. I need to communicate with administration to see if such an approach falls in line with the rules that have been set. But, even without these pieces to the puzzle, there still remains the notion that it was the conversation that was helpful to the students. Not the lecture.

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