As a writing teacher, I regularly encounter students who tell me they hate writing, or that they never write outside of class. However, I often see these same students sending text messages and e-mails, or participating in online social networking. I have come to realize that while I consider these activities writing, my students often do not. Why should they? These activities are typically considered illicit in the classroom, and are therefore rarely acknowledged by writing teachers. I am certainly guilty of missing opportunities for teaching because I am so wrapped up in policing cell phone use in class, or in keeping everyone on the correct screen in the computer lab. Janis Cramer addresses a similar issue in “Learning a Lesson from the Girls Who Write Notes” (2004); she describes how she was able to tap into the knowledge and skills of “the girls who write notes” to improve scores on state writing exam. With this article in mind, I have to wonder if we might make better use of the variety of literacy skills our students are developing outside of traditionally sanctioned activities.

This question seems especially important in the context of recent technologies that allow students to remain in constant, instantaneous communication with their peers. A mere five years after Cramer’s piece, handwritten notes have been all but forgotten for many teenagers, but students continue to seek out ways of communicating through text. The notion that newer forms of communication like email and text messages have caused students’ writing skills to deteriorate has become a widespread source of disappointment and disdain. On the other hand, businesses have begun to utilize these technologies to improve communication and efficiency. When I taught Technical Writing, I began to notice that the latest textbooks contained large sections devoted to electronic communication, evidence that the business world recognizes the potential benefits of using every available means of communication. If we fail to validate and encourage all the writing tasks our students undertake, not only are we missing opportunities to have important classroom conversations about audience, purpose, genre, and medium, but we may be leaving our students under-prepared to make informed decisions about their written communications outside of school. A conversation with one high school senior helped me organize some of my ideas about in-school and out-of-school writing, and provided a great deal of insight into how I might begin to think differently about the connections between writing in school and writing in the world. When I arranged to meet with a student I will call “Pablo,” I hoped to learn about the links he sees between the writing he does at school and the writing he does in other areas of his life; I saw these connections as a starting place for exploring the ways in which school practices enhance personal writing and vice versa. With this goal in mind, I came prepared with a set of five open-ended questions that I hoped would lead us to these connections:

- What kinds of writing do you do?
- What kinds of things do you think about when you’re writing?
- Do you ever think about who will read your writing? If so, when?
- In what contexts do you usually revise your writing?
- What kind of revising do you do?

I thought that if I started with these general questions we would naturally get around to drawing connections between various contexts for writing. Instead, I learned that in many ways, he thinks of his in-school writing and his personal writing as completely unrelated, or even in opposition to one another. Though I recognized some similarities between the processes he uses for school and other writ-
ing. Pablo did not seem to make these connections on his own. In fact, he was reluctant to classify most of the text he produces outside of school as “real writing.” For instance, he described e-mails as not writing, but “just blurtin out what I want to say,” and he almost failed to mention the work he does to prepare for creating a webpage – work many writing teachers would recognize as “sketch” or a “quick write.”

By examining one student’s ideas about what writing means, and how it can be used, I hope to suggest some possible reasons for this apparent disconnect between Pablo’s perceptions of school writing and other kinds of writing, and to develop some ideas for creating more explicit links between the numerous forms of writing students produce. My concern is that as long as students are not invited to view the range of writing they produce as significant, neither students nor teachers will be able to take full advantage of the writing skills and opportunities available to students outside the world of the writing classroom. If, however, we embrace the numerous and varied forms of communication students employ – and recognize the complexity of the rhetorical situations our students navigate daily – perhaps we could better serve our students in the classroom, and better equip them for their future careers.

An Overview of Pablo’s Writing

During our 40 minute interview, Pablo focused on two main types of writing: his college application essay, and the writing he does in preparation for his work as a web-designer. At the start of our interview, I asked him to show me a piece of writing he had done in the last six months, and he chose to share his college essay with me. In his essay, he explores the tensions he feels regarding his racial identity. Pablo moved to the United States from Argentina at the age of twelve. He has developed a strong social network in the United States, and a significant portion of his education occurred here. Still he feels very connected to the Argentine culture, and Spanish remains his primary language at home. Therefore, he struggles to find an appropriate label to identify his race, or as he put it, to decide “which bubble [he] should have filled.” Pablo chose two specific examples – what he calls “stories” – to illustrate the ways in which he sometimes feels “foreign,” and at other times feels “American.” In some cases, he seems to use terms interchangeably in ways that are problematic; for instance, he conflates the concepts of “American” and “white.” He also tends to separate the notion of being “Latino” from that of being “American.” I mention this issue because it has implications for the way he uses language to understand his identity, but an analysis of these assumptions and associations is outside the scope of this paper.

While Pablo freely discussed his college essay, the writing he does for his own purposes was much more difficult to uncover. He apparently thought that I would not be interested in texts other than those produced for academic purposes, and that writing done only for himself was not legitimate writing. However, after insisting several times that he does not write outside of school, Pablo finally told me about a thoughtful process, through which he analyzes his potential audiences before designing a website for a professional client. After composing several paragraphs about his goals for the site, he then uses this writing to make decisions about how best to achieve the purpose of the website. This writing is done in a notebook and then thrown away without anyone else ever seeing it, which seems to contribute to Pablo’s view that neither the process, nor the product should be considered real writing. Because of the purpose of the writing and its private nature, I think of this activity as “pre-writing” or “freewriting,” but Pablo never used these words to describe his own work. Although Pablo did not talk specifically about text messages – and this interview occurred before the Twitter explosion – we can learn lessons from Pablo’s statements that would apply to a wide variety of writing students do on a daily basis, including their various forms of electronic communication.
Writing an Identity

It seems my timing was perfect for talking to Pablo about his writing, because he had recently completed his college application essay and was eager to discuss it with me. He had chosen to write about his confusion regarding his racial identity, which he jokingly referred to as his “race complex.” He said, “I’m not either. you know. I’m not Latino, even though I was born in Argentina, but at the same time I’m not white.” The language Pablo used to discuss this issue demonstrated that he had conflicting feelings about his race, but it also showed that he had given the matter a great deal of thought and had come to some important conclusions about the contradictory nature of race and identity. Through writing his college essay, he was able to clarify some tensions he had experienced since he moved to the United States.

Pablo did not explicitly say that he was trying to cover multiple facets of racial identity, but it was clear from listening to him talk about the examples he included in his essay that he did, in fact, describe several different factors, which all contribute to his notion of “race.” For instance, he discussed the importance of language in several contexts throughout the interview, and in the college essay he specifically listed his English language skills as an important part of his “American” identity. In addition, Pablo emphasized the cultural elements that contribute to his complicated sense of racial identity; he described, for example, a time when he saw his mother attempt to greet an American friend with a kiss on the cheek, only to be “stiff armed” by her friend. This incident served as a clear indicator that he and his friends may have dramatically different social expectations, and therefore added another layer of complexity to his sense of his identity. During our conversation, he noted several times the difficulty in capturing a complex experience like moving to another country in his writing. The most important question for Pablo was whether he had communicated the experience in such a way that the audience would understand what it was like. In the process, he also worked through some very complicated emotions and experiences.

Ultimately, Pablo came to embrace his multiple identities and summarized them in the following way: “I know where I’ve been. I know about my Hispanic culture, I understand it, I accept it. And at the same time, I see where I’m going forward and I see that I’m probably gonna live the rest of my life in America. And I’m probably gonna go to college here, work here, and raise a family here.” Though this version of his position seems quite clear and tidy, Pablo’s account of his experiences indicates that this articulate statement did not come easily. Instead, he had to work through several versions of his ideas before he came to one that satisfied him. It seems as though the experience of writing about his identity and developing a clearly articulated statement about it actually allowed him to clarify his feelings in his own mind. Sheridan Blau (1987) argues, “Only if we attribute enough value to what we have to say are we likely to make the effort required to get our ideas straight, even for ourselves.” Pablo clearly had a sense of the importance of his ideas, and worked hard to get them straight, both for himself and for his audience.

While the topic for Pablo’s essay obviously required explicit discussion of his identity in terms of his race, he revealed another aspect of his identity through the style of his writing, and the language he used to describe his process. Throughout the interview, Pablo made frequent remarks about his efforts to allow his audience to get to know him through reading his essay. He made a concentrated effort not to let his college essay resemble “that stiff sounding research paper that I write sometimes,” and he distinguished this piece from a biographical research paper he had written by saying, “This is a lot more like me, you know.” Still, he said writing about himself was difficult for him, because “you’re trying to explain to someone who you are in two pages.” Despite this challenge, Pablo seemed proud to claim, “if you read [this essay] and then meet five people, I guess you could pick me.” This
ability to create a text unique to him — and the importance of having the freedom to do so — came up several times in our discussion.

**A Writer’s Process**

Revision emerged as a theme in our interview almost immediately. While writing his college application essay, Pablo made numerous revisions to his work, and his discussion of these revisions revealed that he saw this process as an essential part of meeting his goals for the piece. As writing teachers, we consistently try to encourage our students to take on the challenge of revision — the kind of revision that involves substantive changes in organization and content. Still, we continue to find that students rarely do this kind of work on their own; they may do it for a better grade, or because the teacher said they have to, but most students will not voluntarily invest significant time and energy in revision. Perhaps students do not see the value in this kind of revision, or perhaps they do not have the ability to truly see their writing as work in progress. Whatever the reasons, we know that skilled, dedicated writing teachers struggle to instill the habits that lead students to do substantial, self-directed revisions.

However, during my interview with Pablo, one of the first aspects of his writing he brought up was the conclusion of his college application essay, which he had rewritten “at least five times” before he was finally happy with it. As he discussed his experience writing this essay — the conclusion in particular — it became clear to me that Pablo had made revisions that involved much more than changing a word or two, or using different punctuation. Rather than engaging in what Nancy Sommers (1980) calls a “thesaurus philosophy of writing,” Pablo wrestled with the text, searching for the best way to explain a complicated, tension-filled topic. He worked hard to make the conclusion “sound exactly how it was pictured in [his] mind,” which involved more energy and thought than consulting a reference book.

The more Pablo talked about these revisions, the more it became clear to me that he was personally invested in communicating meaning. In fact, he did not seem particularly concerned with satisfying the members of the admissions committee who would be reading his piece, at least not if we understand satisfying them to mean gaining admission to the university. Though we talked about his admissions essay for a significant portion of the interview, he never explicitly talked about having concerns that he would not be accepted. Instead, he focused on his concerns about trying to capture his personality in two pages, and the difficulties inherent in such a task. He said, “Maybe this isn’t even the full of it. Maybe this is just two stories and an intro and a conclusion and that’s it...That’s not enough sometimes.” This goal of making the essay sound like him, not the goal of being accepted to college, seemed to be the driving force behind Pablo’s frequent revisions. He said at one point, “I still don’t think it’s perfect. But there are certain parts that aren’t great but are really me. It’s what I wanted to say.”

Not only did Pablo revise the essay a number of times, he also sought advice from other people he trusted, and then made thoughtful choices about whether or not to incorporate their suggestions — another habit writing teachers often try to encourage. When I asked him specifically if he was nervous about submitting the essay, he replied, “I’ve had a lot of people read it,” and then added, “Even my dad liked it.” Although it wasn’t a direct answer to my question, this response revealed that finding readers for his work is an important step in his writing process, and he gained confidence as readers understood the message he was trying to communicate. Peter Elbow (1993) argues that finding readers who will like and appreciate our work is an important step toward improving as writers. Elbow writes, “The way writers learn to like their writing is by the grace of having a reader or two who likes it” (1993, Elbow’s emphasis). People improve as writers by liking their writing enough to work on it, so that others will like it as well. If this is the case, it seems Pablo has reaped the benefits of liking his own writing, and of having readers who liked it, too. He certainly seems to have cared about his writing enough to revise it mul-
Multiple times until he believed it communicated his message in the way he intended.

Although Pablo did rely on input from his readers, he did not always alter his writing to please them. In one instance, Pablo’s desire to express himself the way he intended resulted in his refusal to make a revision his mother suggested. According to Pablo, his mother wanted him to remove one line from the essay, because she thought it was, “something you might say when you’re talking to somebody, but you don’t put it in a college essay.” However, Pablo believed the line was appropriate for illustrating his personality, and for him the risks involved with including “a little joke” in his essay were outweighed by the importance of allowing his audience to get to know him. In fact, he was so pleased with the passage that it was one of the few he read aloud for me: “What makes me different from the white kid sitting next to me? I can speak English just as well as him. My skin color is no darker than his, even though sometimes I’d like to think so.” He said the line might be “incorrect,” but “it adds a little bit more of me.” This idea of making the text match his personality came up repeatedly in the interview. Creating a distinctive essay that a reader could recognize as his work took precedence over following the perceived rules of writing a college essay.

Of course, the fact that Pablo did not appear to worry much about the possibility of being rejected by the admissions committee does not imply that he lacked an awareness of his audience. Throughout the interview, Pablo discussed his writing in terms of prospective audiences, and showed evidence of thoughtful attention to the potential reactions his writing would evoke. He told me that he wondered if his readers for the college application would just think “oh, poor kid,” or if they would understand “what is going on with [him],” demonstrating again that his main objective in writing the piece was to communicate a message effectively, rather than to follow the rules and write the kind of essay his readers expected. He commented that writing the college essay was different from the “literary analysis” papers he wrote in class because it was not “fill

in the blank writing.” The challenge the application essay presented seemed like a welcome change for Pablo, despite his uncertainty about his audience’s reaction.

**Not That Kind of Writing**

While Pablo seemed willing, even excited, to discuss his college essay with me, he did not readily bring up some of the other writing he had done. Only after I asked explicitly whether he ever picks up a pen or pencil and writes outside of school, did he finally describe a complex, sophisticated process through which he prepares for his work as a web-designer. His un-edited description of this practice is worth quoting at some length, because it shows his efforts to articulate and clarify the process for me, and perhaps for himself:

So, when I’m working on one of those [webpages], sometimes I’ll grab a pencil and just start writing about like just what I want to do, and like what I want to plan out. And I do it in like paragraph form. I don’t do like a “to do list” or anything like that...just because...but that’s not, that’s not really like that kind of writing. It’s just, you know, writing about what I want the webpage to look like, what I want the feeling to be like, what I want people to do with it.

I am certain that my expression registered my surprise at these remarks. As a writing instructor, I would be thrilled to know that my students sit down to do this kind of writing before they begin a project. Pablo clearly understands the importance of the intended audiences for the web-pages he designs, and he thinks carefully about those audiences before he develops a plan. He considers what he wants “the webpage to be able to do” and how he wants “the user to feel when they open the web-page.” He says, “I talk about, like, what I want the viewer to look at when they see the webpage, what I want, you know, the webpage to be able to do, how I’m gonna do it.” Though the writing itself is not for an outside audience, it helps him prepare for a very public form of communication, and it requires a thoughtful analysis.
of his future audiences; he must recognize the 
needs of the client, as well as the website user,
and he acknowledges that these two sets of 
needs are not always compatible. Despite the 
sophisticated nature of his rhetorical analysis,
and the crucial role his writing plays, Pablo is 
clearly reluctant to acknowledge this activity as 
real writing.

This writing also plays another role in 
Pablo’s writing process. He says that as he 
develops the web-site, he returns to the writing 
he did beforehand as a way to stay on task. He 
calls the writing his “own little prompt,” which 
he uses to focus his work and make sure he is 
achieving his goals for the design. According to 
Sondra Perl (1980) returning to the topic 
of the paper is one of the recursive practices 
common among writers. She notes, “Writers 
consistently return to their notion of the topic 
throughout the process of writing. Particularly 
when they are stuck, writers seem to use the 
topic...as a way to get going again” (p.364). 
Though he uses different language to describe 
his objective, through creating a “prompt” 
or a “topic” for his web-design work, Pablo 
provides himself with a way to engage in this 
recursive process.

It seems that as Pablo described this 
writing and the purpose it serves, he began to 
think of it in a slightly different way. When 
I asked him clarify what he meant by “that 
kind of writing;” he started to explain, but then 
decided, “yeah, I guess you could say it’s this 
kind of writing.” He never said why he did 
not initially think of this pre-writing activity 
as “that kind of writing,” nor did he say why 
he changed his mind. However, as he talked 
through his ideas, he began to make comparisons between his web-design writing and e-
mail, and through this comparison, some of his 
additional perceptions emerged. For instance,
he claims that he does not have to think about 
what he writes in either the e-mails or the web-
design planning. Regarding the latter he says, 
“I’m not as self-conscious about my writing as 
I am when I’m writing anything else which is 
something that someone else is gonna see...I’m 
just writing for myself there.” He contrasts the

experience of writing without thinking about 
it with writing his college application essay, 
saying, “When I do something like this, I think 
about what I’m gonna say and sometimes I just 
sit there. [hesitates] When I write I have an 
idea of what I’m trying to say already. I have 
an idea of how a sentence is gonna sound, and 
then it comes out.” Part of thinking about what 
he plans to say appears to include considering 
the potential effect the writing will have on the 
reader. Though he acknowledges e-mails are 
typically for another reader, Pablo insists that 
he doesn’t think about being corrected when he 
writes e-mails; therefore, he places them in the 
same category with writing for himself: “not 
that kind of writing.”

Despite Pablo’s insistence on using writ-
ting to express his ideas, or to represent his 
personality accurately, he is not immune to the 
concerns many students express about writing 
in a way that readers will consider “correct.” 
Some of his comments reveal that he does 
think of his audience for the college application 
essay as a kind of judge, and even says that one 
of the “blocks” he has when he writes is the 
knowledge that someone will read his work. 
He says that when he writes he thinks “Some-
one’s gonna correct it. Someone’s gonna try 
to find the mistakes in this and grade me upon 
it.” Still, he maintains that this knowledge 
would not prevent him from writing something 
he wanted to write, and he again mentions the 
"joke he refused to remove from his essay.

Learning From Pablo’s Writing

Listening to Pablo’s descriptions of his 
writing – and of his writing practices – I was 
continually struck by the level of maturity and 
sophistication with which he discussed his 
work, and by the extent to which he seemed to 
understand the potential for expressing and 
exploring his identity through writing. In many 
ways, Pablo does exactly what writing teachers 
hope their students will do: he takes ownership 
of his writing; he invests time and energy into 
revising both the words and the ideas in his 
text; he performs careful analysis of his audience 
throughout his writing process. Every 
time I listen to this interview or read the
transcript, I wonder how it is that Pablo developed these habits. I assume they came from in-school writing practices, and were initially guided by teachers. However, I do not know this for certain, nor do I know what exactly his teachers did to teach these practices in such a way that he applies them now in a wide variety of writing contexts, including the writing he does outside of school.

Though I tend to credit Pablo’s experiences at school with instilling many of his writing practices, I still have concerns about his perception that much of what I would call his writing is somehow not legitimate. I cannot help but wonder about the opportunities Pablo may have missed because his notion of writing is so wrapped up in the idea of being “corrected” and “graded,” or because he does not recognize the important work of audience analysis as a possible part of in-school writing. I’ve begun to question how these school experiences might have contributed to Pablo’s belief that “real writing” does not include many of the activities he engages in outside of an academic context, even though these activities often involve both exploring complex ideas and communicating meaning through text, either for himself or for other audiences. Surely, these are salient features of real writing. In reviewing Pablo’s statements, I continually return to the question: How is it that a student can internalize and replicate a number of strategies that strong writers use—and that writing teachers recommend—even while he ignores the significance of much of his own writing? Perhaps more importantly, how can we, as writing teachers, better tap into students’ various ways of communicating through text, and use these practices to enhance our writing instruction? I do not yet have concrete answers to these questions, but they have served as important guides as I developed some ideas for incorporating more varied, and perhaps more relevant, discussions and activities into writing classes.

**Where to Go From Here**

I think an important first step will be to provide an opportunity for students to have an explicit discussion of the texts they produce on a daily basis, and to have their teachers openly acknowledge the importance of these communications. Text messaging, or “texting,” is one form of communication that has generated a great deal of public concern recently, and has certainly caught the attention of a number of educators. John Przybys explores this recent trend in “Dismarks my teacha cry: Cell phone text messaging spawns debate on ‘ryt’ and wrong,” noting: “The standard tack for an English teacher is to explain to students that different forms of writing are suitable in different circumstances” (2008). This difference is certainly important, and we should talk about it, but simply explaining it is probably not enough. If we are not careful, this kind of presentation could lead to perceptions like Pablo’s: that writing done for one’s own purposes, or for a non-critical audience, is not legitimate writing. In addition, a discussion about the importance of writing with standard spelling and punctuation in certain writing situations will only touch on one set of concerns.

Arguably, the more important issue is the one expressed in a recent USA Today article. Citing an interview with a high school English teacher of 34 years, Tracey Wong Briggs writes, “Texting relies on brevity, simple word choice and sentence fragments, and she sees more teenagers struggle to compose essays of any length with cohesive logic. She sees texting, and the ubiquitous screen-based communication it embodies, as ultimately affecting students’ intellectual endurance” (2007). I see this as a much more compelling problem, and one that will certainly not be solved by merely insisting that “text-speak” is for personal business outside the classroom.

Students will learn when they leave the school environment that electronic communication has a very real place in the work world. When I teach Technical Writing, I always incorporate discussions of electronic communication, which is becoming increasingly necessary in the workplace. In fact, the textbook I use contains a chapter called “E-mail and Memos”—which includes a section on “electronic messaging”—as well as a chapter on “Websites and Online Environments” (Dobrin et al., 2008).
Clearly, these authors recognize that electronic communication is a necessary part of writing in the workplace. If we teach students that these forms of communication are legitimate, we can also teach students how to use them in a thoughtful, audience-appropriate way. If we instead imply that “real writing” is “traditional writing,” we are missing the opportunity to help students become effective communicators in all areas of their lives.

We must decide to go beyond the conversation about context, and actually have students engage in activities that bring to light the issue of rhetorical situation, as well as encourage the development of extended ideas. For instance, why not bring into the conversation about rhetorical situations a discussion of detail, elaboration, and document length? This conversation could then lead to an activity in which students must discuss one topic in several forms: first in under 160 characters, and then in a three page essay, for instance. The messages would be for different audiences, with different needs, and perhaps with different degrees of interest in the topic. Writing activities like this could promote an open discussion – with concrete examples to which students can relate – where teachers can show their students that there is a wide range of writing that can be valuable and valid.

Universities and colleges have begun using text messages to communicate emergency situations on campus, and the system has proven to be efficient and effective. Everything from inclement weather to potentially dangerous criminals – along with the relevant safety instructions—can be communicated in this way. Certainly, in many cases a smaller group of people with more knowledge about the issue would require a more detailed report of the causes and possible solutions. Real world examples like this might illustrate the ways in which the audience and purpose of the message determine both the medium and the level of detail the author employs.

Another possibility is to incorporate e-mail into formal writing activities. For instance, students could do their freewriting in the form of an “e-mail to myself.” Once they have generated some ideas in this informal context, they could send e-mails to their friends describing their work, or to the teacher containing more formal topic proposals. An exercise like this would create a space for a discussion of electronic communication as a legitimate form of writing, which sometimes requires careful audience analysis, and for which the conventions can vary dramatically. This type of activity would go beyond merely using technology in the classroom, and would allow students and teachers to acknowledge the value of electronic communication, as well as the pitfalls of using it inappropriately.

**Conclusion**

My hope is that as we make explicit the importance of mastering a wide range of writing skills and genres, we can also help students make more connections between their various writing contexts. Of course, cell phones and other devices can create distractions in the classroom, and school policies will have to continue to address this issue. However, rather than simply banning these gadgets from school, we might be able to use them to enhance our teaching, and in the process demonstrate to students the value of the writing they do daily. We cannot simply assume that students will always know when and how to use electronic communication effectively, nor can we assume they will see themselves as writers outside of school. For students like Pablo, who already use writing effectively in a number of contexts, we can use technology to provide new challenges and more meaningful assignments, rather than “fill in the blank writing.” For students who struggle with writing in school, we can offer encouragement by acknowledging the value in what they already do well. In both cases, by showing students that we recognize the literacy work they do every day, we can create an opportunity to help them build bridges between their in-school and out-of-school writing. As they build these bridges, they can begin to consciously use all of the rhetorical tools they have at their disposal, and they can become more thoughtful, more effective communicators both inside and outside the classroom.
“Not That Kind of Writing”:
* A Conversation With One Student About Writing in High School and Beyond

References


