Portal and Gatekeeper: How Peer Feedback Functions in a High School Writing Class

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To counter inequitable, hierarchical classroom structures, research in the fields of language and literacy studies often looks to the affordances of online spaces, such as affinity spaces, for learning that is collaborative and knowledge that is distributed; yet, researchers continue to locate their studies in virtual spaces, outside classroom walls. This study, situated in a high school writing class, repositions the familiar classroom practice of peer feedback as a way to access affinity space features. Using qualitative case study design and grounded theory analysis, the study reveals that, when supported by an emphasis on social connection, the practice of peer feedback served as a portal for students with a range of writing experience and interest to collaborate and exchange honest feedback, practices indicative of affinity space features. Yet, traditional expectations preserved teacher roles and student roles in ways that prevented the class from more fully accessing the affinity space features of distributed expertise, porous leadership, and role flexibility. Discussion expands the field’s understanding of affinity spaces and their application in physical classrooms by outlining new features, theorizing these classroom spaces, and advocating for a reimagined vision of peer feedback in ELA classrooms where role reciprocity and flexibility resist traditional, inequitable classroom structures.

School-based writing instruction, as it occurs in typical high school classes, often features hierarchical structures, with teachers positioned as experts and students as passive knowledge recipients, working individually on teacher-directed tasks (Alvermann, 2008; Cuban, 2013; O’Brien, 2012). This relationship, stratified by age, aligns with ahistorical, cultural assumptions about adolescents as needing to be controlled by adults, their “natural” intellectual superiors (Lesko, 1996). When expertise and power are disproportionately concentrated in teachers, students have less opportunity to contribute expertise or to modify classroom activities. Such traditional structures contrast with New Literacies ethos—a mindset that prioritizes distributed expertise and collaborative participation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). By focusing on the practice of peer feedback, this article explores how it functions sometimes to reflect New Literacies ethos and other times to preserve inequitable classroom relations. This tension is worthy of educators’ consideration.
as they reimagine and enact classroom spaces as sites for transformation toward equity (Gee, 2017).

There do exist learning spaces—known as affinity spaces—that operate with principles of New Literacies ethos and have been found to generate deep learning and wide participation (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016; Gee, 2004; Gee & Hayes, 2010, 2011; Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). Affinity spaces most typically occur outside school contexts in informal, digital realms (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012) where participants share an interest in a particular endeavor, like writing. Fertile territory for peer collaboration, affinity spaces can facilitate knowledge flows among participants with varying interest levels or expertise, who help each other and exchange feedback (Gee & Hayes, 2010). When students work together to provide writing feedback in these spaces, they are engaging in the collaborative participation advocated for in educational policy (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Lammers, 2016). For example, in their position statement on twenty-first century literacies, the National Council of Teachers of English (2013) highlight the importance of “posing and solving problems collaboratively,” practices typical of affinity spaces and peer feedback activities. Creating opportunities for peers to collaborate during the writing process is understood as an effective instructional strategy that improves writing quality when compared with independent composing (Graham & Perin, 2007). In affinity spaces, participants use “portals” (Gee, 2004) that function as entry points to learn and share practices. The online affinity space FanFiction.net, for example, features multiple portals—such as an in-site dictionary/thesaurus, writing-related forums, and fan fiction–specific help sites—that provide participants access to content and help with fan fiction writing (Black, 2008). Young writers use such portals to share and collaborate to create texts—not only in ways policy and pedagogical literature suggest, but also in socially supported ways that youth care about (e.g., Lammers, 2016), making affinity spaces potential sites for motivated writing participation (Black, 2008; Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013).

Thus, researchers believe that affinity space features should be taken up in classrooms to promote collaboration among a wide array of participants who share ideas and solve problems (Beach et al., 2016; Curwood et al., 2013; Gee, 2017; Gee & Hayes, 2010). As Gee (2017) contends, the problems of today demand that “we all . . . learn how to be part of an intelligent team and not just someone who goes it alone” (p. 78). While power circulates through all spaces (Foucault, 1975/1984)—affinity spaces included—how it is distributed can depend on structures and ethos. In redistributing expertise among participants, portals can facilitate wider participation and collaboration online and in physical classrooms, providing contexts to counter inequitable structures, where students will do the work of today’s problem solvers (Gee, 2017) in ways that matter to them (Black, 2008; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, 2016), giving more weight to their voices. Yet, while affinity space researchers present arguments for their work to inform classrooms, they continue to conduct their research outside of them (Lammers, Magnifico, & Curwood, 2018; Magnifico, Lammers, & Fields, 2017), limiting classroom applications of an oft-cited theory and online phenomenon.
This article recognizes the disconnect between online and classroom research by exploring the possibilities and boundaries of theory with a study of affinity space practices in a high school writing class. I combine a theory of New Literacies ethos (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), a connected learning approach that reimagines education with social equity goals (Ito et al., 2013), and the features that define affinity spaces (Gee, 2004; Gee & Hayes, 2010, 2011; Lammers et al., 2012) to explore classrooms as potential sites of affinity. This framework recasts the familiar classroom practice of peer feedback as both a portal to affinity space practices of collaboration and distributed expertise, and a gatekeeper in preserving inequitable classroom structures. In examining this portal in a physical space, this study explores its potential as a mechanism for more equitable classroom practices.

Integral to a writing process approach (Atwell, 1987; Graham & Perin, 2007), peer feedback has been described by young writers as helpful or even critical to their work (Black, 2008; Lammers, 2013), providing them with opportunities to meaningfully collaborate (Lammers, 2016)—although some research demonstrates that peers tend to provide each other with affirming yet shallow responses that fail to prompt meaningful changes (e.g., Magnifico, Curwood & Lammers, 2015). While peer feedback has been studied in a variety of contexts, no research to date has examined classroom-situated peer feedback as an affinity space portal. Moreover, research across contexts reveals a recommendation that teachers play a role in improving peer feedback experiences for young writers, a classroom role I examine through an affinity space lens. In the classroom where I located this study, peer feedback operated ambiguously, both evoking New Literacies ethos and preventing some affinity space features; thus, my exploration lies at the intersection of peer feedback—a literacy practice that is advocated in practice literature (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007) and valued by young writers (e.g., Curwood et al., 2013), yet also found to be unhelpful to the writing process (e.g., Hovardas, Tsivitanidou, & Zacharia, 2014)—and affinity spaces, which researchers urge teachers to emulate, but have yet to study in physical classroom spaces. This work contributes to affinity space theory and how it applies to physical classrooms by identifying a portal that both encourages practices that evoke equitable participation and reifies traditional, hierarchical structures.

I present findings from a larger case study of Creative Writing (CW), a high school English class that met daily, drawing students from three different grades who chose it based on their varied interests in creative writing. As is typical in a formal learning environment, CW students shared the space with their teacher, Mr. E. (all names are pseudonyms), who had his own personal writing practice. Here, students often worked together in pairs or small groups to share writing and provide each other with feedback. These aspects—the mix of grade levels and ages, a common interest in writing, and collaborative activities like peer feedback—signaled that CW might be crossing into affinity space learning.1 Further, since the participants of CW as well as the classroom structure itself worked at times to value and at other times to marginalize peer feedback activities, they played an ambiguous role in CW’s affinity space boundary-crossing.
The following questions guided my inquiry: What does conceptualizing a high school writing class as an affinity space help us learn about peer feedback activities and the space? How does exploring peer feedback as an affinity space portal push the limits of existing theory? Thus, this work offers a contribution to scholarship on New Literacies, affinity spaces, and writing instruction by repositioning peer feedback as a portal to practices of distributed expertise and collaboration but also as a gatekeeper that maintains more traditional structures, providing a nuanced understanding of peer feedback’s multiple functions and potentials in classroom spaces.

**Conceptual Framework**

There is an ongoing conversation in this journal about young writers providing each other with feedback. The topics include creative choices and sharing in an online affinity space (Lammers, 2016) and student perceptions of peer feedback, both in class (Sherff & Piazza, 2005) and online (Loretto, DeMartino, & Godley, 2016). I contribute to the conversation by contextualizing peer feedback in a classroom space with an affinity space lens, highlighting affordances and constraints of the space for peer feedback, as well as peer feedback as a practice that enacts and limits features of affinity spaces. The space and the practice mutually constitute each other. In this paper’s multidimensional framework, I review theory and literature on learning spaces and writing practices from the perspectives of New Literacies ethos, connected learning, and affinity spaces, followed by a review of more traditional learning structures, and finish with a review of writing and peer feedback studies.

**New Literacies Ethos**

With their existing literacies (Bomer, 2011), young people draw upon New Literacies ethos as a mindset with which they approach each other and their work. Compared with the ethos of traditional print literacies, New Literacies ethos is: “more ‘participatory’, more ‘collaborative’, and more ‘distributed’; less ‘published’, less ‘individuated’, and less ‘author-centric’ than traditional literacies…. [It] flow[s] out of different kinds of priorities and values” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 29).

It is an ethos of distributed, wide participation. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) also argue that the goal of collaborating is focused on procedural knowledge (knowing how) rather than propositional knowledge (knowing that). Closely related to collaboration, distributed expertise signifies a blurred distinction between teacher and learner (Alvermann, 2008), disrupting a more traditional tendency to “locate expertise and authority in individuals (e.g., teachers and teacher educators) and institutions (e.g., schools and universities)” (p. 14). Lankshear and Knobel (2011) point out that while it is facilitated in digital spaces, New Literacies ethos does not necessitate technology. For example, youth could engage in an ethos of distributed expertise by turning to peers to inform learning in nondigital settings, rather than assuming that only those in positions of authority are qualified to provide valuable, helpful guidance.
**Connected Learning**

An equity-oriented approach to education developed in the field of digital media and learning, connected learning (Ito et al., 2013) draws upon New Literacies theory and focuses on expanding opportunities for all students by leveraging their digital practices and the affordances of networked spaces. Involvement is reconceptualized as “genres of participation.” Participants “hang out,” which connotes friendship-driven, casual social activity; “mess around,” to explore new interests; and “geek out,” which represents a deep “dive into a topic or talent” (Ito et al., 2008, p. 2). Geeking out, particularly pertinent to a reimagined vision of classroom hierarchies, often “erases the traditional markers of status and authority” by welcoming adults as role models with relevant experience, rather than as “automatic resident experts” (Ito et al., 2008, p. 2). Linking academic, physical spaces with online, social spaces, Ito and colleagues (2013) have theorized connected learning as interest-driven, socially supported, and related to academic pursuits. While academic aims are a key component of the connected learning framework, values of equity, social belonging, and participation are foregrounded, indicating a shift in emphasis toward learning models that give more weight to social and equity goals.

**Affinity Spaces**

Informed by New Literacies ethos, affinity spaces signify “complex, deep and knowledge-producing” (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 69) learning, propelled by an interest in a particular practice. A connected learning approach (Ito et al., 2013) likewise draws upon New Literacies ethos, contributing to this paper’s conceptual framework, and while it is academically based, it is less focused on the construction of spaces than affinity space theory; therefore, I foreground affinity spaces as this study’s guiding theory, supported by New Literacies ethos, which informs thinking and participation, and connected learning, which maintains a focus on equity in classrooms.

Affinity space theory aptly conceptualizes the activities of CW in several ways. One, CW is a writing community, and affinity space writing communities have been studied and theorized, providing helpful frameworks to apply. Also, affinity spaces’ focus on relationships between leaders and followers is fruitful to study in classrooms that feature leaders and followers, but also helps to see possibilities for how those relationships can be reimagined.

**Traditional Learning**

In the predominant mode of classroom instruction, teachers are expected “to monitor and control students, assign tasks to them, and ensure that they have accomplished work” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 86). These traditional expectations of teacher roles impact student roles; as Ito and colleagues (2013) articulate, “teens live in a world of hierarchical relations—where they are graded, run the risk of getting in trouble, and must obey all sorts of status and age-oriented rules” (p. 10). Having emerged at the turn of the 20th century as an efficient way to organize schools, teachers, and students from physical, temporal, and philosophical perspectives (Gee, 2004; O’Brien & Bauer, 2005), these enduring attitudes and accompanying
policies are often referred to as the “deep grammar of schooling . . . [which] operates on the presumption that the teacher is the ultimate authority on matters of knowledge and learning” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 30). Widely criticized as didactic (Scott, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978) and for devaluing adolescent voices (Lesko, 1996), this pedagogical model forces students into passive roles and positions teachers as experts (Welker, 1991) who teach autonomous skills (Street, 1995) and dispense knowledge to their students. Also critiqued as “banking education” (Freire, 2005), this approach positions students as devoid of relevant experiences, though students from historically marginalized groups are further alienated and most vulnerable to losing their voices and feeling diminished in this dynamic. Traditional structures impede New Literacies in classrooms, as they reinforce values of rigid role adherence, working against notions of wide and varied participation, role flexibility, and distributed expertise that reflect New Literacies ethos and embody affinity space participation.

**Writing and Peer Feedback**

Research on writing and peer feedback conducted in affinity spaces has been contextualized with theories of New Literacies ethos, connected learning, and traditional learning—each contouring findings in particular ways. With an affinity space lens, researchers have found young writers in the online space FanFiction.net sharing work with large audiences of peers who provide feedback in the form of “reviews” (Black, 2008; Lammers & Marsh, 2015). These writers value reviews as important critical feedback (Black, 2008; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, 2013). Black (2008) found that online affinity spaces afforded interaction between experienced writers and novices who shared ideas about writing and shifted in and out of their expert/novice roles. Expanding the depiction of writers who respond with occasional feedback to each other, Lammers (2016) found that writers in an online fan fiction community played more central roles as collaborators in each other’s processes. Receiving reviews informs young writers that their work is being read, a motivating force for continued writing and sharing (Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, Magnifico, & Curwood, 2014; Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Magnifico, 2012). In a study of poetry writing on Figment.com, Padgett and Curwood (2016) found that the site provided writers with a supportive, encouraging environment to write collaboratively, give reciprocal feedback, and identify as poets. These studies highlight the social support that peers can provide to one another as writing collaborators.

Studies of peer feedback in physical classrooms are typically framed by more traditional theories of learning that prioritize writing expertise, privileging a teacher’s perspective. This research finds peer feedback lacking, as it provides little guidance on improving text quality (Kline, Letofsky, & Woodard, 2013; Simmons, 2003; Yim, Warschauer, Zheng, & Lawrence, 2014). In studies of physical classrooms using an online component, like Google Docs, peer feedback similarly focuses on sentence-level corrections and vague, general praise (Kline et al., 2013; Yim et al., 2014). Findings that show the social connection and support students provide to each other (Panadero, Romero, & Strijbos, 2013; Van DeWeghe, 2004) are often
backgrounded in these studies, which focus rather on writing quality improvement as the benchmark for peer feedback’s effectiveness.

**Study Design**

The study presented here is part of a larger, qualitative study (Marsh, 2016) of how students used New Literacies ethos in a classroom. The better I came to know and describe what was happening in the class, the more specific, particular, and complex the data became. Such thick description (Geertz, 1973) forms the basis for interpretation and theory construction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), particularly helpful to this study’s exploration of the limits of an existing theory.

To look closely at the phenomenon of peer feedback’s role in classrooms, I used an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995); the study is intended to contribute to similar or related cases in the field—the case holds value as one among others, which are admittedly few. However, this study is also intended to encourage more affinity space research in physical classroom spaces.

**Participants and Setting**

CW was offered at Central High School (CHS) in a middle-class district near a Northeastern US city. CHS’s population was predominantly White (86%), with the remaining 14% identifying as Black, Hispanic, Asian, or multiracial (State Department of Education, 2014). Consistently ranked as a top school both locally and nationally (Morse, 2013), CHS graduated 99% of the 2014 class, 98% of whom went on to two- or four-year colleges (State Department of Education, 2014).

Comprising 16 students, CW was taught by Mr. E., a 19-year veteran teacher and English department chair who identified as 47 years old, White, middle-class, and male. CW was offered as both an academic English class and as an elective to 10th, 11th, and 12th graders, and students chose it for a variety of reasons (see Table 1). Many of them were interested in the opportunity to write creatively, an option largely unavailable since they began high school. They also had social purposes that focused on goals besides those of writing craft practice and improvement—from sharing personal experiences to making interpersonal connections to self-expression. Mr. E. envisioned the course as an exposure to different types of creative writing (nonfiction narratives, fiction, drama, poetry). He hoped that by the end, students would:

> have written enough of their own stuff. Gotten back some graded stuff, so some good feedback, and had some experiences that’ll help them to sort of develop a sense of what they prefer. And give them some opportunities to maybe explore a little bit, through some independent work or some guided practices. (Interview 1)

Through my community membership as a parent at the school and as a university supervisor of student teachers in CHS’s English department, I developed a relationship with Mr. E. Before the study began, we met and I learned that he used some digital practices, such as peer editing via Turnitin.com and asking
students to look up information on their smartphones during discussions. He also expressed his struggle with the place and priority classroom teachers should give to digital practices. Like many teachers, Mr. E. grappled with the changes he saw in his students' online practices and New Literacies ethos; he was interested in learning more, which led to my interest in and his agreement to conducting the study in one of his classes.

We began with convenience sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), when I sat in on each of Mr. E.’s five classes for two weeks. Theory-based sampling (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012) followed, when CW emerged as a class where students were engaging with concepts of New Literacies ethos, which I ascertained through our interactions and informal interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Mr. E. and I thus decided together to locate the study in CW. I drew upon further informal interviewing and participant observation to contribute to a purposeful sampling strategy (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) for focal participants, aiming to reflect diversity in a variety of components—students' purposes for choosing CW, gender, ethnicity, and grade level. Sampling in the latter three categories proportionately reflected CHS's population (Table 1).

**Data Collection**

I applied ethnographic methods of participant observation, interview, and artifact analysis to study the CW case. Affinity space features (e.g., distributed expertise, pooled knowledge, porous leadership) served as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), “suggest[ing] directions along which to look” (p. 7) as I collected data.

Data analyzed for this article were collected during a 21-week academic semester, when I spent several days each week observing in the CW classroom,
generating 92 pages of field notes. During note-writing sessions, I often incorporated “asides” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 101) or memos (Charmaz, 2006), when I spontaneously engaged in the analytic process. I differentiated asides with a colored font, similar to Marshall and Rossman’s (2011) two-column approach. I also designed an observation protocol—a table organized by New Literacies ethos concepts, with spaces to jot down observations reflecting those concepts. This protocol helped me link practices with the ethos and organize my jottings while observing. I conducted two 40-minute interviews with each focal participant and one focus group interview (January 16, 2015) with the eight student focal participants, generating 19 transcripts for analysis. In addition to individual interviews, participants and I engaged in informal, spontaneous conversations, sometimes in person, sometimes through texting or emailing—another form of interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 2011)—gradually building rapport (Spradley, 1979). As I came to know participants, and iteratively built theory, the focus group afforded an opportunity to engage the eight focal students in a conversation with each other and myself, providing an additional data source from a new social context to examine for themes that emerged during individual interviews, an example of methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1984). I also collected artifacts: curriculum documents, lesson plans, student work, and class texts.

**Data Analysis**

Following Charmaz’s (2006) coding stages, I began analysis with line-by-line coding, keeping in mind sensitizing concepts of affinity space features. Coding stayed “close to the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49) as I used action words and in vivo codes of participants’ words, comparing data with data as I went. This initial coding process generated 131 codes, which I logged into a column on a sortable spreadsheet.

Next, I entered a second phase of coding, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), to “sort, synthesize, integrate and organize” (p. 43) data by determining the most significant and frequent initial codes. This phase produced 37 focused codes, such as choosing CW, which became another spreadsheet column. By sorting data based upon choosing CW, I was able to see how some initial codes that labeled the same data by diversity of ages in CW, growing as a writer, and pursuing passion coalesced around one focused code (Appendix A). This collection of initial and focused codes contributed to my growing sense that CW students were accessing New Literacies ethos and affinity space features in their classroom.

Next, I applied focused codes across data, supporting and refining them. Codes that were similar, such as peer feedback, peer editing in CW, and peer conferencing, were collapsed into a coding cluster: peer feedback activities. These clusters were a form of axial coding, which helped make sense of how codes related to each other once they were regrouped into categories (Patton, 2002). Axial coding was also an opportunity to include analytic memos as data that could be sorted along with all of the other data bits. I included these memos under the column “my thoughts.” Sometimes, I simply excerpted memo text from the data source within which it was embedded (field notes, transcripts). Other times, I would memo during the coding process, in which case I typed my reflections directly into the “my thoughts” column.
Thus, memo-ing brought analysis to theoretical categorizing—a conceptual move to understand, explain, and give meaning to codes. By looking across columns, I was able to see how codes nested inside one another with accompanying affinity space information and memos to guide my analysis, revealing “things that [were] completely new and unanticipated” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 156). This last stage went beyond description to theory building, and I began to construct a new theoretical iteration of affinity spaces.

**Findings**

This study identified several affinity space features salient in CW’s peer feedback activities. Table 2 identifies each feature that could pertain to peer feedback, explains its relevance to CW’s activities, and tracks how well the CW structure matched each affinity space feature based on collected data. One feature—*encompassing multiple, social networking portals*—was unsupported in the data, yet as will be discussed later, offers possibilities to classrooms enacting affinity space features. Thus, findings show that peer feedback operated as both portal and gatekeeper to affinity space features in CW.

**Affinity Space Portal**

Peer feedback provided CW students with two ways to access affinity space features, opening opportunities (1) for students with a range of writing experience and interest to hang out, mess around, and geek out and (2) for students to exchange honest feedback. These opportunities to work together and access each other’s perspectives were facilitated through interpersonal connection. For example, during a session when students were sharing early drafts of their personal narratives, Amanda told Lily, “I felt like I knew you when you read that part” (field notes, September 15, 2014). Amanda appreciated Lily’s writing as a way to know her better, thus enacting affinity space features that emphasize social connection as central to participation (Gee, 2017; Lammers et al., 2012), building rapport between writers. While these opportunities can occur in all types of classrooms, they are not always valued. Emphasis is usually on writing improvement (e.g., Simmons, 2003) and teacher expertise. In contrast, the affinity space lens focused findings on meaningful work, peer collaboration, and honest feedback, shifting the emphasis toward social participation as a classroom priority.

**Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out**

During peer feedback, students regularly worked in pairs or small groups, some to improve their writing, others to share stories and learn about one another. In these ways, peer feedback functioned as a portal in CW, giving students access to content and each other. Through this portal, CW students accessed affinity space features that emphasized varied expertise, knowledge sharing, reciprocal role-taking, and socializing, disrupting the expert/novice dichotomy characteristic of traditional learning spaces.
During peer feedback, students of varied writing experience and interest levels worked together to help each other, as they connected their individual knowledge to the available pool of knowledge in the space (field notes, September, 15, 2014; focus group). The more experienced included writers like Theo, who spent much of his free time—both during study hall periods and after school, late into the evenings—geeking out with his writing. He regularly referred to himself as a writer (Interview 1, Interview 2, focus group), describing how his thinking was starting to change, becoming increasingly linked to his writerly identity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Peer Feedback</th>
<th>Case Study Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common endeavor is primary.</td>
<td>The purpose of gathering was to improve writing.</td>
<td>Strong match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants of varying experience and interest share the space.</td>
<td>Groups included writers with varying interest and experience.</td>
<td>Strong match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portals are strong generators.</td>
<td>Student writers exchanged new techniques for writing (e.g., expanding vocabulary).</td>
<td>Strong match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is distributed across the entire affinity space.</td>
<td>Mr. E. and students shared writing knowledge with students, but students did not share knowledge with Mr. E.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is porous, with a vague boundary between leader and follower.</td>
<td>The teacher’s role as expert was static; student leadership varied.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is individually proactive but does not exclude. Help is encouraged.</td>
<td>Students came to see peer feedback as helpful.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles are reciprocal.</td>
<td>Roles were reciprocated between students, but not between students and Mr. E.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People get encouragement from an audience and feedback from peers.</td>
<td>Feedback was exchanged in an effort to help.</td>
<td>Strong match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The space encompasses a variety of media-specific and social networking portals.</td>
<td>CW did not make use of online writing forums or affinity spaces to widen the pool of peer feedback partners.</td>
<td>No match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group is not segregated by age.</td>
<td>The group included 10th, 11th, and 12th graders.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing plays an important role in participation.</td>
<td>Many students used peer feedback activities and each other’s writing as a way to know one another personally.</td>
<td>Partial match</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The whole mindset of the way a writer thinks is just so different from what everybody else thinks, I believe. I've started to notice when something happens in my life, or I witness something, instead of just thinking about it, I think about how it can get into my story. (Interview 1)

While Theo never described himself as superior to his CW peers, he often spoke of himself as a serious writer, and in so doing expressed a level of expertise.

Not to be mean—but I do think the actual, the words that I'm putting on the paper—I don't know if they're better than everybody else's but I think the ideas I have—it comes faster to me than it does to other people. (Interview 1)

Here, Theo spoke of his writing experience as more extensive than that of his peers, which translated into ease and speed of writing. Yet, Theo's expertise did not separate him from his less experienced peers, as he appreciated their input: “As I’m reading mine, somebody who might not be very good at it will point out something that I didn’t even notice” (Interview 1). As Theo was in the midst of writing a novel he planned to publish for a teen audience, he saw his CW peers as representative of his readership. Their understandings and reactions provided important input for Theo’s purposes. Writing for an audience of readers rather than for Mr. E.’s evaluation, Theo prioritized his peers’ feedback because as potential readers, they might have seen or heard things that he had missed, information that could help him reach his goals (Interview 1 memo).

Likewise, CW writers who were there to hang out also had something to gain from peer feedback. Jack, arguably the least interested writer in CW, contrasted himself with his friend Theo when he said, “CW to me is just an English class that I have to take to graduate, and CW to [Theo] is the 4th English class he’s taking this semester because he likes English” (Interview 1). When the two worked together, Jack said, “I’ll read [Theo] my passage and then I’ll read his passage and there’s a lot of words, big words that I would never think of putting in” (Interview 1). Thus, working with Theo, someone whose writing practice he respected, exposed Jack to new words that he might use in his own writing, while also satisfying his desire to connect socially.

Similar to Theo, Lily, whose participation can be understood as messing around, described herself as someone interested in “going deeper” into writing (Interview 1). She expressed a preference for peers’ advice over Mr. E.’s when she said, “I usually take [advice], most of it. Unless it’s from the teacher” (Interview 2). Lily tended to disregard Mr. E.’s feedback. Other students also said that they appreciated and relied on each other’s feedback more than Mr. E.’s, because they felt they understood each other better, precisely because they were peers (focus group). Through CW’s peer feedback portal, students collaborated, reciprocating roles in ways that resisted the tendency to rely exclusively on teacher input.
Desire and Reticence about Honest Feedback

Peer feedback also functioned as a portal that emphasized an ethos of collaboration as it provided opportunities for CW writers to offer and receive help (field notes, September 15, 2014; September 24, 2014), although, as will be discussed in the next section, they did not always do this confidently. Nevertheless, several students described peer feedback, particularly honest feedback, as helpful (focus group; Jaimie, Interview 1; Lily, Interview 1; Robbie, Interview 2; Tim, Interview 1). As Robbie said, it “helps to get that blunt feedback on stuff because that’s what really will help you” (Interview 2). CW writers tended to provide this feedback orally, sometimes with depth and specificity (as will be described in the case of Tim), and other times with general praise (as was the aforementioned case with Amanda and Lily).

During a whole-class feedback session, when Tim shared his piece describing a gardener working on a wall for the “observation assignment,” Theo commented: “As soon as you said, ‘bend over to pick something up,’ it caught my imagination.” He went on to explain that he liked the juxtaposition of mystery with the mundanity of laying a brick wall. Other students joined in by pushing Tim to use a more descriptive word than sunny, or to elaborate on the oldest son (How old?) and the puppy (What breed?) and the car (How’s it parked? What make?) (field notes, September 24, 2014). Pooling ideas and feeding off of each other’s contributions, CW students collaborated to provide Tim with honest peer feedback.

However, students often expressed hesitancy to offer such feedback to other writers. As Tim explained:

I like [receiving] feedback. I don’t like giving feedback, because sometimes it may seem offensive. . . . You’re not sure how they feel about that, because they may take a lot of pride in that one part, so if you’re saying something critical, it might be damaging to them. (Interview 1)

Tim’s concern about hurting another student’s feelings acknowledged the social dimension of peer feedback and may have contributed to the mixed feelings it elicited. Honest feedback was something CW students desired for themselves, but were reserved about giving to others (field notes, November 2, 2014; Vanessa, Interview 2), especially initially.

Comfort with sharing was thus an important element in encouraging honest feedback in CW. In order for students to engage in affinity space features that involved contributing to a shared knowledge pool or providing each other with meaningful feedback, they needed to feel comfortable enough to participate in honest, helpful ways. As Jaimie said,

At first, I didn’t like the group work, I was kinda . . . shy with my writing. I didn’t want to show many people ever or share anything often, and so at first, I didn’t really like it, but now it’s really helpful getting feedback from others. (Interview 1)
Jaimie’s experience indicates that CW grew to be a space where sharing one’s writing during feedback activities felt less intimidating, indicative of feedback participation that can occur in affinity spaces.

CW’s peer feedback functioned as a portal that regularly provided opportunities for students of varying experience and interest to work together, as they prioritized and preferred each other’s knowledge and feedback over their teacher’s. This is an important distinction for affinity space practices in classroom spaces. Rather than trying to emulate their teacher in supplying and receiving feedback, these writers were more interested in each other’s ideas, as they considered peers to be more valued collaborators. Such an ethos disrupts traditional classroom structures that defer to teacher feedback.

**Affinity Space Obstacles**

In CW, static teacher roles and a vision of peer feedback as unreliable indicated traditional expectations. Again, these scenarios are not new, but viewing them through an affinity space lens helps identify how they limit classroom interactions in new ways, thus contributing to a reimagined vision for classroom learning.

**Static Leadership**

Classroom spaces are led by adult teachers, who must contend with expectations of themselves as ultimate experts that online affinity space leaders do not. In CW, traditional expectations of teachers inhibited Mr. E.’s role flexibility and his role reciprocation with students. As he said, “I hope what comes across is a level of expertise that I bring to it. That’s what they need” (Interview 2). As a teacher, Mr. E. saw his role as that of a leader and expert in CW (field notes, September 15, 2014; September 22, 2014). Denise’s description of him attested to students’ perceptions of his primacy in the space: “Everything he says I feel like it could be published. Everything he says, I’m like, ‘oh my god, you’re such . . . you’re a genius!'” (Interview 2).

Since CW drew students of varying experience and interest, students engaged in reciprocating roles, giving and getting advice and encouraging and receiving encouragement, resisting traditional structures, particularly during peer feedback. Yet, Mr. E.’s role remained fixed and often removed, which not only limited his opportunity to take up other roles but also left less room for student roles to vary or develop deeper levels of interest or expertise. Although Mr. E. participated as a passionate writer in a writing group outside CW (Interview 1), he tended to keep that role separate from his teaching role. On the occasions when Mr. E. shared his writing with students, he recalled that “they didn’t have much to say” (Interview 2)—illustrating his perception of students’ lack of purpose during occasions of potential role reciprocity. He suspected they were uncomfortable making suggestions on the work of someone they regarded as an expert. And when Mr. E. participated in whole-class peer editing sessions, his involvement sometimes inhibited students’ suggestions to peers. During the feedback session mentioned previously, when students were offering ideas and questions to help Tim expand
the details of his “garden wall” piece, Mr. E. joined in. The following field note excerpt describes what happened:

Mr. E. suggests that Tim edit the piece . . . cut out a paragraph, stay in the present tense, get rid of typo, divide first sentence of 2nd paragraph in two. He speaks for a while. Jaimie’s hand goes up, which Mr. E. sees, and he tells her he will get to her. He talks a while longer. Students are silent, waiting. When [Mr. E.] was ready for Jaimie’s comment, she decided not to say anything. (field notes, September 24, 2014)

Not only may Mr. E.’s involvement have inhibited Jaimie’s, but according to Denise, his suggestions were perceived as expert knowledge, comments less accessible for students to give. She explained that “none of us would have ever known that he would want that” (Interview 1), which left her confused and quieted other students like Jaimie.

While the peer feedback portal did create potential for students of varying interest to join together, distribute expertise, share knowledge, and reciprocate roles, CW students did not often take those opportunities, remaining in traditional, hierarchical positions as passive followers. Even though Mr. E. envisioned the space as one where “students are primarily responsible for their own learning and growth” (Interview 2), students hesitated to move into roles in a “proactive” or “self-propelled” (Gee & Hayes, 2010) fashion. Thus, the traditional expectations of schooling that supported everyone’s perception of teacher leadership roles, in turn constrained student roles by inhibiting their contributions and preventing the flow of knowledge from participants in the space into the pool of knowledge from which they could draw.

**Vision of Peer Feedback as Unreliable and Exploratory**

Mr. E.’s vision for peer feedback influenced how students regarded these activities. To prepare for a small-group feedback session, he told students, “You’re not judging each other’s work, you’re giving feedback” (field notes, September 15, 2015). He told me later what he meant: “I reminded them that when they go home tonight to work on revisions, that these are their peers and therefore they may or they may not decide to accept their peers’ criticism and make changes accordingly” (Interview 2). This approach positioned peer knowledge as less than reliable, aligning with societal, culture-wide assumptions of youth as inexpert (Lesko, 1996) and reifying traditional expertise structures.

Mr. E. and the CW students regarded the peer knowledge pool with less seriousness than scholars do when discussing available knowledge in affinity spaces. Denise captured the dilemma when she shared her perspective on peer feedback in CW: “So, when I get feedback from [my peers], sometimes they tell me opposite things than what he [Mr. E.] wants” (Interview 1). And as previously presented data demonstrate, Denise privileged Mr. E. and his feedback as “genius” (Interview 2). This awareness, that peer advice lacked credibility in comparison with teacher advice, fixed students’ positions as followers of Mr. E.’s expertise. Denise also said that in CW, peer and teacher feedback was “not the same feedback. Like, I respect
everyone’s feedback, but I also want Mr. E.’s feedback, and we don’t get that until we turn it in” (Interview 1). Moreover, it was only after students turned in work that they also received a grade.

This situation, where students were organized to provide each other with feedback—feedback that was irrelevant to their success in CW—set up a predicament that Denise articulated when she said, “School is confusing because you have to please the teacher even if it’s not what you like” (Interview 1). Everyone in the space understood the relative value of peer feedback; therefore, affinity space features emphasizing flexible roles and knowledge sharing were dampened.

Mr. E. also envisioned peer feedback activities as serving purposes of exposure (Interview 1), rather than as a way to support one another or to hone relevant knowledge that could help the group improve how they wrote, as affinity space features emphasize. For a peer feedback session where students shared poetry, Mr. E.’s goal was that, through peer feedback, students would become familiar with the poetry genre. This purpose of exposure positioned students as “spectators” (Gee & Hayes, 2011) who were to listen to each other’s poetry, but not with the intention of influencing it, even though several students (like Robbie, Theo, and Tim) had experience writing song lyrics, which each of them likened to writing poetry. Robbie described his process:

The lyrics definitely come first. And I write that out first and then come up with a chord progression and a melody to it, I guess. But the lyrics come first, so I gotta see if like, Does this sound good by itself? And, Will this actually mean anything? (Interview 1)

Robbie’s knowledge could have been pooled for the group to share in writing poetry, yet such knowledge was not invited into the CW space, and Robbie stayed in his limited role as a student with little to contribute.

**Classroom Affinity Spaces**

According to affinity space theory, “any space that has more . . . features than another is more of an affinity space than the other or is closer to being a paradigmatic affinity space” (Gee, 2004, p. 85)—which suggests a spectrum. The CW case demonstrates that classrooms can operate with a combination of features, enacting them to varying degrees or not at all, illustrating a new type of affinity space—a *classroom affinity space*. The CW case also reveals that by applying an affinity space lens, we can see regular classroom interactions in new ways that help shift emphasis away from traditional academic values to New Literacies values, which have been found to be more equitable, relevant, and motivating for youth. This shift marks a way to transform classroom learning. The following three sections discuss classroom affinity spaces, first by articulating their features, then by beginning a conversation about how affinity space theory can make room for classroom affinity spaces, and finally by focusing on practice in ELA classrooms as a starting point for change.
Defining Classroom Affinity Spaces

The list of features in Table 3 pertains specifically to classroom affinity spaces, and is intended to be useful for instruction and participation. Blending traditional expectations and affinity spaces, these features represent an ideal of how classroom affinity spaces can most fully and ideally operate. All but one are rooted in the data from CW. Like affinity space scholars before me, I propose that classroom affinity spaces will include some of these features, to differing degrees, rather than the fullest application of every feature. Striving for these features is what makes classroom affinity spaces more paradigmatic.

Moving forward, these features can be used to inform research, theory, and practice that are specific to classroom affinity spaces. Keeping in mind, however, that affinity spaces are “in constant flux” (Lammers et al., 2012), this list should be viewed as a starting point, to be built upon and retheorized as classroom affinity space research continues.

Theorizing Classroom Affinity Spaces

Prior affinity space research, particularly in writing communities, has been conducted in virtual spaces. But if this research is to be useful in making an impact on education, and because schools remain the central site for educating our country’s youth—particularly those from diverse backgrounds and marginalized populations (Ito et al., 2013)—then we ought to be asking how a New Literacies ethos like that of online affinity spaces can make its way toward physical classroom spaces, as this study asks. Gee and Hayes (2011) have critiqued the possibility that such classroom spaces can operate as affinity spaces, stating that “learning in school could resemble passionate affinity spaces, save for the institutional inertia of schools. To support such learning, schools as we know them would have to disappear and society would have to adopt a different paradigm of school” (p. 86). But how do

Table 3. Classroom Affinity Space Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students of various expertise and interest (including those who are fulfilling scheduling requirements) share common space. Everyone is welcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common endeavor is foundational to the space. Those who choose the class as an elective are drawn to the common endeavor that shapes the space’s knowledge and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and teachers share work, connect socially, and encourage each other through portals involving peer interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is distributed across the space, with an emphasis on peer knowledge, challenging hierarchical relations of schooling. Students regard peers as valued collaborators, appreciate honest peer feedback, and take a deep interest in each other’s work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone’s role flexibility and role reciprocation resist hierarchical expectations of teachers and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispersed knowledge—knowledge that is not actually at the site but at other sites—is encouraged.</td>
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we do that, exactly? Bommarito (2014) acknowledges Gee and Hayes’s point, and offers a way to address the dilemma:

Rather than wait for society to adopt a radically new approach to literacy and learning predicated on passionate affinity spaces and to conform our school systems around those sites of informal learning, it may be helpful, at least for the time being, to conform our understanding of affinity space to the current institutional school structures already in place. (p. 416)

It was through Bommarito’s line of reasoning that this study, situated in a high school classroom, found students and their teacher regularly relying on a range of New Literacies principles to enact affinity practices, challenging predictions that affinity spaces are unlikely to survive (if they can exist at all) in traditional classroom spaces. By including Mr. E.’s perspective, this study, in unprecedented ways, also gives voice to a teacher participating in an affinity space.

While CW’s peer feedback portal helped them access affinity space features, students approached these activities tentatively, and Mr. E. usually refrained from participating, indicating peer feedback’s ambiguous role in classroom affinity spaces. Traditional expectations and culture-wide assumptions about youth (Lesko, 1996) problematized this portal with obstacles that worked to fix Mr. E.’s position as expert and limit student roles to those of passive followers. A theory of classroom affinity spaces acknowledges that everyone in the space—students and teachers alike—can move in and out of roles such as expert, contributor, writer, encourager, and editor, thereby gaining opportunities to contribute to and draw from the classroom’s knowledge pool. While CW’s peer feedback activities were generative in terms of knowledge sharing, social connection, and distributed expertise, this portal can be understood as a starting point for further and deeper expansion.

Honest feedback was held in high esteem by student writers as well as by Mr. E., yet CW students struggled to offer such feedback. Their experience aligns with findings that peer feedback activities tend to evoke supportive, general praise (Kline et al., 2013; Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Magnifico et al., 2015; Simmons, 2003). This point is especially relevant in classes like CW, where participants with a variety of interests and experience collaborate. Yet, CW writers also connected interpersonally with each other to know one another better and to feel more comfortable giving feedback, a finding that illuminated peer feedback as a social practice that actually led students to provide the honest feedback they desired. Such social practices are indicative of affinity space features yet are largely overlooked in peer feedback research and pedagogical literature that limit peer feedback’s purpose to writing improvement. Therefore, this study relied on an affinity space lens to reposition social practices as central, rather than ancillary, to the purposes of peer feedback.

Additionally, unlike virtual affinity spaces, CW did not access knowledge located beyond the space (Table 2). Yet such a move to disperse knowledge, thus connecting physical and virtual spaces (Gee, 2004, 2017; Magnifico et al., 2015), would make classroom affinity spaces “openly-networked,” (Ito et al., 2013), a democratizing step to expand “entry points and pathways to learning, education
and civic engagement” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 87). Openly networked classrooms also help “reimagine classroom discourse (e.g., less teacher-directed and more horizontally distributed)” (Kline et al., 2013, p. 378), addressing inequitable classroom hierarchies.

**Classroom Affinity Spaces and Writing in ELA**

When students participate in peer feedback with the belief that their experiences and input can meaningfully influence another writer’s work, they also chip away at entrenched hierarchical classroom structures that can diminish youths’ contribution to their own learning. While skills for giving helpful feedback focused on writing improvement can and should be taught (Simmons, 2003; Van DeWeghe, 2004), classroom affinity spaces prioritize a more expanded role of peer feedback as a social practice, one that has been found to motivate participation and improve writing in online affinity spaces.

Whereas affinity space theory omits discussion of teachers, Beach and colleagues (2016) say that their role in an ELA classroom affinity space encompasses those of “social planner, facilitator, and co-learner, [roles] that differ from the traditional teacher role of conveyor of knowledge” (p. 44). Bomer (2011) encourages an English classroom that “tak[es] the teacher’s response out of the central position it too often occupies, and mak[es] students more dependent on one another to know the effect of what they have written” (p. 254). Likewise, according to this article’s theory of classroom affinity spaces, teachers are acknowledged and accommodated as viable participants in peer feedback activities designed to facilitate role reciprocity, porous leadership, and interest-driven participation.

Other affinity space research (e.g., Lammers & Marsh, 2015; Magnifico et al., 2015) has drawn upon ELA classroom practice literature to help redefine student and teacher roles to increase flexibility and to prepare students to approach their writing, revising, and feedback with detail and purpose (e.g., Atwell, 2015). Thus, teachers in classroom affinity spaces can prioritize learning about students, inviting them into viable roles as experts (Atwell, 2015); share their passion for writing and model their thinking, expanding teacher roles as fellow writers in the space (Simmons, 2003); establish routines and procedures (rubrics, individual conferencing, lessons on feedback) that scaffold peer feedback and revision processes (Schunn, Godley, & DeMartino, 2016); and communicate a level of seriousness that helps their students believe “this class is the real deal” (Atwell, 2015, p. 63), signifying that student contributions and efforts are valuable and integral to the space.

Such instructional approaches that structure the space, roles, and activities to engender more equitable, social, and serious participation honor students’ desire and practice to connect on a personal level, and better prepare them to provide the honest, specific feedback they desire, with less of the apprehension they experience when they are unsure of the purpose or importance of their participation as feedback partners. Thus, teachers can demonstrate their multiple, flexible roles in the classroom, as well as encourage students to explore their own roles as writers, collaborators, and meaning-makers, disrupting inequitable structures by distributing knowledge across the space.
Conclusions

Bomer (2011) argues “that it would be a better world for young people if the places we require them to spend time could have the features of the spaces in which they thrive” (p. x), which can be accomplished by incorporating their existing literacies, often practiced in digital spaces, into classrooms. Accordingly, this study reimagines ELA classroom spaces as sites for transformation toward a New Literacies ethos, emphasizing equitable classroom participatory practices of collaboration and shared knowledge, supported by prioritization of social practices. Peer feedback’s ambiguous role as both portal and gatekeeper locates and focuses attention on one particular practice often used in ELA classrooms to begin the shift away from limiting structures and toward rearranging hierarchies in more flexible ways. With a list of features (Table 3), researchers can engage in more targeted study of classroom affinity spaces in physical classrooms. Future research will discover additional portals that will continue to expand affinity space theory, thus accounting for classroom realities that both encourage and suppress equitable participation. Keeping in mind that CHS was a suburban, high-performing school, new studies can broaden this work by exploring how affinity spaces operate in schools located in diverse communities and those that must contend with additional academic constraints. Looking ahead, ELA classroom affinity spaces will continue to develop, thus pushing the field to incorporate new literacies that are so central to youth participation outside of school, reframing classroom spaces as welcoming of students’ interest-driven forms of participation and disrupting traditional classroom hierarchies so schools become places where youth work together to learn and solve the problems of today.

APPENDIX A: FOCUSED CODE DATA ANALYSIS SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Label</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Data Bit</th>
<th>Initial Code</th>
<th>Focused Code</th>
<th>My Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Int. #1</td>
<td>Jaimie</td>
<td>Well, last year, I really got into creative writing. I really liked it.</td>
<td>Choosing CW</td>
<td>Pursuing Passion in CW</td>
<td>Common endeavor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.24.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>When I had Ms. R.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int. #2</td>
<td>Mr. E.</td>
<td>I think what stands out to me is that the different nature of the classes that I teach.</td>
<td>Choosing CW</td>
<td>E’s Flexibility</td>
<td>Less traditional structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01.08.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int. #2</td>
<td>Jaimie</td>
<td>Yeah. Yeah I think that’s probably – I mean if I was a junior or a sophomore, I would feel a little intimidated by the older kids, but they’re all really good writers still.</td>
<td>Choosing CW</td>
<td>Diversity of Ages in CW</td>
<td>Common endeavor, not age. Interest driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.24.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Mr. E. And I don’t want to overstate the notion that I don’t care for it. In many ways, I do like the class. And I’m learning to like it better. You know, I feel like I’m getting better at it. Um, I think as much as anything else, I’m getting used to having a mixed class. You know, different grade levels in there. And getting used to teaching so many seniors who take a somewhat lackadaisical approach to their studies at this point.

Jack Cuz creative writing to me is just a second English class that I have to take to graduate and creative writing to him is the 4th English class he’s taking this semester cuz he likes English

Vanessa Right. Yeah. I wanted to try it more and get more like strategies. Because I do write at home, but I don’t really know how to – I don’t always know where to start

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NOTE

REFERENCES


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