

# Chapter 13

## “Write Me Back!”

### Diasporic Identities and Digital Media: Creating New Spaces for Writing in School

**Michelle A. Honeyford**  
*University of Manitoba, Canada*

#### ABSTRACT

*This chapter addresses the disconnect between in- and out-of-school writing spaces. Drawing from a larger study of the writing of bilingual Latino immigrant youth in a middle school English language class, the author examines the epistolary community created through an exchange of emails with a group of first-generation Latino university students. The author draws on an ecologies of writing framework to explore writing and place-based identities and the notion of writing across digital and cultural communities in order to analyze the relational, locational, and collective work the students were engaged in. The chapter suggests implications for creating new spaces for writing in school, drawing on social and digital media to participate in imaginative and intellectual literacy work.*

#### INTRODUCTION

One of the key distinctions between in-school and out-of-school writing is the role of an authentic audience. No matter how interesting the assignment or valid the purpose for writing it, if the teacher is the only audience, its power is limited. Aware of the critical role of audience, writing educators have long argued for the need to situate school writing in authentic contexts, positioning students as authors of petitions, newsletters, or editorials, as published poets, picture book authors, short story writers, and essayists (Atwell, 1998; Christensen, 2009; Bomer & Bomer, 2001). Such opportunities

also contribute to students' developing identities as writers—and as citizens, activists, and artists.

The disconnect between writing in and out of school seems to be growing only wider, particularly for young adolescents. With their increasing access to digital and social media, youth are writing more than ever (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith & Macgill, 2008; NCTE, 2009). Though much of this writing is in abbreviated forms (e.g., texts, tweets, updates, comments, in-app or in-game messaging) and is produced in semiotic modes that look substantively different from standard forms of language, youths are increasingly engaged in written interactions with others. And, whether they are “hanging out,” “geeking out,” or “messing around” (Ito, Baumer, Bittani, boyd, Coy, Herr-Stephenson, et al., 2009), their writing reflects the kinds of everyday social

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practices that Barton & Hamilton (1998) and others (Street, 1984; Gee, 1996) have argued are literacy: forms of writing (and reading) that are deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts, used for authentic purposes, and connected to their identities. In school, however, youths’ opportunities to write are primarily individual, inauthentic, and assessment-oriented. For example, Ife (2012, p. 64-65) found that her middle school students believed that real writing only occupied spaces outside the classroom and that class assignments were merely opportunities to earn a grade. More importantly, they defined the dramatic contrast between writing in school (responding to literature, essay prompts, and answering questions at the end of a reading selection) versus writing at home (texting, updating social network sites, blogging, and maintaining personal poetry or rap books).

The contrast Ife’s students experienced is of particular importance when we consider the school experiences of immigrant youth learning English as an additional language. The kinds of writing Ife’s students practiced at home (e.g., texting, updating, blogging, writing poetry or rap) are deeply connected to their social and cultural identities, occur in spaces that are inclusive of transcultural and even global participants, and offer youths a sense of connection and belonging in communities that share their interests. For youth who are often marginalized by their linguistic and cultural differences in school, these kinds of spaces are potentially transformative. While recent research has pointed to the efficacy of such third spaces in afterschool media and literacy programs for young adolescents (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Kafai, Peppler, & Chapman, 2009), there are far fewer examples in school spaces, and fewer yet that focus on immigrant and bilingual youth. In their meta-analysis of research on writing, Juzwik et al. (2006) found that although research “on bilingual and multilingual writing is the second most active area of research, . . . little . . . is occurring at P-12 levels—crucial years for language acquisition, literacy development, and identity

formation. Especially scarce are studies . . . at the middle school level” (p. 467).

This chapter focuses on a study of the writing of bilingual Latino immigrant youth in a middle school English as a New Language class. Mediated by technology (email), the students in this class located an authentic audience for their writing in a group of first-generation Latino/a university students. In this chapter, I draw on a cultural ecologies model of writing to explore the written exchanges of one pair of students. A cultural ecologies approach understands how students’ writing is situated in their local contexts, as well as the more global ecologies of which students are a part (Pahl, 2012). Through an analysis of their emails, I examine how the students’ writing references their relationships to the environments around them but also affords them the opportunity to make connections with one another across those contexts. Based on the study, I argue that to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, school-based writing pedagogies need to acknowledge students’ connectedness to the cultural ecologies in which they are located, but even more importantly, to engage them in meaningful writing across them. I suggest that this can be facilitated, at least in part, by creating digital communities that connect immigrant youth to others in order to recognize, draw on, and extend their personal and collective knowledge and experiences in potentially transformative ways.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research discussed in this chapter is more broadly framed by sociocultural theories of literacy, research in New Literacy Studies (NLS), and youths’ out-of-school practices with digital media and writing. Within this conceptual framework, literacy is understood as socially and culturally mediated sets of practices that people use in the contexts of their everyday lives to communicate with one another and participate in the world (Gee,

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