

Inquiry II: Inquiry into Adolescent Writing

EDUC 629 Teaching English/Language and Literacy in Middle and Secondary Schools

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Fall 2021 October 24, 2021

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In this inquiry, a close look into a piece of student writing is delivered with the ultimate intent of learning from its process for improving of teaching adolescent writing. Substances are drawn from fieldnotes of the tutoring sessions that I had with the student in just the last few weeks, as well as classroom simulation using the descriptive review process when a small group of three graduate students analyze student writing pieces.

The original writing is appended to the end, and the content is organized accordingly into four sections as follows.

Part 1: Content for the Writing – Student, Environment, Intended Audience

When the student writer Mr. T first came to me in the online chat room I wasn't well prepared for any college essay materials or strategic tips beforehand; there were some examples I read from our class when specifically addressing topic-by-topic adolescent writing, while it is quite different than customizing a tutoring effort for a real person/student writer. Mr. T gave me in a straightforward way the question prompt he wanted to work with me, which asked about the reason(s) of liking the program – rationale of applying, so is to say – and gradually through reading his draft and constant on-screen correspondence I learned that Mr. T is a local high school senior who's been practicing art in particular, looking for programs that could provide him an education in art/museum art discipline. He wrote from home, he told me, and that we continued to type together during the two-hour sessions: he modified the draft as I spoke, and I added/organized comments and suggestions using the remaining space in the document. The overall (online) writing environment offered us sufficient amount of freedom and guidance or “tuning” at the same time. Such semi-collaborative format lasted through the other sessions later for the next two weeks, too.

To answer this prompt, Mr. T certainly had to draw ingredients from his journey thus far and in particular the bits he got inspired artfully and by the University he was writing for. I commented he always (and should)

had been aware of his *intended audience* which in this case was the admission committee, some/most the dearest art professors he might want to study with in the future; I pointed out that although the essay would not be the only information through which he would be introduced to the committee, it surely would be very important element telling them who he is and forming an impression to them as an applicant – alongside with any general preconceptions/hypothesized ideas from other application materials he would provide. We did not have to chance or priority to discuss his standardized test, current study, writing standards for the University, or any outside sources of influence; he though was scheduling an on-site meeting and art portfolio preview with this program, in these recent weeks, which was already completed by this point and he told me it went well and was informative for his understanding. In a reserved and semi-passive way, Mr. T was only expecting that he wanted to respond to this prompt within the word limit, and before/ahead of the application deadline. But when I said I was afraid of putting forward potentially too many critiques, Mr. T described that he *wanted* more critical opinions on this response, in this conversation, which gave me a good bit of reassurance/guarantee of how to proceed.

Part 2: Description and Analysis

In our recent literacy class, I and two classmates in the small group were able to discuss this piece using the descriptive review process, a valuable experience as well as reference for my future tutoring sessions (if any) with Mr. T. There are multiple “rounds” designed into this collaborative review paradigm; we weren’t getting to the part about rhetorical strategies and choices, but some discussions had been informative, which I shall organized in the following paragraphs.

(“Round 2”-Paraphrasing: The Words)

- We see here a student’s writing for a specific purpose – his desired program of undergraduate studies, in the discipline of art and museum art. The student is trying to get across interest, providing several examples, and be very specific as he/she draws from his/her authentic experiences.
- It gives a very clear picture of what the student might want to grow his/her art into – specifically, the “movements” that they might want to be a part of (an open-curriculum freedom of art education).
- Very cool to learn from these two short paragraphs that the student really knows what he/she wants to be.

- Highly descriptive – the language style here is detailed enough to convey sensible ideas of who he/she is.
- Besides, we can read that the student envisions using his/her form(s) of art to grow within specific contexts (protest, speaking through art, change creator).
- The student expects a lot of ways to create, not a lot of constraints.
- It is mentioned titles of courses/materials, as well as talking about fake news/deep fake – details of these as to how specifically the student thinks of/worked with them, however, are missing here. The audience would likely wish to learn a little more about further details.
- It includes comments about what the student believes as to why this program is not being restrictive, a free environment, i.e. what the student likes.

(“Round 3”-Tone and mood)

- The writing does not really/precisely follow conventions of topic sentence.
- Anarchist mood and tone it has – living with punk farmers (note: this description had been removed/cut away in the most-recent version, as attached in the appendix), a free exploration of concepts.
- He/she uses one long sentence that fits into who the student is, not someone who overly stresses about incorrect sentence structure. This is not a bad thing since it demonstrates to the audience that he/she has a vision of him/herself as an artist.
- In general, the mood the student uses is “I think, I want”, as he/she focused on self. Although self-centered tones are used, they were not sharing much on rationale yet. It sounds very “official” as the student writes about him/herself.
- Descriptive of feelings, artistic vision, clear on their beliefs (anti-normal, something Tufts provides) are used.
- The writing style is also a little *passive* here, it does not proactively share how authentically he/she experienced or got interested in certain things. This could be a place where the piece can be improved in future revisions.

(“Round 4”-Rhythm, Pace, and Style)

Thought limited by word counts, the paragraphs written are still a little “rambling” as I read it through; it breaks the conventional structural style of writing, which might however fit reasonably well with the student’s artistic nature, philosophy, or ways of expression. The writer seems to have “layers” in his/her thoughts and expressions, as the writing sounds a little too official for an adolescent applicant’s essay to colleges; it sticks with the facts and is authentic, though, making it a very good beginning for further refinement.

A unique path the writer Mr. T brought up the prominent theme of his rationale for this program was that he peeled off the obvious and dived into some specific instructional materials by the University’s program, putting himself into a position of a sincere learner, before indicating his liking of the freedom that the program’s curriculum would offer him as an aspiring art student. Such approach is quite effective and thorough in this case, for at least when I read about it I at once got the idea of what/all he got to get to his current understanding about art education and about the program.

Part 3: Written Comments to the Student

During the several sessions with Mr. T, for this particular prompt I mainly provided my suggestions on two goals: re-phrasing his sentences with more logical coherence, and shortening the paragraph(s) to meet the word limit.

For example, one “alternative trial” I spoke to him, on how to articulate the interest on the program, was that while the two classes may only be an “excerpt” from the entire curriculum/any wisdom of art faculty professors, they represented the program and strengthened his belief in applying to it (the program strives beyond traditional single-major curriculums and aims to provide students with a constraint-free environment).

I also commented of the way he described the “style” of the curriculum. Because this could likely be, I said to him, things that the audience (admission committee) is familiar with since it’s their own curriculum, he may not need to spend words introducing the curriculum he learned about. But I thought it would be essential to point out specifically *why* he loved it – could he give an example, the first year’s course schedule, or any rules for elective courses? That way would make it much more sensible for the reader, as well as more convincing since it is backed up with further details.

Besides, adding perhaps a little about the University, I suggested, could make the entire paragraph look more coherent with the question prompt – using a structure such as “Meanwhile, ” at the very end should complete the paragraph with an assuring message about why the student likes the University in general, without taking up too much space.

Part 4: Reflection – Learning, Preconceptions, New Understandings, and Insights

The first lesson this experience (looking at Mr. T’s writing) gives me is the **process to read into the context of an adolescent student** and his/her intended audience with patience. Youths have a lot of features, and for some it could be an honest tone with an authentic worldview which should be undoubtedly valuable, and for others it could be a self-centric communication style, perhaps in particular for those more introverted ones. Getting to know Mr. T and assisting his writing task is a tree in the forest, nevertheless also a tangible practice to me as I found a connection in our communication, reading and writing together. It is a situated, social practice as literacy is (Hughes, 2010, Section 1), suggested by Mary Hamilton, where the “situated” part depicts the particular environment/places in which the process of literacy takes place with varying demands/goals. “Speech makes us human, and literacy makes us civilized,” (Olson, 1977) for which when I sit down and reflect on what *actually* happened in this tutoring process, it turns out that I was not merely correcting mistakes or reshuffling expressions mechanically for the better quality of writing; in a profound sense I was also knowing this student writer as a person and an academic pursuer, making lots of meanings along the way of our communication.

I, at the same time, also looked closely into college admission essay in general, given this specific instance of the University that Mr. T is applying to. The combination of questions asked as prompts, both short and more complicated ones, form the overall idea of how the colleges hope to learn from these applicants’ essays. Another part of his application material, the artist’s statement (“Artist statement”, Wikipedia) that describes one artist’s own work and viewpoints, was also brought up to me alongside with this prompt as the student is pursuing art school programs mostly.

The experience with Mr. T coincides with my class discussions/insights into how readers and teachers learn from adolescent writing. On occasions, the response is framed in terms of “deficits” that focus on what is not done right or well, rather than aptitude or potential (Simon, 2013). We as “writing coaches” were reminded about

this part too, before the tutoring sessions began, that if there was any aspect we should lean toward, that would be **giving encouraging/uplifting and constructive feedbacks**. I mentioned above that I had to implicitly *wait to see* if the student would like me to be more “critical” (in our case Mr. T said positively), while in fact I remained a positive, critical, and inquiry-based approach throughout the sessions with him. For example, instead of bluntly asking “What do you mean here? It doesn’t make any sense to me if you don’t provide any substance to support your argument. Rewrite it!” I would normally say things like “Err... I’m thinking about (this sentence) from this perspective how am I going to support this argument with more information, perhaps making it more sound and convincing.” My (general life) experience should tell me that the core of tutoring this well would be to do it with deep *care* on the students and a profound love of literacy and the literary process – as a situated, social practice – in a way such that instead of criticizing a piece of work from the side or without much sense of ownership/responsibility, the adolescent writer and the tutor are looking at it as an object and decorating it “together”.

The Descriptive Review collaborative routine proposed by Patricia Carini and other scholars (Carini, 2001) has been crucial and helpful to my understanding Mr. T’s writing; it brought me to two other graduate classmates into an oral inquiry with notetaking in live discussion, in which we took turns to inspect into three different pieces of student writing including my piece from Mr. T’s. It is noticed that our discussion was also a collective, social inquiry itself, and by the way **use dissonance to think together to gain awareness of the student writer’s perspective**. In addition, since Mr. T and I were able to look at this prompt for three consecutive weeks’ Fridays together, there formed a strong sense of presence of his “figure” as a high school applicant to this University as I reread, revised the response he wrote and gradually got to know him better. We did not necessarily reach the point of a “deep talk”, nor did my conversation with Mr. T turn into any areas that were too personal, I however on multiple occasions quoted my side knowledge as well as personal experience, such as myself applying for the same University several years back (for some graduate program) and how I organized my application statement’s paragraphs last year to submit to my current department at Penn. I also quoted something I learned from a summer writing class I took at Penn, and the feeling and encouragement I received from that class in which the students were exposed to many different genres to “write freely” as we started – a somewhat different training/pedagogy from my own past, adolescent education when I was taught and trained a little bit

hard by repetitive peer-comparisons and seemingly-endless revisions. While Mr. T was thinking and/or editing the piece, my mind would occasionally wonder like this, searching for any fruitful ingredients which could not only be potentially inspiring to his current work, but also bringing us closer by letting him know more about me through the practice and pedagogy of writing.

In future practice, it is a hope of mine that more interactions and advice-seeking efforts shall be made by me to gain objective opinions about my communication style and skills, meanwhile gathering more information about the specific writing requirement and accompanying the genre with appropriate writing strategies/toolset.

References

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Appendix: Writing by Adolescent Student

Prompt/Requirement ([Website](#)): Which aspects of the Tufts undergraduate experience prompt your application?

In short, “Why Tufts”? (100-150 words)

Finding the University was like finding a diamond in a hack stack. Finding a college that allows me to explore environmental science and interdisciplinary art is an infrequent opportunity. During the winter of my junior year, I spent time talking to current students, researching programs like the study abroad program “Tufts at London”. SMFA has classes like “Embodied Resistance Through Textile Practice” that will let me explore using textile art as a form of protest and feminism while also having the resources of a top research university.

I believe that an art education should not be defined to a single major and the customized art experience that SMFA strives to achieve in its curriculum solidifies my interest to learn in an environment free of the constraints of a traditional single-major experience, with room to explore the limits of what art truly can be. Lastly, after talking with Professor K at my portfolio review, I left excited about what an tufts education has to offer.