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Collective Creativity: Pedagogies of Collective Authorship in a Hollywood Writers' Room and Its Implications for the Teaching of Writing

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Pedagogies of Collective Authorship in a Hollywood Writers' Room and Its Implications for the Teaching of Writing

Joseph D. Sweet & David Lee Carlson

Abstract

In this article, we conduct a case study of collaborative authorship that takes place in the writing of the Amazon Prime series, *Transparent*. To do this, we rely on extensive interviews with three of the show's writers, and one editor to investigate what can be learned by tracing the collaborative efforts that begin in the writers' room and extend through every aspect of the show's production. This inquiry intends to open possibilities for the ways in which collaborative authorship practices of Hollywood writers' rooms and television production can inform writing pedagogy, and professional writing practices, particularly for collaborative, creative writing. Ultimately, the authors suggest practices currently being enacted by these professional writers that school communities, teachers of writing, and professional writing groups can adopt.

Keywords: collaborative writing, collaborative authorship, qualitative research methods, writing pedagogy, *Transparent*, television writing, writing methods

Introduction

Many professional writing contexts require that authors write collaboratively,

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and educators in higher education demand that their students engage in collaborative authorship. Likewise, demands of the academy encourage collaboration among scholars (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). However, collaborative authorship goes largely untaught in secondary school and remains a topic ripe for further research (Yim et al., 2014). Surely, many reasons exist for why collaborative authorship remains largely neglected in secondary ELA curriculum, but an increase in testing demands continues to soak up considerable teaching time in secondary schools. Though current professional and academic circumstances require collaborative writing (Ede & Lunsford, 1990), forty-two states recently implemented the "college and career ready" Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that include zero standards concerning collaborative authorship. In fact, only one writing standard mentions collaboration and it does so in the context of scaffolding writing activities through peer review. Collaborative authorship is distinct from collaborative writing. In writing research collaborative writing often includes writing activities such as pre-writing, editing, revising, etc, (Christensen, 2014; Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perrin, 2007; Wilcox, Jeffrey, & Gardner-Bixler, 2015), but excludes two or more people collectively authoring a text. We use the term "collaborative authorship" to indicate two or more people writing a common text with little interest in determining authorship rank (i.e., first author, second author). Collaborative authorship presumes writers engage in collaborative writing activities. To date, the CCSS do not require collaborative authorship at all. While school standards and their corresponding high-stakes tests emphasize individually assessing a learner, the real demands of professional and academic life beyond secondary school require people to write collaboratively.

Furthermore, and as will be explained in greater detail below, writing scholars have given scant attention to the process writers undergo when authoring collaboratively (Yim, et al., 2014). Owing to the professional demands for collaborative writing, the lack of scholarship in this area, and the pushing aside of collaboration in secondary school standards, this study offers unique insights into the collaborative writing processes that occur in a Hollywood writers' room. These insights may offer strategies that writing educators can use to engage more meaningfully and authentically in collaborative authorship.

To investigate the possibilities of collaborative authorship in writing pedagogy, this paper conducts expert interviews (Flick 2012) with three writers and the head editor of the popular Amazon prime show, *Transparent.*[1] Our interest in this research stemmed from our desire to understand both how the show educated the public about the lives of trans*[2] people (Carlson & Sweet, 2019; Sweet & Carlson 2017, 2019) and how the creative team enacted their writing process. The interviews uncovered important revelations about collaborative authorship, which we believe can contribute to the existing scholarship in this area. Additionally, we believe this research offers alternative approaches to the complex relationships between various aspects of writing. So much of the scholarship on writing

seeks to soften or sanitize writing practices in schools while our paper seeks to understand how writing happens in the messiness of a production of a televisions series that also seeks to inform the public about a marginalized and oppressed group of people. Beyond the public pedagogical components of this paper (see Sweet & Carlson, 2019), this article considers the radical contextualization of a writers' room in the television series *Transparent* to explore different approaches to understanding the elusive and complex writing practices. The revelations discussed below only emerged during the data collection process. Though *Transparent* offers great potential for teaching and learning about trans* subjectivities (Carlson & Sweet, 2019; Sweet & Carlson, 2017, 2019), the research presented in this article seeks to open possibilities for collaborative authorship practices of Hollywood writers' rooms and television production and how these practices translate to writing pedagogy and professional writing. Thus, we focus primarily on the collaborative process in the writing of the show. In doing this, we highlight the rather chaotic aspects of the sayable and knowable of writing practices and consider their implications for collaborative authorship.

This article neither addresses the possibilities for improving student academic achievement through collaborative authorship nor through collaborative writing. Although correlations between collaboration and higher test scores may exist, our research design does not lend itself to such conclusions. That said, the results presented here do offer novel and valuable insights about the complex ways of doing collaborative authorship that may carry many benefits and may be applicable to pedagogies of writing. Nonetheless, we cannot conclude whether or not this will lead to improved academic test scores or to greater fluency with writing generally.

Instead, we examine the real-world context of writing for television and investigate its potential for collaborative authorship in writing pedagogy; *Transparent*'s executive producer, Jill Soloway, created a nurturing writers' room that we believe offers new possibilities for teaching and enacting writing. In order to address the possibilities therein, the inquiry relies on the following research questions:

> What can collaborative authorship processes taking place in a television writers' room teach scholars about the chaotic aspects of the writing process?

> What might scholars learn about collaborative authorship from a writer's room of a popular television series?

The article attempts to answer these questions by examining the collective experiences of authors in the writers' room and putting these experiences into conversation with existing discussions already taking place in writing research, particularly scholarship that investigates collaborative writing activities. To do this, we organize the paper in the following way: first, we detail the existing research on collaborative writing and provide an overview of scholarship investigating writers' rooms as sites of inquiry. We focus on collaborative writing literature because it is the closest area of scholarship to collaborative authorship. As noted

above, very little research has been conducted on collaborative authorship. Thus, grounding our work in the area of collaborative writing is necessary to establish the importance of our research. Then, we outline the methods of data collection and analysis. We follow the methods with a comprehensive discussion of *Transparent*'s writing practices and their implications for writing pedagogy, including outlining specific strategies educators can appropriate. We finally conclude with a discussion of the transformative potential that high quality writing carries for empowering writers to create change.

Collaborative Writing

Even though contemporary demands of academic and professional life require collaboration among authors (Ede & Lunsford, 1990), school practices tend to ignore collaborative authorship (CCSS, Yim et al., 2014), and teachers tend to favor individual writing over collaborative writing activities (Wilcox et al, 2015). Collaborative writing emerges from a rather long history in the teaching of writing that encourages students to lean on one another's writing or writing groups to aid the writer in the writing process (Atwell, 2014; Elbow, 1998; Murray, 2009). Collaborative authorship, on the other hand, credits two or more people authoring one product.

It is noteworthy that some of the scholarship in cinema studies and pop culture acknowledges that television writing holds a unique place in Hollywood specifically because of its collaborative practices (Ross, 2011). Other scholars offer that television writing presents an exception because it is a "negotiated activity" where groups of writers collectively create story through recurring characters (Nicholas-Pethick, p. 156, 2011). Television, then, offers a special opportunity for educators to learn about collaborative practices that may be beneficial to teachers and school communities because of its "negotiated" aspect. Thus, the television writers' room is a particular genre that relies heavily on collaborative writing activities and produces a collaboratively-authored product. To initially investigate the research regarding educational possibilities of the writers' room, we conducted a search on ERIC for academic articles that infused educational research with the collaborative writing processes of television writers' rooms, which produced zero pertinent studies.

Scholars in the fields of cinema studies and pop culture, however, have investigated the television writers' room as a site of inquiry (Henderson, 2011; Heuman, 2016, 2017: Phelan & Osellame, 2012; Redvall, 2014; Ross, 2011, to name a few) but none that we could find specifically investigates how these practices of collaboration may impact the teaching of writing. In his aptly titled piece, "What Happens in the Writers' Room Stays in the Writers Room: Professional Authority in *Lyle v. Warner Brothers,*" Heuman (2016) emphasizes the competitive nature of the room and the gendered politicking that takes place. Heuman (2017) asserts

that television producers often view writers as workhorses and emphasize productivity over humanness. Though he is careful to point out that there is not "some monolithic subordination of writers" (p. 33), he posits that television production includes infrastructures that subordinate writers' humanity and creativity. Likewise, Henderson (2011) writes specifically about issues of gender and race in the writers' room, concluding that the writers' room practices marginalize co-workers based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status. However, unlike most Hollywood writers' rooms, the production of *Transparent* is a highly nurturing environment where these writers take time to cultivate a warm and open writing process that mitigates competition. (N. Harpster, personal communication, October 14, 2016, November 16, 2015; Soloway, 2015). Thus, our investigation into the *Transparent* writers' room offers a rather unique approach to collaborative authorship and offers insights into the writing process.

Though we could find no studies that investigate the possibilities that writers' rooms may have for educational practices (e.g., secondary English classrooms, first-year writing courses), there exists a great deal of educational scholarship on collaborative writing activities in schools. Scholars in the field of education may employ collaborative writing practices in their classrooms, but they do not necessarily glean these practices from cinema studies or popular culture studies. Instead, these studies reveal a clear relationship between peer collaboration in writing activities and improved writing that is positive and strong (Godbee, 2012; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perrin, 2007; Loretto et al., 2016; Wilcox et al., 2015; Yim et al., 2014). Graham and Perrin (2007) assert that their investigations "of collaborative writing processes . . . show that collaborative arrangements in which students help each other with one or more aspects of their writing have a strong and positive impact on quality" (p. 16). In their discussion of independent writing, Wilcox, et al. (2015) affirm that, "peer collaboration and feedback in writing activities . . . are correlated with better writing performance" (p. 18). Importantly, they also assert that a disconnect exists between evidence-based practices regarding cooperative writing activities, and high-stakes tests that favor individual writing. They point out that favoring independent writing may be a disservice to those writers whom scholars have shown will benefit from collaborative writing activities. Specifically, educators may serve their young writers better by asking them to engage in cooperative writing rather than the current emphasis on individual composition.

Furthermore, in their study of collaborative writing across four Colorado middle schools, Yim et al.'s (2014) piece reinforces the existing scholarly literature regarding the impact of collaborative writing activities. However, they implore schools to include more opportunities for students to engage in collaborative authorship: "Given the ever-increasing demands for collaborative writing in professional and academic contexts broader forms of collaborative authorship, in which multiple authors share various forms of responsibility and contributions . . . should be en-

couraged by teachers" (p. 252). Further, they observed "little true co-authorship; most collaboration consisted of a main single author receiving and responding to feedback from others" (p. 252). While this form is the most commonly enacted in school and the only one included in CCSS, Noël and Robert (2004) indicated that this kind of writing, though collaborative, is the simplest form of collaboration. Moreover, the real world, or in other contexts outside of the classroom, requires working in a community to compose one common text. Although writing curriculum rarely fosters collaborative writing or collaborative authorship, academic success and writing in various contexts necessitates that writing pedagogy in educational contexts (broadly defined) consider a change in their approaches to teaching writing. Our inquiry begins to bridge the gap between collaborative authorship in popular culture and the writing classroom.

Thus, we offer this study to enhance the existing research on professional writing practices, their implications for writing pedagogy, and writing collaboration. While this section situates the study in the existing literature in collaborative writing and makes a case for its inclusion, the following section describes the methods of data collection and analysis.

Methods

The data for this project consist of a series of semi-structured expert interviews (Flick, 2014) with four members of *Transparent*'s creative team. Among those on the creative team, we interviewed three staff writers and one lead editor. Each interview required between one and two hours. Joe also conducted one, one-hour, follow-up interview with one of the writers (Noah Harpster) to investigate specifically the collaborative practices taking place in the writers' room, on the set, and in post-production (for complete interview protocols, see appendices A and B). The authors critically designed the interview protocols to address a variety of topics pertinent to the research, including sexual and gender fluidity, masculinities, character development, transparency, and the writing process. We designed the writing protocol to include inquiry about the creative writing processes to better understand how the writing process transformed from the initial concept for a show to the completed script. The results from the interviews presented here focus exclusively on the collaborative authoring aspects of the show's production.

Of those we interviewed, we chose three writers who together comprise very diverse writing experiences and personal backgrounds. We believe that each provides unique insights into the collaborative practices taking place in the writers' room. Together, their expertise grounds the study and provides it methodological trustworthiness.

All of the interviews were professionally transcribed, and we sent the participants copies of their transcribed interviews and allowed them to make changes. Two participants made minor changes to their transcribed interviews. We read

through the data in their entirety twice before we proceeded to memo the data during the third reading (Saldaña, 2015). After memoing the data with initial impressions and ideas, we began to see some major themes emerge and formed initial categories of larger thoughts collected in the entire data-set (Flick, 2014; Saldaña, 2015). After this, we developed an emergent list of preliminary categories by reviewing and coding the transcripts. We noticed that writing and collaborative writing emerge as an important aspect of the data. We disaggregated the sections of the data that dealt with specific aspects related to composition, such as "writing," "collaboration," "editing," "writing process," and "revising" to name a few. From this set of disaggregated data, in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2015) began to emerge as emblematic of these particular chunks of data (see results below). Finally, we met to discuss and merge the categories that we created and shortly thereafter distilled the data into four in-vivo codes, which is detailed in the following sections. In the spirit of collaboration and transparency, we member-checked the codes by emailing them to the participants (Flick, 2014). We felt this a necessary step to ensure the trustworthiness of the codes and to collaborate with these professional writers. Thus, we corresponded with the participants throughout the data analysis process to ensure the trustworthiness of both the data and the analysis of the data. The section below presents the four in-vivo codes and discusses their implications for writing pedagogy.

Results

The major codes that emerged from our analysis include: safe writing culture and corresponding emotional benefits; disciplined schedule and protocols; connection to stories; collaboration throughout production. In the paragraphs that follow, we contextualize each of these with interview excerpts, and analyze the literacy practices they reveal.

Safe Writing Culture

It's about listening. It's about not saying no. —Noah Harpster

Before the writing team began writing together, they shared a two-week retreat where they formed meaningful and intimate relationships. Executive producer, Jill Soloway, rented a house in Los Angeles where each day the writing team would gather to engage in one another's lives. Harpster describes this experience:

> One thing that Jill did is she forced intimacy on the first day. . . . She basically sat everyone around in a circle on couches and was like, "Let's check in. Who are you? What are you about? Where are you in your life right now?" I think that she chose people who [sic] she thought would be susceptible to that, who would be open to being vulnerable, and being forthcoming with what's going on in their lives. It took about five minutes for someone to start crying.

Harpster implies that intense emotional intimacy among the group became integral to their creative process, and the writers acknowledge that the two weeks they spent together taught them to trust and be vulnerable with one another. The time they shared helped to build a culture in the writers' room that allows them to mine their histories and use those histories to build stories and characters for the show.

While each of the writers recognize the intimate relationship they have with one another, Soloway intentionally orchestrated this event to create a communal and safe space for the show's artists to engage in creative processes. As Harpster puts it, "Jill totally manifested that. She created that environment. That was very intentional—then we started talking about story." In addition to crafting an intimate environment, Harpster also posits that Soloway intentionally sought writers who would be willing to be open and accessible with other people. Our Lady J explains how the culture stimulated and guided their writing process:

> First, we break story[3] all together, where for three months, two months, we'll be in the [writers'] room. We go in. We open up. How was your day? How was your weekend? We start talking about feelings and life and experience. Then, the next thing you know, "Oh, my god! That would be amazing for Josh," or, "That'd be amazing for Maura or Ali." Then things start going up on the board.[4]

As Our Lady J implies the relationships among the writers fashion a space where they both encourage and respect moments of vulnerability. This dynamic proves integral to their writing process.

In his discussion of being emotionally available, Harpster describes in detail how this communal environment provided the writers a context where they could create a character from their personal experiences. In the original version of the pilot, which Soloway solely authored, she exposes secrets of each of the major characters except the middle son, Josh, who did not have one. One of the writers brought this to Soloway's attention, and the writing team created a secret past for Josh during which he participated in a sexual relationship with his adult babysitter, Rita. Over the course of the season, he maintains this relationship with her as a man in his 30s. Rita is a major character and influences much of the plot across the entire series. Harpster describes how this character developed: "Rita is someone who was born out of the writer's room and that whole story was filled in off of people in our room's personal experience." Rita's creation illustrates the importance that collaboration plays in the writing of this show. Rita emerged from an organic, group effort, but did not exist when Soloway wrote, shot, and edited the original pilot. The fact that a child-molesting babysitter can be born from a community of authors' life experiences indicates a very real intimacy and trust present in the room.

In addition to the specific example Rita offers, Our Lady J describes in general the ways everyone contributes to developing characters and plot. Though all of the writers write for all of the characters, each writer provides different insights:

> We all write for all. We write for every character. . . . When we're breaking

story, like we are now for season three, when it comes to [transwomen] Maura
or Davina or Shea, I'm always telling stories that I've gone through. . . . Things
that I've had to overcome or challenges, and that comes up and goes into the
trans* stories.

Our Lady J reveals that extremely safe and nurturing environments foster trust
and encourage participants to share their pasts. To have the freedom to divulge
these experiences allows the writing team to draw on their histories and construct
characters and story.

While emotional security proves vital to *Transparent*'s writing process,
Harpster expresses both the value of ideas that emerge from being emotionally
grounded, and highlights the care necessary for maintaining an intimate culture.
"The more emotional, the more personal, the better. In order to do that it has to be
an incredibly safe space. You have to be very kind to each other." Harpster stress-
es that this type of partnership must take place in a very safe space where one's
integrity will not be threatened. Also, the writers who share the space recognize
its significance, so they take responsibility for maintaining it.

The culture the writers nurture in *Transparent* is something of an aberration
for television writers' rooms. In general television writers' rooms are known for
being "one-uppy" and "competitive." Harpster describes that "a lot of writer's
rooms are about competition and one-upping each other and trying to get your
jokes in." In her interview with Vulture.com (2015) Soloway describes the more
typical writers' room atmosphere:

> A lot of writers' rooms are set up where there's a team of draft horses that are
> waiting to come and be ridden by a showrunner,[5] at the showrunner's will, for
> however long. In other rooms I've been in, you don't get told what time you're
> going home. . . . There's this traditional way where your dignity can be at risk.

While *Transparent* diverges from the decorum of traditional writers' rooms, Solo-
way also concedes that some other Hollywood writers' rooms are inclusive and
communal (Soloway, 2015). However, because the writing process enacted in
Transparent requires writers to divulge deeply personal and intimate details of
their lives, the emphasis that Soloway and the other writers put on maintaining
a safe and warm environment indicate the influence that environmental contexts
has on creative writing processes. Researchers, professional writers, and writing
teachers alike have established inclusive and safe environments as foundational
for effective writing teaching (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Griffith, 2016; Kirby
& Krovitz, 2013), yet the data here indicate that it is even more vital for margin-
alized people who are being asked to mine prior experiences.

In addition to the benefit an inclusive collaborative community can have on
creative writing processes, writers also receive an added personal benefit from shar-
ing their stories, watching those stories portrayed by actors, and later disseminated
into the community. Our Lady J describes the impact this process has had on her:

> In a way, in a personal level, it's really therapeutic to be able to tell these stories in a room. Then, it goes past that into a creative area, where these stories are then told through characters. Then, you see the actors on set portray those stories. Then, you see it on the final version on film. It's really—there's no way to explain it. It's magical.

Not only is a safe communal space where writers mine their lives for creative material fundamental to the creative process taking place in the writing of *Transparent*, but authors also receive therapeutic rewards from sharing their stories with caring colleagues. Harpster describes this experience as both integral to creative writing and "kind of like therapy."

The data also indicate that writers can receive the advantage of public recognition from writing and producing stories that depict their lives. Our Lady J explains:

> On a very personal level, it's very therapeutic to be able to tell stories of trauma and to have it reflected back to me in a healthy way. Where a group of cis people are like, "Wow, that sucks." Like, "I'm sorry that happened." Whereas, as a trans* person, it's just part of my story.

In this quotation, Our Lady J reflects on how this kind of writing provides opportunities for public recognition and acknowledgement, which helps to validate her as a trans* person. Thus, she illustrates another benefit of a nurturing and inclusive writing environment.

Though scholars and writing instructors alike have discussed the importance of establishing a secure and inviting writing environment in classroom settings (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Griffith, 2016; Kirby & Krovitz, 2013), *Transparent* teaches us that this environment is primary for the types of collaboration and creation that occur in its writers' room. The writing practices of *Transparent* emphasize the significance of establishing relationships among the writers well before any writing takes place, and, as will be detailed below, they purposefully set aside time to maintain these relationships throughout the writing process. This section highlights the culture of community and understanding that permeates the writers' room, and the following section will explore some of the ways through which the writers sustain this culture, and the protocols they employ to ensure an inclusive, respectful, and creative process.

Discipline to Collaborate

Nobody but the person holding the pen standing at the whiteboard gets to say, "No." That's the rule. —Noah Harpster

When the *Transparent* writers break story, they maintain a very strict writing schedule that provides ample time to care for one another. Soloway (2015) describes the procedure:

> We work in 50-minute chunks and then we take 15-minute breaks, during which we're really paying a lot of attention to each other. We don't actually work for that many chunks per day, usually four, but they're really intensely focused chunks.

She implies that providing a structure for the writers to care for one another, check in with each other's lives, and cement lasting and trusting friendships helps engender a creative process where they are willing to take creative and emotional risks. In addition to maintaining personal relationships, the ample breaks allow time to reflect on what they have created, and provide the opportunity to deeply consider each other's ideas.

Harpster asserts that the intense focus within these relatively short writing sessions proves an invaluable benefit of the schedule. As he says, "Everyone is completely focused and available emotionally." He illustrates that the level of focus and emotional intensity would be much more difficult if the writers worked over long stretches, rather than 50 minute intervals. Additionally, to help facilitate attuned focus, the writers adhere to an agreed upon set of rules that include no cell phones or computers in the writers' room. Only the intern, whose job is to write down every word exchanged, has a computer open during communal writing activities.

The strict writing schedule deviates from the more traditional writers' rooms where writers often work at the will of the showrunner (Soloway, 2015). In her discussion of the *Transparent* writers' room, Soloway emphasizes the humanity embedded in its decorum: "I'm all about a humane process—we don't work really long hours—and respecting the artists' time, too" (Soloway, 2015). While the strict writing schedule respects artists' time and allows for maintaining intimate relationships, the protocols of the writers' room also provide insight to the collaborative processes.

When the writers break character or story, they designate one person to lead the discussion. This person may be the showrunner or it may be one of the writers who has personal experience or vested interest in the topic the writers are exploring. The person leading the discussion stands in front of the white board and writes down ideas the other writers suggest. As Harpster puts it, "Whoever is 'running the room' is the only person who gets to say, 'No, let's not focus on that. Let's move on to this.'" According to this protocol, the person running the room may deny an idea, but all the other writers may only grow ideas. Additionally, the outlines the writers produce via this process are mobile and malleable. They organize the ideas on sticky-notes and affix them to a whiteboard grid. The white board functions as a graphic organizer and contains the basic episodic structure and character arcs. However, the sticky-notes allow plot points to float among episodes and scenes that encourage the story as constantly in process. All of the writers accept that some ideas will evolve and some will be abandoned. This collaborative structure provides opportunities for focused creativity and hinges on a community of respect where communal trust and friendship mitigate hostilities that may arise from excessive ego and competition.

Connection to Stories

> *Everything that happens has to have an emotion behind it. —Our Lady J*

While on the writing retreat before Season One, Soloway discussed her experiences when her 70-year-old parent transitioned. According to one of the writers, Soloway had vague notions of the direction they thought the season would go, but they relied on the writers' experiences and the exploration of the writers' ideas to guide the season's trajectory. Soloway (2015) identifies one of the grounding premises of the writers' room: "We come from an intuitive, emotional place, as opposed to other TV shows where you might be thinking about joke-writing or odd situations to put the characters into." Soloway stresses intuitive and emotional base from which their writers' room generates creativity, characters, and stories.

While discussing the social context that allows *Transparent* to be produced in the first place, writer Ali Liebegott considers both the ways that our culture's expectations of television and gender have shifted, and indicates how her life experience and the life experiences of queer people in general have suddenly become marketable:

> The fact that I'm writing on a [television] show—I always say this to Noah is like, "Guess what everyone? I fucking published the first thing I ever wrote in 1987. Okay? Finally, my life is marketable to someone to be mined for a TV show." Do you know what I mean? People have been doing this shit forever. People have been writing things. They just haven't been greenlit.

Liebegott suggests that television is breaking new ground regarding queer identities, but she also implies that writers unearth their lives as an integral aspect of the creative writing process. The personal connection that Liebegott feels for the show and that Soloway intimates above pervades the culture of the writers' room.

Our Lady J further articulates both an emotional connection to the material and a personal responsibility to the stories. She feels that transwomen of previous generations have worked and sacrificed for her future, so she likewise has an obligation to work for younger trans* people. "I guess, I just—in the context of the show, I feel like so many of my trans-sisters really [sacrificed their lives for the future]. We continue to do it for the future. The people who came before me who lived their lives authentically and open and made a splash doing it so that I could see them." Our Lady J indicates that she speaks for voiceless trans* folks and is obligated to present "authentic" trans* characters; she creates trans* stories "in a way that is authentic and real. I think having a trans* person in the [writers'] room really is the only way to do that. . . . Also, I feel a great sense of responsibility." Not only does life experience play an important role in creating authentic characters, but also the characterization grows from personal connection and responsibility to the story being told.

Though Our Lady J feels a palpable sense of duty toward trans* folks, fellow

writer Harpster asserts that personal connection is a prerequisite for producing high-quality writing. When asked about the importance of personal connection, he responds,

> I think it's super-important. The longer I do this, the more I realize that I have to be invested in it. It's one of the only truths that I've realized about writing is that the things that we've written that were like, "Eh, it's not that good" or, "It doesn't resonate with other people." It's because it didn't resonate with us. It wasn't coming from a place of understanding and need in the writer.

According to Harpster, writers tend to produce higher quality work when they feel invested in the writing, yet he extends the idea of connection and investment even further. He states that good writing comes "from a place of understanding and need in the writer." Though Harpster's approach is similar to Our Lady J's sense of responsibility, Harpster also posits that writers require this connection to produce good work. As he puts it, "The odds of [producing high quality writing] are incredibly slim if, on the very first level, the writer is not emotionally connected to it." Good stories are those that writers feel they must tell (Elbow, 2015), and while a personal connection to the piece persists as a foundational aspect of good writing, the following section examines how collaborative authorship in television extends beyond the writers' room.

Extended Collaboration

I mean, I don't even remember who wrote what at this point. —Our Lady J.

Well before the season begins filming, the script has already undergone a complex process of creation and revision. Once the writers outline the season, a detailed process that occurs over three to six months, the executive producer assigns episodes to individual writers or writing pairs. Upon completion, these drafts will then undergo a series of revisions to which the entire writing team, including the showrunner and executive producer contribute. During this revision process the actors also participate in a "table read" of the draft and provide their feedback. By the time an episode is finally approved for filming, innumerable collaborative revisions have already taken place. However, a complex and intricate process of collaboration continues to occur *after* filming begins. Our Lady J summarizes one way this collaboration occurs:

> Things happen on set where (actors) improvise. We're like, "Oh my god. That's amazing. That changes everything else, so now we have to rewrite." It's a real group effort. That's between the writers and the showrunner and the dirrectors and the actors, and everyone involved really help create the story.

As Our Lady J suggests actors provide revisions through improvising new dialogue on set which may affect the characters' stories. Moments of improvisation

may be a minor edit from the shooting script, or some of their improvisation may require major revisions of plot points within the series. When the story requires these revisions, writers incorporate the actors' input to rework the story.

Academy award winning editor, Scott Conrad, coined the phrase, "Editing is the final rewrite" (Freedman, 2014). While actors provide important revisions via improvisation and suggestions, editing also emerges as a vital aspect of cooperation in producing television shows. While the creative team films the show, the editor works concurrently to create a story from the daily film clips. By splicing the dailies together, she constructs the initial, "editor's-cut" of each episode. As *Transparent* head editor and Emmy award nominee Kate Haight describes, "As the editor, you're making your own choices and your own decisions. You hope that you've been hired because you have the same point of view as what [the executive producer] is looking for." After she creates the editor's-cut (which is often as much as twice as long as the required episode length and is always the starting point for post-production), the editor works first with the director to revise the editor's-cut. Once they create the director's-cut, then the producers and writers all provide feedback to form what becomes the final, "online" episode.

Haight also describes the ways through which writing evolves over the various processes that occur across the development of the show's story:

> When you write it on the page, it's different from when they shoot it. When you cut it together, it's different from when they shot it. You always are trying to just make the best version of what you have, instead of what your intention was when you first started writing.

Haight offers interesting perspectives about both intentionality and adaptability. As she states, successful artists and writers must be willing to relinquish their previous intentions and embrace new ideas. The willingness for all of these artists to adapt, to check their ego, and to care about each other makes the collective creativity described here possible. That said, the creative team construct each episode to follow Soloway's vision. Throughout the entire process, from initial creation of ideas to the polished end product, the unifying undercurrent centers on honoring the vision Soloway has for the final product; "[They're] always the final say on every choice." Having a final decision maker who oversees the collective effort of many opens interesting possibilities for pedagogical practices that we explore in the following section.

Implications

The practices enacted throughout the creation of *Transparent* provide a number of implications for writing pedagogy and professional writing communities. The show's writers specify that the culture of respect and group-care they foster and maintain proves paramount to their generative and collaborative processes.

Though writing teachers and researchers alike acknowledge the importance of creating a safe environment for students to explore ideas in writing, we argue that this is even more vital when people engage in collaborative writing activities. In writing groups, educators often require authors to reveal their writing throughout the process, which may be a personal and exposing experience. To assuage some of the anxiety writers may feel regarding their work, educators can create environments that nurture collaboration through mutual trust and respect. To do this, they introduce and maintain guidelines for how writers interact with each other, and create time in their writing curriculum for guided discussion within writing groups that explore members' lives, mutual interests, and concerns. Teachers can also allow students to choose with whom they would like to work. Because trust and emotional availability is integral to collaborative writing processes, offering students the opportunity to be comfortable with their writing partners would help engender affirmation and promote cooperation. In a similar vein, providing writers a choice of writing topics may increase possibilities for author investment and motivation in their writing projects. Scholarly literature in the field of writing research reveals that motivation plays a significant role in students engaging in writing activities (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Troia & Olinghouse 2013); students may be more invested in their writing when they are provided a range of topics to choose from or can create their own topic (Elbow, 2015; Griffith, 2016; Fletcher, 1996; Macrorie, 1988; Romano, 2000, 2013).

The practices of the *Transparent* writers' room also suggest that a very structured environment with ample time for reflection and relationship maintenance proves integral to creative, collaborative authorship. Teachers can implement a similar structure where they divide writing units into relatively short periods of very intense and focused work intermingled with shorter periods of reflection and socializing that encourage care of relationships within the group. Correspondingly, what many educators have vilified as "off-task behavior" may have very beneficial outcomes for collaborative authorship, so teachers might reconsider off-task behavior as an essential aspect of building relationships. Also, when students discuss story possibilities, one student could oversee creative decisions while others may only provide encouragement and grow ideas. Additionally, we urge teachers to use sticky-notes and whiteboards as tools to encourage adaptability and likewise help some students overcome their tendency to become fixated on a particular set of ideas.

However, in the codified processes of school and student evaluations, many education systems indicate that authorship must be accounted for when students engage in collaboration. Along these lines, the writers of *Transparent* undergo a chaotic and complex process negotiating authorship throughout the show's production. For instance, though all of the writers are all responsible for writing every episode, only one (occasionally two) is officially credited. In fact, writers understand that episode credits sometimes do not correspond with the person or

people who wrote the majority of the script, but the writers agree that this is an acceptable practice and reflects the cooperative nature of their writing community (N. Harpster, personal communication, October 24, 2016). This point about authorship speaks to the dynamic characteristic of language in the collaborative authorship process. No one owns language, or to be more precise, language is used as a tool to communicate the lives and experiences of trans* individuals in the context of a television series. Authorship is placed in quotation marks in order to teach the public about the complex lives of trans* individuals. Collaboration trumps authorship in this instance. The writers, therefore, are driven by the result; they unite together in order to create a meaningful series that attempts to move its audience to empathize and understand the experiences of trans* people, and thus produces the possibilities for social change (Greene, 1995). This drive to reflect the lives on trans* people in order to educate others appears to assuage a desire for credit or for authorship.

Conclusion

Though the practices of Hollywood writers' rooms may have important implications for writing, many student collaborations taking place in school filter through the students' social contexts, including school hierarchies, social statuses, writing anxiety, motivation, and writing readiness. The omnipresent social factors in adolescent lives must be taken into account during practices of collaborative authorship at school. This paper does not assume that these contexts will be necessarily alleviated even if educators make every effort to ensure a culture of trust and comfort. Similarly, there could very well be social status, hierarchy, and competition at play in the *Transparent* writers' room that simply went unreported.

The writers for *Transparent* indicated that they remained emotional available and empathic of others throughout the collaborative authorship process. Interview evidence indicates that writers were hired partially because of their affective dispositions (N. Harpster, personal communication, October 24, 2016). Given the profound significance that social contexts and hierarchies play in students' lives and the fact that many people are less inclined to be emotive in classrooms, this study cannot assume that its findings will be germane for all writing communities. Nonetheless, we contend that the collaborative authorship practices, including establishing a safe writing environment to explore provocative and controversial topics can initiate a profound discussion about the uses and applications of collaborative authorship in the writing pedagogy scholarship.

As this article reveals, the creative process in the *Transparent* writers' room fashions possibilities for creativity that would not have existed if the authors wrote in isolation. The success and popularity of *Transparent* indicate that communal writing processes described above provide authors the capability to create exceptional pieces of writing and may prove an exemplar for how to implement collab-

orative authorship; moreover, the rewards of collaborative authorship extend far beyond a measurable product, for collaborative authorship involves a complex, highly structured, nurturing and creative practice that provides many avenues for unexpected, supplementary benefits of participation. Those who partake in this type of communal writing receive an emotional wage where they earn additional payments in the forms of emotional security and meaningful friendships. Correspondingly, authors gain recognition when fellow writers affirm their histories, and when they witness these stories embodied, publicly presented, and validated. We believe that the extended benefits that exist via the process of collective creativity described here carry potential value for a wide variety of writing contexts including academic, professional, amateur and educational settings.

While the supplemental benefits of *Transparent*'s writing practices provide significant emotional gains, the demands of collaboration persist as an integral aspect of many professional, artistic, and academic settings. Educators have an ethical responsibility to provide their students the tools necessary to be successful, so educational settings should include more opportunities for young writers to engage in occasions of collaboration.

Moreover, writing carries the capacity to open alternate realities and offer readers or viewers fresh perspectives. Soloway reminds us that high quality writing products contain the potential to create affective responses that continue far beyond pedagogical responsibility. They explain,

> I love when I meet people who tell me they were able to come out because of the show. People say, 'My parent is trans. My family stopped talking to them ten years ago. I called them up and I said, "Have you seen this show?"' [*Transparent*] becomes like a bridge for people to reconnect and a model for love and family. (2016)

As this quotation implies, writing carries innumerable possibilities regarding human interactions. Because the show produces affective responses like empathy and understanding, it likewise has the potential to alter human behavior (Greene, 1995). As the anecdote suggests, writing can affect social change, and educators can empower their students with the capability to use collaborative authorship to reconnect and to build bridges. What more could we hope for in writing classrooms?

Notes

[1] The authors recognize that two of the show's employees have accused the lead actor (Jeffrey Tambor) of sexual misconduct, and we by no means condone his behavior. Quite the contrary. While this behavior is inarguably egregious, one of the accusers (actress, Trace Lysette) implores that Amazon allow the show to continue. With this in mind, we believe that the writing processes that create *Transparent* offer writing pedagogues rich possibilities regarding the teaching of collaborative authorship.

[2] Trans* (with the asterisk) includes various and diverse gender identities among

transgender, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary people, whereas trans (without the asterisk) traditionally only includes transmen or transwomen.

[3] Both writers Our Lady J, and Harpster use the terms "break story" and "break character" to refer to the process of making up events that affect characters' and plot outlines.

[4] "The Board" will be discussed in more detail in the following section where we outline procedures and protocols. Briefly, it is a white board upon which the writers organize ideas.

[5] Showrunner is a word used in television to designate the individual who is ultimately responsible for the content of an episode. This person is often (but not always) the executive producer and lead-writer. At the end of the day, the showrunner decides what an episode will contain.

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Appendix A

Writing Interview Questions

Primary:

1. Walk me through the process of how the idea for an episode becomes what the viewers see. What roles do writers, producers, actors and editors play, and how do the playing out of these roles promote the purpose of the show?

2. What scene and/or episode would you say is most critical to show to adolescents to learn about gender/sexuality?
    a. What do you want viewers to learn about gender/sexuality from this show?

3. What choices editing, writing, etc did you make in order to engage a less progressive general audience?
    a. Why did the show choose to cast a straight, critically acclaimed and well known male actor to play a trans-woman?

4. What compromises in the writing process did you make in the collaboration?

5. Tell us about the discussions you had in the writers' room about Maura's femininity. Alok Void Menon wrote a piece for The Guardian arguing that *Transparent* reinscribes gender binaries, he argues that trans people must be either male or female in order to be accepted. How does the show move us forward in our understanding of gender?

6. How does narrative help teach others about transgendered people?

Secondary:

1. In the commentary they indicated that the writers debated about whether Maura returns to Shelley for comfort? What were the debates?

2. What are Maura's foibles?

3. What prop or object best represents each character?

4. In terms of writing character, how does triangulation work in terms of finding one's identity?

5. In what ways do the kids see potential selves or potential identities in some of the other characters?
   a. How does the mirror work as a metaphor for character development?

6. Tell us about the decision about the scene where Sarah and Tammy tell children about Grandpa Mort's change?

7. Talk to us about the writing of Marci's phone conversation at camp?

8. The two girls have gender/sexuality fluidity—but Josh does not—why not?

9. Tell us about the scene with Josh and his niece and the dream light—what is the importance of this scene?

10. Continually returning to the past—how much of the puzzles of the past need to be filled in for people to feel authentic—Ally holding hair at the conclusion of the season—tell us about this decision? She seems to be ready to fly away, holding on by a thread, or is she finally "grounded"?

Appendix B

Follow-up Writer Protocol

1. What is the culture of the writers' room?
   a. How was that culture created?
   b. How is this culture maintained? As in, what specific methods are used in maintaining the culture that has been established?
   c. Would you describe the decorum of the writers' room?
   d. How does the writers' room engender collaboration?
   e. What happens when people disagree?
   f. How is this writing context different than other writing contexts you've worked in?
   g. How is this collaborative writing process different than writing projects you've done individually or with Micah?

2. Walk me through the process of creating a new season.
   a. How much do you plan ahead as in outlining the whole season before getting down to specifics of writing an episode?
   b. What does collaboration look like when creating the arc of a season?
   c. How is plot created?

d. How are characters created?

e. How does the diversity of experience among the writers enrich the collaborative process?

3. How much collaboration occurs in the writing of a single episode among the writers?

a. How is it decided who writes which episode?

b. What does this look like?—How does this collaboration occur?

c. Can you think of a specific example from an episode when this occurred?

d. How does this change when other players get involved (e.g., actors, producers, director, editor, etc)?

4. How do you think the writing process would be different if you were writing a plot driven show rather than a character driven show?

a. How might character driven shows invite creative collaboration in ways that plot driven shows may not?