

Where We Are

Writing in the West African Context

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In West Africa and in Ghana, there exist many modes of communication beyond the verbal and written. For example, at the chiefs' palaces there exist many systems of communication; notably, symbols (ideographs) that tell the philosophies and stories of the chiefs and the people of the tribes. In the Akan language, these groups of symbols or stylized pictures are known as the Adinkra symbols. They are typically drawings, some of which depict the experiences of the clan/tribe and many others are teachings and wise sayings. As we grew up, these drawings connected us to the flora and fauna (nature elements such as birds, land, and trees) around us. At the same time, the legacies of colonialism suffuse the Indigenous culture, conflicting with its ways of knowing by blurring indigenous practices with colonizing practices. Thus, tracing pure undiluted writing systems of Africa is difficult. We can, therefore, not belittle the existence of some forms of writing in Africa in the past. However, contemporary practices of education have little to say about writing as a field.

In Ghana, as in many West African countries, it is difficult to center the study of writing because writing is micro-inscribed in the macro study of English. The study of writing forms a small section of the study of the English language. The educational systems and its students hardly recognize writing's distinctiveness or necessity. The school curricula are remnants of the colonial empire, and they inadvertently continue to maintain and promote gatekeeping structures and practices—especially in defining and teaching writing. It is not surprising that the educational institutions and stakeholders in West Africa have restricted writing to just print texts; written words are assessed based on “a test of grammar,” (298) as Yancey puts it. Writing in the West African context is slow in encompassing multimodality and digital technologies in its production in the classroom. In 2017, the then senior minister of Ghana, Osafo Marfo, spoke highly in favor of the sciences over the study of language, concluded that “we can't industrialize with grammar” (Neequaye, 2017). Such a comment demonstrates that not only the arts, but that writing itself is not a priority in that country.

In this piece, we explore the West African context by focusing more specifically on writing at the high school level among the five English-speaking countries: The Gambia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ghana. We made this choice because these five West African countries write common regional

examinations organized by the West African Examination Council (WAEC). With respect to how writing is taught at the higher education level, we decided to focus on Ghana only.

Writing: Curriculum Design

West Africa has five English-speaking countries, namely Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia and they, arguably, have similar curricula for various subjects at the high school level. The curriculum for English Language is divided into five main components, comprising Listening and Speaking Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Writing, Grammar, and Literature (Teaching iv-ix). The curriculum over-relies on reception and production by students. This raises concerns about the lack of attention given to writing as a process.

Some general aims for teaching English are to “improve the communicative competence of students and give them the confidence to communicate” and “raise students’ level of proficiency in English usage and their ability to communicate with other users of English” (Teaching iii). The aims are problematically stated; they give the students little to no agency in their learning. To “improve the communicative competence of students and give them...” implies that it is teachers’ task to make that happen, while denying students’ agency and responsibilities. This confirms Freire’s banking system of education; a system that creates a giver-receiver relationship between teachers and their students where students are mere listening objects taking instructions from their subject teachers. It encourages what he describes as a situation in which contents or “empirical dimensions of reality tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified” (52). Thus, “the knowledge of writing is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire 53). At this level, though writing seems to enjoy some form of importance, we argue that writing would receive much more attention if it were treated as a whole entity/subject. Drawing from our past teaching experiences and knowledge, we contend that the labor in grading writing discourages many teachers from teaching writing in their English language classrooms.

Writing: Pedagogical Approaches

In this section, we explore how writing is taught in the English Language classroom at these levels. At all levels, the pedagogical approaches adopted in teaching writing focus more on writing as a product, instead of writing as product, process, recursive and nonlinear. Fulkerson describes four philosophies of composition: the Expressivists, the Mimeticists, the Rhetoricists, and the Formalists. The Expressivist values the writer and emphasizes openness,

honesty, voice, and personal expressions; the Mimeticists value informational accuracy and logic while the Formalists favor the text, or the internal traits of the writing. Finally, the Rhetoricists value “effectiveness, audience awareness, persuasiveness and contextual flexibility” (Fulkerson 409-410). Of the four philosophies/ideologies of composition Fulkerson describes, the Ghanaian writing context--that is if that exists at all--tends to adapt the formalist approach, giving more attention to the text and its internal traits with little attention to the others. Although there is no open admission of the teaching philosophies, we draw our conclusions by examining the contents of writing in Ghana and to some extent, West Africa more generally. Because writing is not centered or taught on its own beyond academic requirements, it is difficult to examine writing from a central perspective.

Usually, because the teachers are considered the repository of all writing knowledge, they adopt approaches with less engagement of students in the writing process (Chokwe 541). And because much emphasis is placed on writing as a product, process activities such as brainstorming, drafting, peer review, and reflection are of little significance, while rubrics play an influential role in teaching writing. Though students are given some space for creativity, there is not enough room in writing pedagogy in West Africa for students to explore and practice their writing. This is partly because of the educational systems’ overreliance on colonial and gatekeeping practices in teaching writing, with Ghana being a particular context for such an approach (Sackey 1997).

In higher education, more emphasis is placed on academic writing. The focus on grammar features prominently in teaching writing. The academic writing mainly aims to prepare students for effective communication, through writing, in the academic community (University 3). Writing practices within higher education contexts demonstrate a limited view of the reality that the most productive writing students do happens outside the classroom and beyond the walls of the academy (Yancey 300). Emerging technologies have greatly impacted the writing and writerly behavior of students. However, higher education institutions seem to be reluctant in shifting their pedagogical approaches to meet the increasing demands and needs of students outside academia.

Further, the overreliance on teaching academic writing shows that most of the students conceive writing as a non-recursive, linear process, and are not adequately prepared for the professional world, since the most common type of writing and the most valued writing, post college, are more of non-academic writing (Blythe et al. 272-273). We must be quick to admit that English language writing teachers face significant challenges: large class sizes, inadequate writing technologies, and the seemingly slow pace and reluctance of the government agencies and institutions in charge of education to review the writing curriculum.

Writing: Assessment Approaches

To give a sense of the assessment approaches adopted by writing teachers at the high school level, we examine here a marking scheme for the 2020 WAEC English paper. We use this material because the grading system for writing in the classroom is based on the WAEC marking scheme. In the West African context, assessment of writing is based on four key areas: Content, Organization, Expression, and Mechanical Accuracy. It is worth noting that Mechanics/grammar is a higher order item on the hierarchy of concerns in assessing writing. For example, in the WAEC marking scheme, Mechanical Accuracy—Grammar—receives equal importance with Content and Organization, except Expression. This goes to support our claim that pedagogical emphasis is placed on writing as a product rather than writing as a process. It could be that teachers focus on writing as a product because many educational institutions are more concerned with students' grades than what Yancey calls "use value" for writing (301). We are of the view that this approach leads to unintended consequences, as many students dread writing due to its punitive tendencies in grading. Thus, students do not feel encouraged engaging in extensive exploration of ideas/issues beyond the strict requirements, which stifle their inquiry and critical thinking. At the university level, the writing assessment story is not so different. But things have shifted: universities now have improved required writing courses for students.

To conclude, our exploration of the state of writing in the West African context shows that writing has received very little attention in scholarship. Though there are some studies done about writing in the larger African context, emphasis is placed on academic writing, a common focus of English for Academic Purposes programs (Afful 142, 147). Focusing on only academic writing as a genre fails to achieve what the Conference of College Composition and Communication calls "sound writing instruction"—an instruction that "enables students to analyze and practice with a variety of genres" (CCCC). We support Joseph Afful's call for African higher education institutions to embrace the paradigm shift and to establish writing programs that focus on writing as interdisciplinary and a social act (154). We stated earlier that it is difficult to categorize the purpose of writing and the motivations for writing in West Africa; that said, we are interested in further examining how writing in the West African educational systems promotes the "habits of mind" identified in CCCC's "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing."

When we do rhetorical interrogations with a focus on the evolution of writing and the responsiveness of writing sites (workplace, school, and social community), would the viability of over-reliance on academic writing hold? One of our aims in writing this piece is to problematize the teaching and

research of writing in West African contexts. As scholars, concerned about what writing is and writing pedagogies in West Africa, we invite a scholarly conversation on expanding the scope of teaching writing in the West African classroom. Writing is evolving and it challenges us to look beyond the colonial educational frameworks and ideologies that drive writing pedagogies in West Africa to a more local but practical one. Emerging technologies have impacted the evolution of writing in and beyond the classroom. As educators and writing scholars from West Africa, it is our responsibility to reexamine the impact of digital technologies on the writing lives of students and explore how writing pedagogy prepares students as productive writers in various responsive writing sites. As we consider expanding the landscape of writing and writing pedagogies in ways that meet students' needs and the demands of responsive sites, we might be interested in further research that looks into interrogating and extending students' writerly productivity beyond the academy. Writing is contextual, social, and interactive and must be taught to meet such demands while responding to the ever-evolving global needs. We would be interested in among many questions, how classroom student writing impacts and informs daily interactions and meaningful negotiations, and how technology can enhance the teaching and learning of writing in West Africa. More importantly, how can we expand the landscape of writing in West Africa beyond academic writing?

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