



# Combat Sports Bloggers, Mad Scientist Poets, and Comic Scriptwriters

Engaging Boys in Writing on Their Own Terms

by Rachel Loeper

As the program director of a community writing center that serves children and youth ages 5–18, I see it all, from 15-year-old spoken word poets to six-year-olds whose first “books” are strung together with yarn. In all of my roles—administrator, teacher, volunteer trainer—I value engaging the most reluctant of young writers. I therefore began to focus on a few middle school boys who frequented the center, Mighty Writers in South Philadelphia. All were students of color; eight of the 10 were considered to be “at risk” in school because they received free or reduced-priced lunch. They were noisy, rambunctious, and disruptive to other writers. They tended to rush through their prewriting and were careless in their drafting. Revision was a struggle and proofreading barely a thought. They were most engaged when wrestling on the sidewalk or cheering one another on to the next level of a computer game. Although they were certainly writing, I didn’t see the same enthusiasm, focused attention, or motivation I saw in other Mighty Writers.

I wanted to discover strategies to better engage these boys and others like them in writing in out-of-school time (OST) programs. When I participated in the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship during the 2010–2011 school year, Mighty Writers’ second year of operation, I had the opportunity to conduct research in my program to try to find such strategies.

I wanted these boys to experience, as I had as a child, what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) calls *flow*: the feeling of being fully absorbed in a challenging but enjoyable task. No professional basketball player achieves the flow experience without taking thousands of shots from the foul line. However, those thousands of shots need not be tedious. In fact, they’re often communal and fun. In my research, I

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**RACHEL LOEPER**, is the founding education director of Mighty Writers in Philadelphia. She has taught English as a Second Language, remedial reading, and creative writing for children and adults. She offers presentations, consultations, and professional development on the writing process, as well as community writing programs for museums, K–12 schools, colleges and universities, and other nonprofit organizations. She participated in the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship in 2010–2011 and in the Level II fellowship the following year.

found that, before flow can occur, students must be given the opportunity to take small, incremental steps toward engaging in the writing process with the support of adults and peers. They must go through the writing process in safety, with encouragement and real critical feedback from people they know. The onus then is on educators, mentors, parents, and other adults to create engaging and collaborative opportunities through which boys can experience the writing process. My inquiry into the experience of 10 boys in Mighty Writers workshops helped me identify some key indicators of engagement that can move boys toward the flow experience.

### Means to an End: Engagement Leads to Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) defines *flow* as an experience of participating in an activity—sports, crafts, academics, or nearly any other pursuit—in which the participant is highly engaged and enjoys the activity. Also key to the flow experience is challenge: The activity should be just beyond—but not far beyond—the participant’s skill set and knowledge. The identifiers of flow are involvement of both body and mind, deep concentration, clear intentions, and awareness of the quality of the performance. A person who is in a flow state has no fear of failure, no self-consciousness, and no awareness of the passage of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

In a study of engagement and flow in OST settings, Shernoff and Vandell (2008) found that urban boys reported peak experiences of flow during arts and sports activities. They experienced the lowest level of flow during homework help and test prep times (Shernoff & Vandell, 2008). I wanted to explore how to make the writing process feel more like a sport or a game to my group of reluctant male writers. Though the end goal is flow, ongoing engagement in the writing process may be the key to getting there. For example, Judy Abbott (2000) found that developing tools and strategies for writing engagement led to the flow experience for two fifth-grade boys. The engagement strategies included a great deal of praise, conversations about hot topics and current events, students’ ownership of their writing, and an environment that supported all student writing endeavors (Abbott, 2000).

Bartko (2005) identified seven elements of engagement in OST programs:

1. Reactions to teachers, classmates, curriculum, and school
2. Sense of belonging
3. Value placed on learning
4. Participation in academic and social activities

5. Conduct
6. Attention
7. Willingness to exert the effort required to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills

In addition to these psychological and behavioral elements, engagement also requires the support of caring adults (Woolley & Bowen, 2007).

How ongoing engagement might connect to the flow experience is illustrated in Lipstein and Renninger’s (2007) study of stages of writing interest in adolescents. Young people at the initial stages of writing interest require specific praise and manageable feedback to remain engaged. At later stages, young writers need their teachers and readers to show an understanding of their intentions as writers and to provide them with leveled challenges. Challenges that are just at the border of writers’ current abilities are characteristic of the flow experience.

### Program Context: Mighty Writers

The population at Mighty Writers is socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse. Some students find us because they are already avid writers; others are pushed in our direction by parents or teachers. We offer programs focused on encouraging clear, concise, and creative writing for students at all levels. During the 2010–2011 school year, when I conducted my inquiry, our afterschool program offered homework completion time, a snack, free-choice time, and opportunities to learn the writing process. The classic writing process approach to creative and informative writing taught at Mighty Writers involves five steps: prewriting, drafting, revising, proofreading, and publishing.

We tried to create an environment where students could safely receive critical feedback and embrace revision. After homework and formal writing time, students congregated in small groups, playing computer games or taking a hula hoop break on the front sidewalk. Although our programming space is only 1,700 square feet, we have six rooms designed with children in mind, featuring comic book heroes on the walls and lots of ways for children to engage in brief physical activity.

In addition to our afterschool program, the Mighty Writers staff works with volunteers to develop and implement long- and short-term writing workshops during evenings and weekends. Eight of the 10 boys in my focus group participated in the afterschool program, and all of them participated in at least one of four writing workshops I observed as part of my inquiry.

## Exploring Boys' Engagement

I identified the 10 boys in my study group because writing appeared to be a struggle for them at every stage of the process. The program's flow from homework to writing to play became an incentive system that perpetuated their negative attitude toward writing. Instead of seeing writing as play, which was my goal, they asked, "If I finish my writing, can I play?" Both engagement in and ownership of the process of writing seemed to be lacking.

Still, these boys would frequently stay late to participate in the writing workshops. I speculated that something was happening in the workshops that wasn't happening in the afterschool program. I began my inquiry by observing four workshops: Writing My Neighborhood, Act Out Loud, Comic Book Club, and Sports Blogging. In these initial observations, I was looking for themes, structures, activities, and relationships that contributed to engagement of the boys in my study group. I observed several meetings of each workshop, taking notes on the conversations, body language, and group dynamics I saw.

From these initial observations, I settled on a number of points of interest, which I used to guide interviews with students, parents, and instructors. Student interviews focused on the workshops themselves, the boys' identities as writers, their role models, and their writing portfolios. In parent interviews or surveys, I asked about social, emotional, and academic changes in their children, as well as the boys' attitudes toward writing. In the instructor interviews, the volunteers spoke about the challenges and opportunities of the workshop setting.

Finally, I closely studied the students' writing samples. For each of the boys, we had an average of seven writing samples or literacy artifacts spanning a period of six months to two years. In paging through the writing they produced, I first wanted to identify themes that had emerged in interviews: role models, autonomy, experimentation, relationships, and identity formation. I also looked for evidence of revision, working on the assumption that multiple revisions of a work connote a high level of student investment.

## What Engagement Looks Like

I chose to study these 10 boys because I thought they weren't experiencing flow, and this observation led me to believe that they weren't engaged in the writing process.

Once I began to speak with the boys, their parents, and the instructors, however, I learned that I was confusing *flow* with *engagement*. Entering into *flow* requires a certain level of expertise. *Engagement*, by contrast, can happen at all skill levels and is a necessary prequel to flow.

My observations, surveys, and interviews pointed to four features of the boys' engagement with the writing process:

- Banter and physicality
- Frequent breaks to talk about form or content with peers and adults
- Sharing work with the writing community throughout the writing process
- Sharing work beyond the writing community

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When all four of these identifying features were present, the boys showed what Bartko (2005) calls "willingness to exert the effort required to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (p. 112).

Of course, many of these identifiers will be present when girls are engaged as well, while some instances of boys' engagement will be missing some or all of them. I offer these observations and strategies not to contribute to a gender binary,

but rather with the understanding that each child has a unique identity and experience, which makes each child receptive to a unique set of learning inputs.

## Banter and Physicality

For many preadolescent boys, physical exploration is their primary way of understanding the world, although such exploration is generally discouraged in school settings. My observations and interviews showed that banter and physical activity affirmed boys' experience. These activities created a safe zone where boys felt safe because their way of being in the world was affirmed. Here my observations disagree with Bartko's list of elements of engagement, which includes "conduct." Though activities like wrestling, speaking with raised voices, or bantering in front of a computer screen are often viewed as poor conduct in a classroom, they may be acceptable in OST settings. In fact, we can harness this energy and redirect it toward positive writing experiences.

Banter and physicality can foster a sense of belonging among middle school boys and allow them a way into the workshop space on their own terms. Nearly all of the boys

talked in their interviews about a favorite workshop activity, such as gardening, acting, or painting, that incorporated movement. A fifth grader fondly remembered a game of charades he played during the Act Out Loud workshop: “The best thing about Mighty Writers for me was when I had to act like Steve Urkel in charades. Everyone was laughing as I was done and that made me feel excited.” This young actor generally struggled in social settings because of behavioral problems, but the game of charades gave him an opportunity to make everyone laugh and so to feel accepted.

A seventh-grade student critiqued the workshop Writing My Neighborhood by comparing it to Act Out Loud:

All you’re really describing is what your neighborhood is like...You’d describe something, the people, it wasn’t as fun...For me, it might be better to act out your neighborhood, what you would change.

This student’s critique went on at some length. He made it clear that the topic of Writing My Neighborhood wasn’t what left him disengaged; it was the delivery. Even a workshop about neighborhoods can incorporate banter, physicality, and maybe a game of charades.

A good example of banter turned up in my observation of the Sports Blogging workshop. The instructor opened by talking with the group—three boys and three adults including himself—about what had happened in sports that week. As the conversation moved to the Mets and Yankees, the students—who were all Phillies fans—were making fun of one of the volunteer teaching assistants for favoring the Mets. Then this exchange ensued between the instructor and Daniel,<sup>1</sup> an eighth grader of mixed ethnic heritage.

*Daniel:* There’s this kid in school who always wears a Yankees cap, and everyone makes fun of him.

*Instructor:* Do you make fun of him, Daniel?

*Daniel:* Yeah! I don’t know why he wears the hat.

*Instructor:* That’s not cool! The poor dude already is a Yankees fan. He’s got enough problems.

This light, friendly opening engaged students and volunteers alike. The banter created a way into the safe space of the workshop. Educators and youth workers may resist informal dialogue or make the mistake of thinking that conversations like this one are superfluous to the activities at hand. In fact, this kind of dialogue is essential to the writing that follows.

<sup>1</sup> All names in this article are pseudonyms.

### **Frequent Breaks to Talk About Form or Content**

The boys I observed were often most successful at writing when they drafted a piece with an adult at their elbow, often stopping to engage in conversation about form or content. Having an expert adult nearby during the drafting phase does wonders to increase boys’ attention and cultivate their perception of the value of the writing process. Targeted questions from adults during drafting makes the effort required to write well less intimidating, since support is nearby. One parent said on the parent survey that the Sports Blogging workshop “made [my son] think about what he wanted to say, how to say it, and how to present it.” Another parent of two boys said in an interview:

My boys have a lot of respect for what the tutors say. I think they’re looking for role models who have a strong self-identity and understanding of their own abilities, and I see them benefiting from both male and female role models at Mighty Writers, and even older students.

These role models help to engage boys in writing by offering support while communicating respect for the boys’ ideas.

Volunteers who sit next to the boys as they write offer a hybrid of critique, critical thinking, encouragement, and positive feedback.

During one observation of the Sports Blogging workshop, I saw three boys writing for nearly an hour, each with an adult at his elbow. During that time, the boys and their mentors engaged in conversations about how to write transitions and, because the room contained a Ping-Pong table, banter about past Ping-Pong games. Most amazingly, they also had really great discussions about the form and content of the boys’ writing, all of it couched in encouragement and a spirit of collaboration.

*Volunteer:* So you know that every writer has to rewrite things several times. Let’s try reorganizing this a little bit. We want a hook here, something to catch your reader. Of all of your sentences, which one do you think would be best to start with?

*Muhammad:* [Whispers to volunteer.]

*Volunteer:* That’s good. Go with that.

*Muhammad:* All right, now I got it.

*Volunteer:* So what’s going to come after this? You just told me you have something to say. What do you have to say?

*Muhammad:* Maybe this? [Points to the page.]

*Volunteer:* What’s the basic thing that you’re trying

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to get across? What's the one sentence that this just doesn't make sense without?

*Muhammad:* [Reads one of his sentences.]

*Volunteer:* Right. So before you tell them that they have to agree with you, tell them what they have to agree with. Keep going. [Plays with his phone.] Keep going. You've got the idea now.

*Muhammad:* So then I might say this. [Points to his notebook.]

*Volunteer:* It's up to you, your choice. You are always right.

In this observation, we see the volunteer using a lot of joining language: "we" instead of "you." Also, rather than telling Muhammad that his first suggestion for the main idea doesn't work, the volunteer asks more questions to try to get Muhammad to come to the main idea on his own. Finally, the volunteer offers encouragement in almost every line. Conversations like these keep writers' attention sharp, communicate respect for the written word, and ease the effort of the task at hand.

### **Sharing with the Writing Community**

In Mighty Writers workshops, all members of the boys' writing communities shared their work in formal and informal ways throughout the writing process. At every stage, they received praise and encouragement.

The best writing teachers are writers themselves who are unafraid to share their own work with students. They offer students models of good writing while creating a community in which writers can safely receive critiques and engage in revision. The instructors are not gatekeepers of good writing, letting students in or keeping them out. Rather, they are writers working alongside students, discussing struggles and successes as they arise. When all members of the writing community share their work, students are more willing to exert the effort to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills—a key element of engagement, according to Bartko (2005). Conversations with instructors and peers help to scaffold skill development, and then the effort is rewarded when writers share their work and receive positive feedback.

For example, during one session of Sports Blogging, it was Andy's turn to share his first draft of an introductory blog post, a descriptive list of his top five favorite

combat-based video games. As he read, Andy, an eighth grader, showed a fair amount of reticence, speaking softly and holding his binder to cover his face. When he finished, everyone applauded. Muhammad, a fifth grader, gave this feedback: "[Andy] used a metaphor in that sentence, and he was very specific about what was going on, about dead scum being on the ground in the jungle. It made me see the game that he plays." As Andy listened to Muhammad's comments, he put his binder down and nodded slightly. He was back in the fold, feeling a little more confident.

In all Mighty Writers workshops, students produce a final written product. Many workshops end with a performance as well. At the conclusion of Act Out Loud, students performed their final monologues at a local college theater. One parent spoke about how proud she was of her son. A fifth grader a full head shorter than the other students in the workshop, this boy took a lead role in the production. His mother said, "I couldn't believe it when I saw him on presentation night, this little

guy among all these older kids. They really gave him a level playing field." Observing how the boys shared writing was an eye-opening experience for her. She said, "I wanted [my son] to think of himself as a writer, but I didn't really see how he was doing that until the final performance for Act Out Loud. There, he was loving it."

In my research, the act of sharing student work throughout the writing process stood out as both an indicator of and a motivator for engagement. Sharing gave the boys multiple opportunities for praise and critique at every stage of the writing process. The students seemed to understand that they were working side by side with adult writers who faced the same struggles they did. The support of those adults empowered the boys to approach the difficult business of drafting and revising.

### **Sharing Outside the Writing Community**

In Mighty Writers, as in many other programs, students share their work with others outside of the immediate writing community. When boys bring their writing back into their lives, sharing with teachers, friends, parents, and other relatives, they reveal their pride and investment in the good work they've done, creating a snowball effect of effort and reward.

Daniel's mother said on her survey that Daniel "talked about Sports Blogging a lot afterward, including what they

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did and progress on his blog.” Another student’s guardian noted that the boy would spend hours working on his Act Out Loud monologue at home. “As far as I can tell, the workshops really made him think. [He] would work hard on the Mighty Writers assignments and spent countless hours at my house working on his pieces.”

In the most telling account, Muhammad’s mother talked about the way his sports blog became a conversation point at gatherings of both immediate and extended family:

[Muhammad’s tutor] gave him an idea of what a blog was. They considered it like an online journal where he could write about things that mattered to him, and other kids would respond. I signed on to review it and comment, and we’ll often pull it up when the family is together to show off his work.

When boys take the work they produce beyond the writing community, asking friends and family to affirm this new skill, they reveal their engagement in the writing process. As their skills and engagement increase, they take ownership of their writing and embrace their identities as writers. I’ve found that this internalization of a writerly identity is the last step in moving from leveled engagement to flow.

### Ways to Foster Engagement

In the process of discovering these four key indicators of boys’ engagement in the writing process, I also identified several strategies that promoted our boys’ success. With thoughtful planning, these strategies can be easily implemented in other OST programs, in clubs within OST programs, or in other educational settings.

### Training and Professional Development

Professional development is crucial to the success of any OST writing program. Programs that seek to engage boys in writing can train their staff and volunteers to create an environment in which the four indicators of engagement can flourish. Programs should train adults to:

- **Create opportunities for conversation and banter to emerge naturally.** OST instruction periods need not begin with a formal check-in. When boys and adults practice the art of conversation on their own terms, everyone can feel at ease.

- **Use mentor texts to encourage critical thinking about writing.** Volunteers and staff can use discussions of newspaper articles, literature, web content, or their own writing to help boys discover what makes a written piece work.
- **Collaborate with students throughout the writing process.** Programs should train staff and volunteers to listen well, use critical questions to guide revision, and treat writing as a shared endeavor.
- **Communicate high expectations and specific praise.** Both expectations and praise should be conveyed in a clear and concise manner.

During an observation of the Comic Book Club, I saw a volunteer exemplifying the kind of communication we hope to achieve at Mighty Writers:

Joshua is doing something I forgot to mention. He must have taken comic book classes before. (Have you?) He drew a blue feather on his hero’s chest in every panel, so there’s no question about who that figure is.

In this example, the praise for Joshua is also a teaching moment for other students.

### Program Design

The shape of the program also helps to create an environment in which boys can get engaged with writing. One important component is opportunities for boys to work one on one with adults. Staff or volunteers who get to know each student’s writing intimately can offer the greatest amount of support. The effectiveness of the relationship depends on the adults’ skills, patience, and ability to praise.

Programs can also create workshops that are explicitly boy-centered, along with girl-centered and gender-neutral workshops. At Mighty Writers, workshops that have attracted upper elementary and middle school boys include Sports Blogging, Comic Book Club, and a playwriting workshop called For Boys Only. The key to success is the degree to which boys can identify with the theme of the workshop. Gender-targeted workshops are usually not exclusive. When a boy wanted to join Hair Stories to write about his dreadlocks, we let him. Workshops

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that appeal more to boys and more to girls should exist alongside gender-neutral options.

### **Safe Spaces**

Every writer needs a safe space in which to write drafts, get feedback, and revise. One aspect of safety that may be more important for boys than for most girls is that the program space allows for movement and physical activity. Even when program goals are academic or creative, as in the case of Mighty Writers, a Ping-Pong table in the writing space gives boys an outlet. Staff and volunteers can find energetic but focused games that give students a chance to expend their energy in positive ways while building community. After “blowing off some steam” together, boys will be better able to function as a community of writers who compassionately and thoughtfully critique one another’s work.

Another aspect of safety is multiple opportunities for positive feedback at every stage of the writing process. Encouragement breeds motivation. Anyone who puts pen to paper or sits down at a keyboard is taking a risk. In order to uplift boy writers, the adults who work with them must find the good in everything they write, point it out in specific terms, and encourage them to try it again and again.

Finally, adults should encourage autonomy and responsibility. In my interviews with boys, I asked, “Are you any kind of writer?” Every boy had an answer. Volunteers and staff at Mighty Writers encourage autonomy and responsibility by having clear, specific expectations for student writing while also giving students the freedom to choose genres, make process decisions, and decide when to share their work.

### **“Are You Any Kind of Writer?”**

The boys I interviewed had a lot to teach me. As I listened to their stories and those of their parents, I learned that they already were engaged in the writing process. When I looked for ways to keep them engaged, I came up with a framework and recommendations that will shape future writing programs at Mighty Writers. However, my greatest reward was being allowed to listen to the boys’ stories and learn why and how they identified as writers.

The response of Andy, from the Sports Blogging workshop, was the most poignant. Andy was a quiet boy who grew a foot in the two years I knew him. He was often found hanging at the periphery of the room or activity. Two years into the program, when Andy was finishing eighth

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grade, I asked him, “Are you any kind of writer?”

Without answering, he jumped up, walked to the closet of my office (which also doubled as program space), and pulled down his June writing project, a poem in which he imagined himself a tree at the center of one of his favorite combat video games. It was June 1. Andy had already

completed that month’s assignment and stashed it in a place where only I might find it. I was reminded of similar moments I’d experienced during the year: I’d be cleaning out a cabinet or pulling a book down from a high shelf, and there I’d discover an Andy poem.

In the two-page poem, Andy takes on the persona of a tree in the middle of the battle zone, standing firm despite the war and chaos exploding around him. The poem concludes:

I survived because I am worthy  
My roots are strong  
as they stand before me  
I was here first  
and I will be here after  
I guess I could stand through  
any disaster.

“I’m a poetry writer. I listen to a lot of music, and I guess I’m good at rhyming now,” he shrugged.

Andy is a poet. Maybe he was a poet before he came to Mighty Writers, but he may not have been aware of his gift or had the chance to develop it. A community writing center, or a writing community within a broader OST program, is a dynamic and interactive approach to OST education. If we can train volunteers adequately, design programs with boys in mind, and create safe and accountable spaces for boys, we’ve made a start. If nothing else, adult readers of children’s work must learn to identify the writers’ engagement with every piece they’re willing to share, praise their successes, and cheer them on to try again and again.

Through practice and regular engagement, more of our boys will achieve the skill necessary to experience flow in writing. Whether they become teachers, engineers, or business managers, the joy of writing will inform their private and public lives as they grow into adulthood. Just as the high school basketball star returns to the court later in life when he needs to clear his mind, so will our young writers have the ability to return to the page to clear away the cobwebs, clarify their thoughts, and construct their future.

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