

Creating Middle School Harlem Historians: Motivating Urban Students through Community-Based History

As one of our mentors always declared: “How can students learn about Mesopotamia, when they don’t even know the history of their own block?” Although a simple ideal, it is one that is poignant and timely for us as middle school educators in an urban school.

Guided by decades of research on motivation (Graham & Weiner, 1996; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2013; Stipek, 2002), we know that for students to be academically successful they must, at least in part, find the material interesting and relevant. This intuitive notion, despite its widespread acceptance, is one that middle school educators still struggle with in practice.

Recognizing our location in Harlem—one of the country’s most historic areas—as well as the fact that we work primarily with African American and Latino/Latina students, we created an after-school program that tapped into students’ inherent interests in their community. With our ultimate goal of increasing students’ writing motivation, we created Middle School Harlem Historians (MSHH), a six-session educational program that occurred in three cycles, apprenticing middle school students as historical researchers of their Harlem community.

In an attempt to hook students, the first two sessions introduced the history of Harlem not as a listing of facts from a textbook, but rather as a web of conflicting narratives and interpretations that needed investigation. For example, during

the first session we presented students with an original 1964 *New York Times* newspaper featuring a front-page story of the 1964 Harlem Riots; our discussion about how they, as students of color, might (or might not) have had a different perspective than the white newspaper reporter was a counternarrative that powerfully resonated with our middle level students. Throughout the unmediated discussion, it was apparent that students were beginning to wade their way through the gray area in which history often lives. They were able to make their own meaning, essentially inferring the truth while closely examining the accuracy of the information provided. In an attempt to further student buy-in, the following week we visited a local historic landmark: Alexander Hamilton Grange (Cycle 1 and 2) and General Grant’s Tomb (Cycle 3). At these landmarks, students wrote both their observations and general reflections on the visit using a choice board of journal prompts (see Appendix A, Figure 1). In the remaining four sessions, students worked independently, researching a self-selected topic related to the history of Harlem *and* their lives. Following the completion of their essays, students presented their work at Columbia University in front of teachers and peers.

Creating a Culture of Motivation and Inspiration around Harlem’s History

The Middle School Harlem Historians program had a number of specific structures and goals that aided its success in motivating students to write. Frankly, we knew that if we were going to get eighth graders to stay after school, on a

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Friday nonetheless, to voluntarily write about history, we had to design the program in a particular way that would foster excitement and a sense of purpose among students. To do these things, one main goal was to create a peer group with a unique culture where students would motivate each other. For starters, we branded it by giving it a name: Middle School Harlem Historians. Students, most of whom were below grade-level in writing including some with learning disabilities, felt like they were part of an elite academic club; this feeling of exclusivity instantly motivated the group. We worked hard to build a community of “scholars” where students felt that they had something valuable to contribute to the group, no matter their abilities. Students responded positively to this framing of the program, as these urban middle school students became attracted to the idea that they were researchers. As the program progressed, students developed a sense of a self—a “scholarly” identity as “critical public historians,” described by Morrell and Rogers (2006)—that motivated them to write in profound ways.

Encouraging students who were significantly below grade writing levels to dedicate two and a half hours writing was already an important first step, so we made pedagogical choices to further increase student motivation. For starters, the curriculum was heavily rooted in students’ lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010;

Nieto, 2004; Lee, 2007; Howard, 2003), as students selected historical topics that were meaningful to their lives and connected in some way to their Harlem community. Students bought into the idea that by living in Harlem, they had a unique perspective on this history that other historians—including us as instructors—did not possess. While we taught students basic historical skills (e.g., using book indexes, performing online searches, etc.), as well as various writing strategies during each session, we also emphasized to them that they would be teaching us as well as their peers about their research.

In connection, the way that students approached learning about their Harlem topic was in sync with the autonomy we entrusted to them in this after-school space. The middle years are a time during which students clamor for independence. However, this calls for the trickiest kind of independence: the type that requires autonomy with the assistance of an invisible hand. To push students to the sea and tell them to float is not yet developmentally appropriate, nor is coddling and micromanaging their learning experiences. At MSHH, we ensured our pedagogy nurtured this appropriate level of independence with the goal of maximizing classroom motivation. For example, we provided students with as much scaffolding as needed to be successful, such as listing all the different types of help available, while still giving them the choice to complete assignments in an autonomous manner.

Furthermore, relying on a checklist we provided (see Appendix A, Figure 3), students worked almost entirely independently. It was their decision how much support they desired during these sessions as they self-monitored their

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

“Not Your Usual History Lesson: Writing Historical Markers” from ReadWriteThink.org invites students to develop their understanding of writing and local history by creating their own historical markers. They begin by studying historical markers in their own communities and then draft content for an unmarked historical location.

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progress. Although adult support was always offered to all students, it was never a requirement that students work directly with an educator. Our goal was to act more as brainstorming partners (when appropriate) rather than program “directors.” By providing a clear ladder to success for all students, each individual scholar was able to self-assess what metaphorical rung to begin at in order to effectively complete the tasks outlined. Granting students this type of autonomy and choice through both content and readiness level allowed students the opportunity to take ownership of their learning—a key reason why students remained consistently motivated during each session. Keeping with our theme of fostering a “scholarly culture,” the onus of “success” was transferred from teacher to student.

This transfer of responsibility from educator to scholar was perfectly embodied by a student who completed two cycles of Middle School Harlem Historians. Although this young scholar was bright, he had an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and was rarely motivated to write, completing very few of his regular classroom assignments. After begrudgingly attending the introductory MSHH meeting because of the “invitation” we sent him to participate, he was immediately drawn to the idea that he could research any historical aspect of Harlem. His attendance alone signified our first victory: getting an over-aged student who struggled mightily to complete work to partake in MSHH was an early testament to the power of the program’s community-centered premise. Although his overall participation at first was only subpar due to some behavioral issues, to our surprise, this student wanted to enroll in another cycle of MSHH following the completion of his first cycle (an offer extended to all participants). This time, the student’s motivation drastically improved—rather than being rambunctious and apathetic, he flourished and did so independently. His success, from a micropedagogical standpoint, is representative of MSHH’s broader design. For example, while he researched in the corner of the room with his headphones blaring, we questioned the

amount of work that was being completed. Yet, holding true to our class rhetoric that the students were autonomous scholars, we refrained from intervening with this particular student’s choice of workflow, only periodically walking by to see if he needed assistance. At the end of the cycle, this student not only produced an essay independently, but the quality of his work essentially doubled using an eighth-grade Grade Common Core-aligned student-facing rubric to compare his MSHH essay to his baseline essay, written during his English/language arts class. When asked on a survey to name one thing that he liked about the program, this student replied: “I liked the fact that we got to choose our own theme.” The focus on Harlem combined with the refreshing sense of autonomy and emphasis on “the scholar” motivated this student to write in ways we had not previously seen in his traditional classroom setting.

Although this student’s transformation was noteworthy, he was certainly not an exception; all participants became more motivated to write and think critically as they worked on their research, particularly knowing that they would present their work at Columbia University to peers and community members. Having this concluding event was essential to the MSHH paradigm. These student-led presentations exemplified our vision for motivation by providing students agency and freedom of expression; for example, as a reward for completing their essays following the guidelines, they then had total freedom to create presentations of their liking. We purposely omitted any guidelines for the presentations; at this point in the program, students had internalized the notion that they were scholars and had their minds made up about how they wanted to share their work. Thus, having students present at Co-

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lumbia University validated their belief in themselves as researchers. Just like scholars, students commented on each other's essays, as this event was the capstone to their experience as a Middle School Harlem Historian.

Concluding Thoughts: The Intersection of Motivation, Writing, and Community Research

Each aspect we employed in MSHH became essential for motivating students to write voluntarily after school,

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including our encouraging, yet scholarly, classroom culture, an emphasis on student agency, and a meaningful curriculum rooted in students' interests. By initially rallying students around the idea of becoming historical researchers, MSHH combined these elements into a successful after-school program, particularly with students who showed little motivation in actual classroom settings and who were significantly below writing grade level. Once these "low-achieving" students stepped into the space we created, they internalized the notion that what they said as researchers mattered. And that was immensely powerful! As educators, we often overlook how the links between motivation, learning, and life are intricately woven together; instead of acknowledging these intersections, we focus on improving one aspect of students' academic success (such as trying to help a struggling writer's grammar) in isolation from motivational pedagogy and their lives at large. We forget that in order for students to become better writers, they must first be motivated to write; and for that motivation to be actively present, how and *what* we teach students must connect to their lives in inspiring and affirming ways.

Coming full circle, middle school teachers in urban schools have the unique opportunity to motivate students to write by speaking to their inherent interest in the history of their block. The success of the MSHH program was not only anecdotal in nature, it was tangible in terms of students' explicit writing growth—our qualitative and quantitative data strongly suggest that our students' high levels of motivation improved their writing efficacy. Averaging all three cycles together following an eighth-grade Common Core-aligned student-facing rubric, students' writing ability collectively improved more than 25 percent. For our students with IEPs, our results were more drastic, with most of their MSHH essays doubling, and sometimes tripling, the Likert scores of their baseline essays. In addition, we also noted an improved use of vocabulary as well as an increase in writing confidence. We knew, based on both the literature and on our experiences teaching and working with youth, that if we focused solely on motivating our kids to read and write in genuine ways, the improvement in their writing skills would follow.

Yet, the success of these students should not be viewed as a boutique program particular to our physical location; like Harlem and New York, every metropolitan area has a rich history that can become grounds for similar types of replicable after-school programs (or even in-school curriculum units). Whether in Atlanta, San Diego, Boston, Tucson, or St. Louis, urban students can learn the history of their community in powerful and pedagogically innovative ways that have the potential to increase writing motivation for middle school students, of all ability levels, all across the country.

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Appendix A: Student Handouts and Instructional Guides

These three documents are examples of various instructions and guides that we used to help students progress in the program and feel like they were autonomous researchers. Although the documents themselves are basic, they adhered to our goal of supporting students with scaffolds as well as giving them choice and independence in their work.

Pick Your Role

White Police Officer	Reporter (any race)	African American in Harlem
<p>Write a poem explaining the event with vivid emotions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poem should be at least 3 stanzas - Poem should clearly demonstrate the feelings, experiences, and point of view of your role—the more you get into your character, the deeper your writing! 	<p>Write lyrics to a song that recap the events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Song should have at least 3 verses and one chorus - Song should clearly demonstrate the feelings, experiences, and point of view of your role—the more you get into your character, the deeper your writing! 	<p>Create a visual representation of the events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual should include at least 2 events within the riots OR a very detailed representation of one event - Visual should clearly demonstrate the feelings, experiences, and point of view of your role
<p>Create a Google Powerpoint outlining the events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation should include at least 3 slides - Presentation should clearly show the events from the point of view of your role 	<p>Create a video expressing your emotions around the events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video should be at least 2 minutes long - Video should clearly demonstrate the feelings, experiences, and point of view of your role—the more you get into your character, the deeper your video! 	<p>Your choice...Respond to the event in a way that is meaningful to you.</p> <p>Please check with teacher about any specific guidelines to make your choice project strong!</p>

Figure 1. “Choice Board” for students. This figure illustrates activity instructions for students to express their perspective following our discussion on the *New York Times* newspaper.

Harlem Historians Research Organizer

Directions: Please find 3–5 sources for your research topic. Be sure to add the link on the left-hand column and a 3-sentence description of your source in the right-hand column. The more info you add to your description, the more useful the source will be later on. This will help you retain all of the good information you find.

Source (link)	Brief Description of Your Source

Figure 2. Research organizer for students. This figure shows a simple way for students to organize their research for later reference.

	I chose a topic	I found 3-5 sources	I created a thesis	I have three pieces of evidence to support my thesis	I have completed my boxes and bullets	I have created a First Draft of my research paper	I have put my first draft, my completed boxes and bullets and my collecting evidence in my Harlem Youth Historians Folder	I have revised my draft and properly cited my sources
Yes	No							
Yes	Yes							
Yes	No	No	No					
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					
Yes								
Yes			Yes	Yes				
Yes								

Figure 3. Student checklist. This figure shows the main document that students updated themselves as they progressed through the program.

Appendix B: Student Photographs



Figure 1. A student presenting her research in front of family, friends, and teachers at Teachers College, Columbia University.

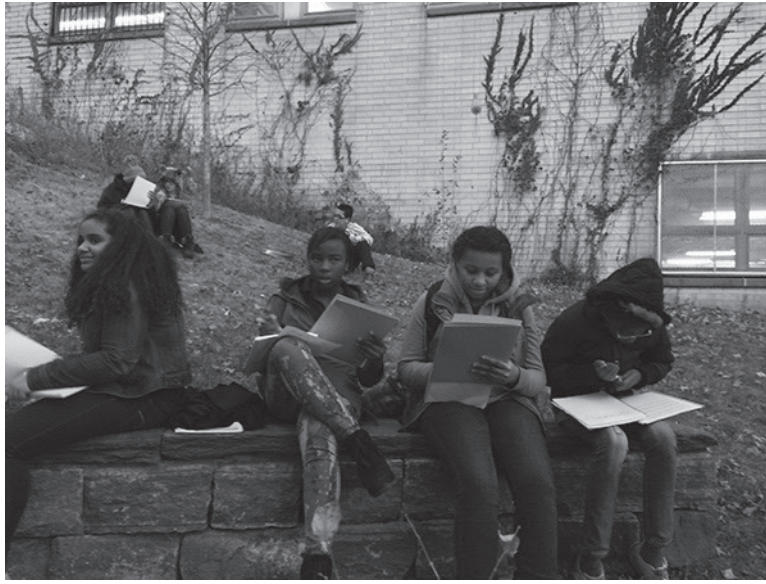


Figure 2. Students journaling about their experience visiting Hamilton Grange in Harlem, including their reflections and historical notes.



Figure 3. One student sharing his research in front of family (pictured here), friends, and teachers at Teachers College, Columbia University.