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Allies in Progress: The Public-School Institutions We've Ignored

Lance Langdon

Abstract

This article highlights some of the successes the Humanities Out There (HOT) program at the University of California, Irvine had when partnering with progressive institutions, namely with the Chicano/Latino Studies program at the university and with the arts program in a local high school. The first program engaged students in exploring the history underlying their communities, and the second helped students to dramatize their life experiences before a local public using their home languages. Analyzing what enabled HOT's successes, I urge others sponsoring youth literacy to seek out, and make alliance with, progressive institutions within public education.

California voters struck down race-based affirmative action in college admissions in 1998, leaving our universities scrambling for ways to continue enrolling a diverse student body. The University of California system responded soon thereafter by creating a number of outreach programs, among them UC Irvine's "Humanities Out There" program, known as HOT.

As a doctoral student at UC Irvine, I was eager to work with HOT, not least because it reached students like those I had taught in nearby public schools. But did HOT work? Did it get these high schoolers excited about the humanities, make the humanities seem "hot"? And did it encourage them to see our university, and others like it, as a place for students like them? In what follows, I argue that HOT met those standards, and point to the coalitions we formed with progressive programs as the main reason for our success.

But first I want to share how HOT impacted me, because without the program, I would not have made it through graduate school.

In HOT, I found a mentor: program founder Julia Lupton. She and my dissertation director, Jonathan Alexander, gave me the freedom to design literacy workshops to engage younger students. In these workshops, the younger students practiced multiple forms of literacy: they wrote letters to the undergraduates who came to mentor them, performed spoken-word poems about their identities, crafted concrete poems on natural objects, glossed bilingual pop songs, and more.

Lupton and Alexander didn't just support me in designing those workshops; they encouraged me to study them, and to study similar workshops that HOT had run for over a decade. With Lupton's help, I began talking with people who had been involved in HOT and examining the materials and interactions HOT had helped produce. Specifically, in the larger, IRB-approved study from which this article emerges, I inter-

viewed dozens of HOT participants, including Julia Lupton and other HOT program directors; the graduate students who had developed HOT's curricula; undergraduates who were delivering it; and high school educators who provided space, time, advice, and other resources HOT needed to operate successfully in their classrooms. I also analyzed the materials HOT distributed to students, as well as academic articles and promotional publications that documented, and reflected on, HOT's identity and achievements. Finally, I observed the workshops HOT was running at the time, both those I was charged with leading as a graduate student researcher employed by HOT and those taught by my counterpart in history, James Ramirez. The inspiration provided by James and others like him gave me the energy—in the face of graduate school's infantilizing hierarchies, soul-sucking bureaucracies, and pocketbook-draining employment opportunities—to make it across the finish line to the PhD.

This article on coalition-building is, beyond the dissertation, my second publication concerning HOT's literacy partnerships. My first article ("A Clear Path") probed the similarities and tensions between the literacies promoted by police and other educators in after-school spaces. This article, however, is concerned with K-16 partnerships wholly *within* and across public education. Here, I look to provide two main lessons:

On the one hand, as I document in the first half of this article, HOT demonstrates what's possible when a progressive unit in a university effectively "reaches out" to high schools. Our university's Chicano/Latino Studies program trained and supported that dynamic graduate student who taught with HOT: James Ramirez. I was privileged to observe how his lesson plans engaged high school students in local history and thereby helped them to find themselves in relation to their community's racist past. In sharing James's lessons, I urge those who haven't yet connected with ethnic studies programs to consider the value in doing so, particularly given how much these programs energize marginalized students.

On the other hand, as someone who has taught and continues to teach at the high school level, I want to draw our attention to the progressive institutions *already* at work in "secondary education"—a term which might lead us to misunderstand middle school and high school as less important than college. Thus, the second half of this article shares what is possible when students enjoy the kind of well-staffed, progressive program that HOT was lucky enough to find as a partner. In an era where schools serving nondominant students often suffer from an impoverished, test-centered curriculum, I describe how the high school arts program in a local high school offered an alternative, guiding its working-class Latinx students in developing their own vision and voice in theater, music, and the visual arts.

Overall in what follows, I take up the call to choose community partners wisely (Baca), heed the advice to take part in collaborative imagination rather than individual efforts in community uplift (Feigenbaum), and, as Licona and Chávez put it in analyzing their own partnerships, attempt to make a "coalitional gesture of intervention into the violences of the normative" (102). By forging coalitions with progressive programs like the two I highlight in these pages, we as literacy educators can find pathways out of the narrow "crawl space[s]" available to progressive practitioners

in regressive institutions (Feigenbaum, Douglas, and Lovett 33), making our way to ground that sustains long-term, strategic engagement with the students we serve.

Introduction: Hot and Civic Writing

To understand what Humanities Out There was able to do in coalition with progressive partners, we must first understand HOT itself. Founder Julia Lupton, a steadfast sponsor of publicly engaged humanities and a prominent Shakespeare scholar, captured the program's branding and philosophy in her 1999 "Humanifesto":

The name [HOT] sums up my basic method of teaching classical and Renaissance literature to undergraduates: namely, to "make it hot"—to make it fun, passionate, exciting, rewarding; to make it "out there" in the sense of cool, hip, a little on the wild side. This seemed like a good stance to take "out there" to the community as well: to show K-12 students from all backgrounds, but especially disadvantaged ones, that the humanities are "hot" . . .

Our many workshops, more than forty this year alone, are united by the goal of teaching basic skills, especially writing, through the study of challenging primary texts and problems from the Humanities, including both foundational works of Western civilization and perspectives from minority and non-Western traditions. (7)

One immediately sees the parallels between HOT's goals and the goals of those of us who practice K-16 partnerships today: a desire for student engagement ("make it hot"), a move toward social justice by enriching the education of disadvantaged students, and a focus on writing. However, HOT also departed decisively from most current approaches to K-16 partnerships in civic writing in its focus on the foundational works of Western civilization and its belief that the education universities offer to undergraduates can and ought to be brought to younger students. Moreover, the measure given here of HOT's success—the program's institutionalization as evidenced by its scaling up to forty workshops—has also come in for critique; Paula Mathieu and others have questioned the wisdom of the strategic place for which HOT and programs like it fought so hard.

Yet above all, it is HOT's achievements, or rather what was achieved by the coalitions of which HOT was a part, that I think are of the most use to educators and community members looking to realize progressive goals themselves. Accordingly, I show here the benefits of HOT's progressive partnerships by dividing HOT into three iterations, each of which is portrayed in its own section. In my first section, HOT Cooled Out, I critique HOT's most conservative curricula for failing to engage its diverse students, and I use this problematic situation to question the tendency toward conservatism when we institutionalize community engagement programs. I then depict a second, centrist model of HOT, which I put into conversation with the term Paul Feigenbaum, Sharayna Douglas, and Maria Lovett adopted from Bob Moses, the *crawl space*. I demonstrate what enabled this centrist program to teach progressive politics within the otherwise conservative space of eleventh grade American history. Finally, I present what we might consider a more radical form of HOT, one which document-

ed and formalized students' experiences and translingual voices in a theatrical production before a local public. In demonstrating how this radical partnership engaged our students and the community, I show what's possible when progressive institutions within public education align.

Hot Cooled Out

HOT was part of California's efforts to recruit and retain university students embodying the ethnic and income diversity of the state. But how could the humanities help us do so? Lupton's "Humanifesto" defined HOT's central project as one of literacy:

H.O.T. aims to develop what I have called the "*literacy triangle*," founded on the synergetic interplay between basic literacy (reading, writing, and critical thinking), cultural literacy (general knowledge of western civilization) and multi-cultural literacy (awareness of relations between different traditions). (7; emphasis added)

In theory, then, HOT would balance cultural literacy—familiarity with established touchstones of our shared American culture—with contemporary multiculturalism. But in practice, HOT's most conservative curricula signaled our program's heritage in traditional, historically oriented English departments at both the high school and university levels.

I discovered this as I began to lead reading and writing workshops at HOT's partner school, City High. In doing so, I made use of lessons on canonical American literature created by previous HOT graduate students, lessons that the classroom teacher with whom I partnered had enjoyed when previous HOT workshop leaders had presented them. These lessons fit comfortably in the "American Literature" framework of the eleventh grade English classes in which we taught. Specifically, we began with Arthur Miller's take on Salem, a play whose explicit subject is British protestant religiosity amongst colonists in New England. Next, we addressed Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*—of those colonies from Britain—then Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*—against the U.S. government within the U.S. legal system—and his *Walden*—rugged individualist nature writing in a North American wilderness.

Many students in our classrooms—be their ancestors Native Americans, Spaniards, or mestizaje—could trace genealogies to those who had lived in the pre-Columbian Americas, Spanish California, and, later, Mexican California. Their families had faced discrimination in legal battles over land titles that drained the wealth from their estates, in mortgage redlining and in racially restrictive housing covenants that denied their families the rights to settle in integrated communities, in white flight from neighborhoods and the public schools serving them, in affluent voters' repeated refusals to pass school bonds to repair out-of-date facilities, in the subtle stereotyping and downward adjustment of expectations for students of color in a "post-racial" society—in short, from the usual slew of problems for twenty-first century Latinx youth. However, the literature and rhetoric that grew out of their people's survival and resistance were nowhere part of our curriculum. Instead, the books we studied presented Anglo American history and culture, with an implicit focus on our na-

tion's roots in the eastern colonies and its westward expansion, leaving the lands in which we taught a kind of blank slate awaiting their inscription in America's growing empire.

In terms of the literacy triangle, I would argue these literature units were supported by one leg: cultural literacy. Certainly, progressive educators could address progressive issues using each of these pieces of literature: from our rights as Americans to assemble against tyranny in the Declaration of Independence to our ability to think beyond capitalist markets and resist unjust laws in Thoreau. But these concepts were downplayed in, if not absent from, our language arts curricula, as were the varieties of English our students spoke and listened to in their daily lives. HOT had not carved out a progressive space within the school system; we simply became part of the system.

HOT is one of many programs to support a monolingual, Anglo American take on language arts instruction, and my intent is not exactly to criticize this version of the program or the conservative departments it grew out of. Rather, I'm arguing that even the most well-intentioned literacy partnerships will founder if they lose their focus on the language and heritage of the people populating them.

It is not always easy to honor that language and heritage. Cruz Medina has written, for example, about attempts to ban ethnic studies programs centered on Latinx experiences in Arizona public schools, as has Elias Serna. Indeed, Roseann Dueñas Gonzáles argues that the marginalization of Chicana history and the Spanish language in the Arizona public schools amounts to a "subjugation and subjectification" bent on "eradicating equality of educational opportunity for Latinos and instituting ghettoization" (Baca and Kirklighter 26-27).

Curriculum that marginalizes and even eradicates our students' history and language practices has no place in our schools. However, it can be hard to recognize this curriculum and the damage it does because such curriculum—in this case Miller, Jefferson, and Thoreau—has long since shed the markings of the ideological struggle that instituted it and become a default, common-sense approach to the teaching of language skills in American high schools. And as those running partnerships know, what is common sense to the partners must be accounted for by the university, whose ticket to entry is its ability to assist partners in meeting their own goals. However, in the case of HOT, the fact is that our state's Latino dropout rate—10.8%—continues to exceed that for whites: 7.2% (Ca. Dept. of Ed., "Torlakson"). One contributing factor may very well be Anglocentric curriculum like that HOT-sponsored curriculum that does not always engage Latinx students.

Progressive Partnership I: George W. Meets Ethnic Studies

If we accept that we would do better to try the kind of curriculum fought for in Arizona's ethnic studies department, curriculum which has been shown to lower the dropout rate for Latinx students (Baca and Kirklighter), the question remains: What *strategic* ground does a program like HOT have to develop such a curriculum?

In asking that question, I have in mind the debate Paula Mathieu initiated in *Tactics of Hope*. Mathieu notes that when partnerships focus on sustaining themselves as institutions, they too often fail to account adequately for the desires and needs of those they are meant to serve. When conducting engagement, Mathieu argues, university scholars may form partnerships with nonprofit professionals that serve university or nonprofit interests more than those of the nonprofits' clients or the university's students. In mounting this critique, Mathieu makes use of Michel de Certeau's distinction between counter-institutional tactics and institutional strategy, arguing that successful engagement is tactical (16). One upshot of tactical partnership is timing projects to match community members' schedules, which extend past semester deadlines. Another is meeting community members' expressed desires, which do not necessarily coincide with the college's needs to measure student performance or satisfaction— typical metrics of service learning— or even with the desires of professionals at nonprofit agencies who might place their own job security ahead of the interests of the clients they serve. As the CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition makes clear, we ought not to judge community engagement as successful if community members do not benefit.

Yet, as Mathieu notes in her 2013 follow-up to *Tactics of Hope*, there are benefits to strategy ("After Tactics"). Many amongst us understand the difficulty of maintaining community-engaged programs, of securing them strategic space to continue what can be valuable work. Building on that insight, I describe in what follows a second, centrist iteration of HOT, one made possible by an ethnic studies program that had developed *strategic* ground for progressive politics *within* the academy. I argue that we in civic writing would do well to ally with these programs in meeting the needs of our own underserved students, as well as those in K-12 education.

In our case, HOT partnered with our university's Chicano/Latino Studies program, which today enjoys the status of an interdisciplinary department with dedicated faculty. The radical potential of HOT history grew out of the radical politics already sustained by that program, which, like many ethnic studies programs nationwide, owed its existence to the efforts made by students and faculty of color during and following the Civil Rights movement. Scholar Cati V. de los Ríos eloquently narrates the development of ethnic studies programs, how they "emerged from a swiftly flowing confluence of revolutionary work and theorizing in the late 1960s," took on institutional status under the banner of Third World Studies at both Berkeley and San Francisco State (3), and soon thereafter took root in multiple high schools serving nondominant students throughout California (5). The continued vitality of ethnic studies programs in this state is signaled by a 2016 bill that directed the state to adopt an ethnic studies model curriculum for use by California schools, a process that at this writing is scheduled to conclude by March 2021 (Ca. Dept. of Ed., "Ethnic"). Moreover, Arizona's battles over ethnic studies demonstrate that such programs are not confined to this state alone.

Our university's longstanding Chicano/Latino Studies program grew out of the same movements and was fortunate enough to have the resources to devote to HOT's outreach efforts, even devoting a prominent Chicano/Latino studies faculty member

to serve as the director of HOT. As documented in a contemporary article on publicly active graduate education (Day et al.), HOT at that time fulfilled the mission of ethnic studies to educate students on historical and contemporary struggles by people of color. For instance, in the spring of 2006, HOT administered a unit on twentieth century history that connected immigration movements in the early twentieth century with the nationwide immigration rights marches happening that year. HOT also led an “oral history project in which students interviewed Santa Ana elders who had been prominent Orange County activists during the 1950s and 1960s” (12). And HOT brought local K-12 students to our university campus to speak with Francisco Jimenez. Jimenez, the child of migrant farmworkers, had authored an award-winning book on the topic called *The Circuit*, and he had gone on to become chancellor of UC Davis. That day he had circulated amidst the young students gathered in the humanities quad while they shared pizza, chatting about his book and whatever else was on their minds.

Their gathering calls to mind the CCCC Position Statement on Community-Engaged Partnerships, which reminds us that fleeting events and interactions can themselves be the end products of successful partnership. However, HOT’s affiliation with Chicano/Latino Studies contributed more enduring lessons as well; the partnership ensured that Chicana students’ education on civil rights and immigration was informed by Chicana Studies.

I saw this firsthand when I observed a series of history lessons at our partner high school. These lessons were led by the afore-mentioned James Ramirez. As the HOT history workshop coordinator for two years, James took it upon himself to design and refine a lesson on *Mendez v. Westminster*, the landmark court case that desegregated Orange County schools in 1947, seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Like many of the graduate students who developed HOT’s curriculum, his own scholarly interests informed what he brought to the high school. His lesson framed the Mendez case in both local and national contexts. Nationally, *Mendez v. Westminster* served as precedent for the more famous *Brown v. Topeka* case, desegregating Orange County’s public schools by discrediting the racist justifications for barring Mexican-descent students from Anglo schools. Locally, James’s lesson developed a narrative about the discrimination Latinx residents faced in public spaces in the very city where the high school now stood, from the schools and parks to the local movie theater. It was at that local theater, just a few blocks from this school, where a Mexican-American World War II veteran fought for the same integration that the Mendez family had fought for in Orange County’s schools. James’s lesson told about how the veteran refused to sit in a section reserved for Mexicans, and how he eventually won the fight.

That lesson hit home in the group I observed, which included one of the school’s many ROTC students, dressed in uniform. At war, this student said, you are “watching your buddy’s back and he doesn’t care if you’re white or Mexican.” He added, “You’d feel cheated if you fought for someone else’s freedom and then you came back and you were treated like an animal.” When asked by the tutor how they’d respond to such an injunction—or to other discriminatory laws like the banning of Mexican res-

idents from public pools except for “Mexican Day,” the day before cleaning day—students in this group talked about circulating petitions and gathering in marches, even as they admitted that it would be difficult to stand up to the adults who held power in such a system. In the case of these history lessons, students were able to link their personal stories of discrimination to the racist laws that have helped to produce a culture of White supremacy whose effects still influenced their lives; students were thereby encouraged to understand themselves within a Chicana identity formation that countered Anglo American dominance.

In so doing, the history James encouraged upheld the tradition of using “counterstories,” a term developed in our field by Aja Martinez, to undercut racist stock stories supporting dominant ideologies. Picking up on previous scholarship, Martinez sets out this opposition clearly:

[S]tock stories [are] those that people in dominant positions collectively form and tell about themselves. These stories choose among available facts to present a picture of the world that best fits and supports their positions of relative power . . . Counterstory, then, is a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as methodology thus serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. (38)

I would wager that if students contemplated their ability to orient themselves racially and politically on other days in this classroom, it’s more likely they were using stock stories than counterstories to do so. The history teacher, call him Kent Purcha, had organized multiple student trips to the Republican National Convention, and posters of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan decorated his classroom walls, along with news of Operation Iraqi Freedom. When I interviewed Kent, he explained that HOT’s approach to history differed from that given in the school’s textbooks and his own curriculum:

HOT provides a different look at history from a different viewpoint. The curriculum hits groups that may not have been included in the history book . . . They [the students] [a]re reading about the contributions of minorities and women, people who didn’t necessarily have the agency to be historical players in their time. That’s different.

How was it that Kent welcomed HOT into his classroom to teach a progressive curriculum critical of America’s, and this city’s, troubled racial history? For one, James Ramirez had established a warm working relationship with Kent over the course of two years, suggesting that there’s truth to Mathieu’s emphasis on “personal relationships, mutual needs, and a shared sense of timing” (*Tactics* 17) and to Eli Goldblatt’s assertion: “individual relationships among people in schools and colleges will probably prove to be the single most important factor in students’ success” (12–13). James spoke highly of Kent, and Kent of James; during the classes I observed, they swapped jokes and traded stories. A few times, I asked James about his and

Kent's conflicting politics, and each time James brushed the questions aside, assuring me that Kent was cool with HOT.

It would be unwise to downplay the role of emotions and interpersonal rapport in making this particular partnership work, though it didn't hurt that an earlier HOT director and Kent had enjoyed each other's company at a barbeque a few years back. But James was also comfortable bringing Chicax history to Kent's classroom because James's university department and his advisor took it for granted that Chicax people are central actors in history. So even when Kent had trouble fully accepting that perspective—saying that minorities “didn't necessarily have agency”—in every lesson led by James and carried out by the HOT undergraduate tutors he trained, Kent's students were learning that they did have agency.

James was certainly tactically savvy in drawing connections between the Mendez case and students' lives, and in citing events the students cared about—like war—and locations in their hometown like the movie theater. However, equally important, James was supported all the while by UCI's Chicano/Latino Studies program; this provided a strategic ground in which to develop progressive curricula for an otherwise conservative high school history classroom.

What form did that institutional support take? To begin with, James had won an award designed to support members of underrepresented minority groups and first-generation college students. The vote of confidence, and the funding, associated with the award were crucial during James's transition into our research university; in a personal interview, James surmised he would have made it through grad school without the award, but it would have been a lot harder. Moreover, once James began graduate studies, James's advisor and eventual dissertation director—a leader in HOT and a member of the Chicano/Latino Studies faculty—supported him in finding time to build the Chicax studies lessons he brought to City High, lessons that grew out of his doctoral research. His advisor's scholarship focused on everyday Chicax people living nearby and their participation in actions that unified Chicax communities. This same theme ran through James's dissertation and through the lessons James brought to City High. And not only did his advisor and the program as a whole support his research, it also gave him the time he needed to adapt and deepen it for the lessons he developed in HOT. Specifically, graduate student researchers who taught with HOT did not need to fulfill other teaching commitments during the terms they taught. Moreover, meetings with the high school students HOT served were limited to five per term. While this reduced the contact time between university and high school students, it ensured that James and other graduates had time to develop high-quality lessons.

In “Tales from the Crawl Space: Asserting Youth Agency within an Unsustainable Educational System,” Feigenbaum, Douglas, and Lovett offer lessons on delivering relevant and empowering curricula in similar situations—in classrooms that are unresponsive to students' needs and their funds of knowledge. The authors critique the K-12 education system in which their university sponsors a partnership, beginning by noting that the state itself has labeled its own schools as “failing” and the students within them as illiterate. Based on that fact, the authors argue that what Mathieu

might call the strategic space of this school system “*is itself unsustainable*” (34, emphasis theirs). Yet at the same time they admit that no exit from that system is possible for those interested in quality education for all youth. Seeking ways to empower students in hostile conditions, these scholars draw on a concept Bob Moses developed to characterize the avenues of power available to him and Ella Baker as organizers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi voting drives in 1962: the “crawl space.” Maneuvering in this space allows for “working *with* the system without becoming *of* the system” (36, emphasis theirs). It means recognizing what in the official discourse of a school system, or in Moses’s case a voting system, offers an opening for activist collectivities to sustain themselves and bring about systemic change.

The environment James carved out in which to deliver his progressive curricula is aptly described as a *crawl space*, carrying that term’s connotations of restriction and discomfort, feelings resulting from traveling on hostile ground. Harkening back to Bush- and Reagan-era America, and lionizing the American personnel involved in those administrations’ foreign wars, this particular high school history classroom was not a natural home for progressive education. But this classroom’s décor only emphasizes the conservative form of nationalism too often embodied in eleventh grade American history curriculum more generally. Such curriculum sometimes depicts non-Anglo peoples in what is now the Southwest as marginal figures swept out of the way during Manifest Destiny; James’s curriculum, on the other hand, located them as protagonists in a class- and race-based struggle for full rights as citizens and workers in a pluralistic democracy.

“Crawling” might have been the natural posture in such a space, were it not that ethnic studies programs had already developed space in which to stand. We were fortunate in establishing alliance with a progressive, strategic movement housed firmly within institutional grounds at the university: the Chicano/Latino studies department. I would also add that this department both contributes to, and is one result of, strategies and policies larger than any one department within the university—of system-wide efforts to ensure that our diverse students’ knowledge and experiences are valued in our flagship universities. For instance, our state is fortunate to have regents committed to “inclusive diversity,” which, in addition to funding outreach programs like HOT, has supported legislation that extends in-state tuition as well as some state grants to undocumented students, making it more feasible for them to bring their experiences and knowledge to our classrooms. The more that progressive politicians secure representation for our state’s people in our institutions of higher education, the less the people need to crawl.

However, the most important message I would share from HOT’s successful programming isn’t about statewide politics, but local partnerships, where those of us sponsoring community-engaged writing might have more immediate impact. Put simply, if our aim is to sponsor literacy that empowers racially marginalized communities, we should follow the lead of de los Ríos, Gonzáles, Medina, Serna, and others in tapping into the knowledge base of ethnic studies programs, and of similar programs teaching critical race consciousness.

I would not, as Parks cautions against in “The Necessity of Constant Vigilance,” simply “claim victory” (Cella et al. 49) for HOT’s achievements in this regard. I recognize that HOT’s successes were in one classroom and were contingent on a working relationship with the high school teacher that developed year by year. Moreover, it is not necessarily true that ethnic studies programs will remain responsive to the emerging desires and aptitudes of our students. Yes, these programs were established through the collective will of disempowered groups in the Civil Rights Movement, so they are better disposed than most to recognize the voices of local constituents. But like any strategic institution, an ethnic studies program runs the danger of perpetuating itself rather than growing along with its constituents. Nonetheless, if English departments and writing programs are looking for partners with deep experience in making use of community writers’ multilingual and multicultural realities, programs that have secured institutional funds and a permanent strategic space, we ought to make connections with our counterparts in ethnic studies.

Progressive Partnership II: High School Arts & University Humanities

Sometimes it isn’t the legislature or the university but an outside agency that has developed a strategic ground for progressive politics. My final case study documents such a situation, describing a progressive high school drama program that sponsored a student-authored play to which HOT devoted its resources—a play that brought Latinx student voices and perspectives to a local public.

Before going into detail on this HOT play, titled *Life As ME*, I want to highlight the progressive nature of the high school arts program that sponsored it. To find out about the history of that program, I interviewed a teacher from Santa Ana High who had been involved in it for some time, including in the production of this play: Claire Castle. Claire reported that the play was just one aspect of the program. Santa Ana High, according to Claire, “had a full theater program, a full choir program, a full dance program . . . a full orchestra, a full band, and a full visual-arts [program]—photography, drawing, and painting.” Even as demands for testing rose, the principal defended the value of the high school arts department and supported the faculty devoted to it.

In our era, in which schools serving marginalized students face pressure to focus on academic achievements in English and mathematics, a thriving arts program in such a school would itself be progressive. In the time since *Life As ME* was produced, testing pressures have intensified, beginning under Bush’s No Child Left Behind mandate and continuing on through the reauthorization of similar legislation under other names—“Race to the Top” and “Every Student Succeeds”—in the Obama era (Ravitch). By relentlessly testing students year after year in English, math, and other “core” subjects, and rewarding and punishing school staff based on the results of these tests, federal legislators have narrowed the curriculum at many such schools. Many focus the majority of their time and energy on those subjects, and do so in a way that standardized multiple-choice testing will recognize, whether that be the statewide tests passed in the Bush era or the national Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessments

developed in the Obama era and still distributed today (ibid). To be sure, resistance to standardized tests has taken hold, with teachers' unions resisting the evaluation of teachers using students' standardized tests and libertarians resisting the federal power manifested in the test-driven curricula that have arisen to meet these standards (Russo; Au). Nor did all of the threatened penalties materialize for schools "failing" to consistently raise test scores to show "Adequate Yearly Progress." Nonetheless, public schools measured as "low-performing" using these tests—most often schools serving nondominant students—continue to suffer under federal and state mandates that strip educators of the power to design their students' education. In the case of literacy education, this means that teachers don't have the power to make time for students to represent the world they live in through the languages they speak.

Given these developments, it's important to recognize what was achieved in the moment before NCLB, when *Life As ME* director Stephanie Keefer, backed by supportive administrators, had set up the theater as a strategic space. They'd earned the arts, which in this case offered students the chance to represent and reinvent their everyday lives to their community, their own proper (propertied) ground: the periods carved out of what would come to be a test-centered school day for arts education, time for students to compose their own dramas and to take charge of the public stage in telling their stories.

It was from this strategic ground that Stephanie Keefer was able to embark on a partnership with Humanities Out There that enriched the language education of her drama students. *Life As ME* was actually the second stage in that partnership. Keefer was a graduate of our university, UCI, with a double-major in Drama and English; she was also a onetime student of Julia Lupton. She had first collaborated with HOT in staging a bilingual version of *Antigone* set in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. That collaboration made use of the expertise in Spanish offered by another UCI student, a student who would earn a Comparative Literature BA and Spanish MA from UCI and eventually become a university professor. With Lupton's coordination, Keefer brought the *Antigone* production to UCI, where the performers had the opportunity to discuss the decisions that went into the play with UCI faculty and students. Despite the key role that HOT played in this *Antigone* performance, I would argue that it was as much a move outward from Santa Ana High's strategic arts program, gathering our university's Spanish resources and an interested audience, as it was outreach from our university to Santa Ana.

The same is true of the Santa Ana High play I cover in more detail below, *Life As ME*, which was also directed by Santa Ana High drama teacher Stephanie Keefer. To say Keefer and the high school led the play is not to discount HOT's substantial contributions. For instance, HOT brought support to the *Life As ME* production in the form of tutor Katjana Vadeboncoeur, then a senior drama major at UCI. Moreover, with funding from another branch of our university charged with diversity outreach, HOT also helped publish a transcript of the play as a book. In fact, it was this publication that brought *Life As ME* to my attention, for the play had come and gone nearly fifteen years before I arrived at HOT. The publication included pictures and commentary by the cast and crew as well as prefatory remarks by the play's many sponsors,

among them HOT Director Julia Lupton, administrators and professors in the UCI drama program and in the school of the humanities, the principal at Santa Ana High, and Stephanie Keefer herself.

Produced in the fall after just eight weeks of scriptwriting and rehearsal, *Life As ME* is really a collection of student-written scenes, scenes driven by believable characters engaged in real-world conflicts. Some of the conflicts relate to education. To go away or stay home for college? To study one's heritage or pursue a practical career? One character soliloquizes on her great teacher's departure and another critiques her teacher's inattention. Other scenes deal with personal and community relationships: chastising drug users, considering the pull between gang membership and love, discussing a teen mother's decision to give up her child, and, most often, describing infidelity in dating and arguments with parents. One recurring pair of characters, known as the rumor mill, functions as a kind of inverted Greek chorus, spreading gossip.

Inasmuch as the writing process solicited students' agency in creating material that commented on the everyday experience of life in their neighborhood, the play was quite a departure from the kind of education offered in the Anglo-American literature workshops I would find myself leading over a decade later. That choice was deliberate: Keefer settled on the idea for *Life As ME* because, as she put it, "I spent the summer reading other plays designed for high school actors . . . and realized that none of them really addressed the concerns of our student population" (10). This is not to say that the play was primarily autobiographical; rather, it was an attempt to stage community concerns. Again, my interviewee, Claire supplied background:

I'm pretty sure that none of the kids in the production were involved with drugs on any kind of hard level . . . But they were surrounded by that, because of the community they grew up in . . . So, talk about politics! It was a way of them processing the reality that they saw other people had to deal with.

Another radical aspect of the play, in an educational system that almost always measures achievement at an individual level, was the collective process through which the students honed the script. UCI Drama Major Katjana Vadenboncoeur coached students in developing their scenes during rehearsals using Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal's method of simultaneous dramaturgy. This practice, which Katjana brought from her drama courses at UC Irvine, allows the audience to interrupt the action of a scene and to direct the protagonists to act differently, or even to step in to the role of the main character themselves. In Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, as Nichole Lariscy has also discussed in "Staging Stories that Heal," such a process would be used to work through confrontations actors might find in their daily lives, whether in interactions with local authorities at the courthouse, or on the streets. Lariscy notes that these methods involve everyone in the production and audience as "spect-actors," (not simply spectators), who "consider the ideas and problems together . . . if only in the moment of production" (132).

This play's moment of production offered something else not always allowed our nondominant students in high school: the joy of being fully present for one another.

er. Paula Mathieu states of publishing with the homeless in Boston that the productions they made together sustained them in fellowship, “the pleasures of collaboration” helping them to get through the week (cited in Lariscy 131). Similarly, Libby Catchings, in her analysis of prison writing, argues for public writing “not as a process that moves *toward* political action, but rather *as* action in the immediate space of its utterance and reception” (216). Nor, in sponsoring partnership, should we neglect the impact of emotion in our moment-by-moment understanding of ourselves (Micciche), or the present-minded attention urged by mindfulness practices such as yoga (Wenger), some of the same qualities Feigenbaum refers to in his Conference on Community Writing keynote address, and subsequent essay, pointing to *flow*—a state of total involvement and attention to the task at hand, what we might call being “in the zone” as we instinctively rather than deliberately tap our existing knowledge. Flow exists for its own sake; Feigenbaum quotes Csikszentmihalyi on this topic: “The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing” (“Cultivating” 33) and I would also say, when thinking about what tactical and perhaps fleeting community arts projects offer, that the purpose of speaking and listening is often simply to keep doing so. June Jordan, the late founder of UC Berkeley’s Poetry for the People, wrote something similar: “Good poems can . . . build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter” (3). Of course, we wish to *build* that revolution through the painstaking and difficult work of political advocacy, but not at the expense of recognizing and celebrating moments in which that revolution is already here.

Admittedly, it is hard to ascertain twenty years after the fact how joyous or present the actor-writers were, but there is certainly a playfulness in many of the scenes that’s at odds with the boredom and ennui that characterize too many afternoons in language arts classes geared toward test preparation. I interviewed another key player in the production, Pasclina Descamps, about *Life As ME*. She remembered the engagement that this collaborative and embodied writing elicited from the Santa Ana High drama students:

Because it was their own words . . . at the end of the process they had this entire collection that was a real script. And it was like, “This is my friend’s scene. This is my scene. This matters.” . . . They put words on a script, and once they had improvised, written them down, and then edited them, they now had words they believed in. I just don’t think they ever would have cared so much about what was on the script had they not created it.

When *Life As ME* was produced, state voters had just outlawed most bilingual education with Proposition 227. Thus, the play was progressive not just because it addressed daily life, not just because students authored it collectively, and not just because they took pleasure and pride in talking about what mattered to them, but also because they demonstrated translingual fluency in their script. The play focused on concerns common to mainstream and Latinx high schoolers at the end of the twentieth century—romantic relationships, parent-child arguments over curfews and dating— and at times it pulled language from Anglo American pop culture: “They

were playing with language that was coming from Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Claire said, “bringing some real, slangy, fun.” But woven throughout many scenes in *Life As ME* is the mixed Spanish and English used in their neighborhood. As Pasclina put it in her interview, “Spanish was spoken, like, bilingually in a lot of their homes. So they’d start doing the scene and then in recreating the mom character or older brother they’d start putting in colloquialisms, and the colloquialisms would come in Spanish.” Indeed, Pasclina reported that students sometimes laughed while speaking in Spanish, which at first made her wonder, as someone unfamiliar with the language, if they were making inappropriate remarks; instead, she concluded, they were laughing in embarrassed recognition at how their own voices had made their parents present amongst them at school.

Domestic scenes, including the following monologue, demonstrate this cross-generational code meshing:

DAD: Hijo, déjame decirte something. I do not know how you will even earn money studying about the Aztecs and las tortas or, what do you call them, Toltecs, and Frida [Kahlo], Diego [Rivera] and all of them. Now, on the other hand, mira a tu cuate. He makes web pages y gana muchísimo dinero. (20)

This conflict is staged as a domestic drama between a Mexican-born, bilingual father and his American-born, monolingual son, but it reflects a larger conflict in the students’ world between an economy that rewards technological literacy and a Chicana Studies political-academic formation that promotes ethnic heritage. Depicting a Dad who translanguages is crucial to capturing this conflict.

At a few points in the play Spanish takes on life not in domestic quarrels but in an imagined public, as in this scene where two young men tune into a radio program in which Chica One and El Brujo discuss love:

JUANITO: Hey, it’s El Brujo on the radio. Let’s get some advice from him.

BENITO: Don’t tell me you believe in that, do you?

JUANITO: Simón, carnal. He gives love potions. Hey, maybe you can give her agua de calzón to get her to fall in love with you.

BENITO: Qué es eso?

JUANITO: Forget it, just listen.

Juanito turns on the radio. Benito gets out his notebook and pencil to take notes.

CHICA ONE: Qué honda? How are you all doing out there in radioland? (30)

Here, the folk tradition of *brujería*— witchcraft, with the connotation of folk medicine— is depicted as integral to a radio show, one of many media outlets that filter through students’ everyday lives but that somehow elude the attention of many language educators. By including this influence, students succeed in depicting the Southland’s mixed cultures from a Chicana perspective. Director Stephanie Keefer put it eloquently in her introduction to the published play: “In the very texture and sound of

its mixed language, the play strives, at its best, to document and formalize the drama of everyday life in Santa Ana” (11).

It was unusual, and I think admirable, for a student-authored play of this type—a play that included code-meshing and that addressed difficult topics like rape, domestic violence, substance abuse, and gang activity—to make it public on a high school stage in a region often understood as conservative. And not just make it to the stage, but win a theater award from the school district and garner an article in the local paper. “Talk about validating their work,” Claire said of these accolades. “As artists and writers, they [the students] really felt ownership.”

Conclusion: Mobilizing A Progressive Coalition

When we talk about promoting community literacy in the public schools, we need more studies that account for the richness and diversity of K-12 teaching, that explore how sponsors within the K-12 system push counter-hegemonic practices. Otherwise, we risk adopting a “savior” approach to communities, which at worst means imagining ourselves as rescuing colonized and racialized others from themselves using our superior knowledge. Instead, we need more work like that done by the following scholars, who recognize progressive education movements in the K-12 arena and who trace different constellations of teachers supporting it: Steven Alvarez showcases how biliteracy as practiced in family and community networks enable social action in out-of-school spaces; Steve Parks documents the history of the RELA movement in the Philadelphia schools; Eli Goldblatt highlights the progressive team of educators at Somerset High School in Philadelphia; Cati V. de los Ríos recognizes the renewed vitality of ethnic studies in public high schools across California; Korina Jocson demonstrates how minoritized college students can lead younger people from local schools in deeply literate engagement with their shared concerns; and Maisha Fisher chronicles a year with the Power Writers, a spoken-word poetry class that goes public in the Bronx. These examples of progressive, strategic education are inspiring and instructive, and remind us that literacy educators have much to learn about student empowerment from those who have been practicing it since before we arrived, whether that be the K-12 educational units we hope to assist in our partnerships or programs like ethnic studies in our universities that focus on nondominant peoples’ experiences and idioms.

In our case, when HOT partnered with a progressive arts program within the public school, or when it was organized by members of our university’s ethnic studies program— spaces that were at once radical and strategic— HOT found a progressive collectivity that enabled it to meet its mission of reaching nondominant students. If we call that collectivity *collaborative imagination* (Feigenbaum), we emphasize the social nature of creatively inventing a better world by working together. As Feigenbaum points out, doing so counters the notion that a rhetorician, or in this case an out-reach program like HOT, can succeed as a solitary agent of activist discourses or of social change. *Collaborative imagination* turns our attention to the multiple agencies involved in successful movements for social justice, both in large-scale social action

like the Civil Rights movement and on the smaller scale documented in this article: the administrators and state agencies who collectively created space for student voice at Santa Ana and City High. If we call such collectivities *coalitions*, then we emphasize “the desire and possibility for shared action and *conocimiento*,” a word which I would translate as acknowledging and knowing one another in the moment (Licona and Chávez 96). I would say that HOT certainly enacted *conocimiento*, and at least attempted social justice, when we partnered with the theater program to produce a student-authored play, or, in HOT projects I did not have the space to outline here, with bilingual educators to produce bilingual poetry. Moreover, as I hope to have shown above, we also found *conocimiento* in lessons taught by UCI’s own Chicana scholars through HOT history, lessons that educated the high school students on anti-Mexican discrimination in a local context. Both the history and creative writing versions of HOT, then, allowed for the authority and voice of students even as they linked students to groups beyond the classroom: adults in their homes and schools and academics in the Chicana movement.

As important as it is for us to critique programs that sustain themselves without sustaining their students and clients, it’s important too that we highlight *strategic* resources *within* the system of public education, and beyond. Such resources can assist those of us in university writing programs in creating and sustaining valuable projects—projects that engage young people with the local histories underwriting our efforts at inclusive democracy and that call on young people to use all their language resources to address their communities, both as they exist and as they might become.

Notes

1. A pseudonym. The names used in this article for those people who were interviewed or observed are fictional, as is the name of the first high school with which HOT partnered, “City High.” Actual names are used for people who have made their participation in HOT public through their publications: Julia Lupton, who was the public face of HOT, and Santa Ana High, which published the student-authored play discussed later in this article, *Life As ME*. The first use of each pseudonym includes a (fictional) first and last name and all subsequent uses are by (fictional) first name only.

2. Lupton, in “Philadelphia Dreaming,” offers a different perspective on HOT, arguing that its curricula involved students in a deeply progressive process of analyzing original documents and making connections to their contemporary concerns. Readers who wish to judge HOT’s curricula for themselves can procure materials through the UCI history department.

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