

Spring 2018

Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement

Allison Bennet
Kennesaw State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Bennet, Allison. "Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, pp. 106-109. doi:10.25148/clj.12.2.009108.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement

Allen Brizee and Jaclyn M. Wells

Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 165 pp.

Reviewed by Allison Bennett

Kennesaw State University

As most writing center practitioners can attest, their participation in community engagement is not new; plenty of writing centers regularly engage with community members on and off campus. However, the published conversations surrounding this engagement are few and far between. Thankfully, Allen Brizee and Jaclyn M. Wells's *Partners in Literacy: A Writing Center Model for Civic Engagement*—a resource that is sure to intrigue more than just writing center administrators—can now be added to the mix. In her 2014 book *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center*, Tiffany Rousculp touches on the infrequent attention “seminal writing center scholarship” gives to “theories or pedagogies of empowerment, public writing, or community engagement” (46). Rousculp’s purpose is to help educators interested in activist efforts understand the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center’s (CWC) value (6). Two years after her book was published, beginning in August 2016, Jaquelyn Davis and Tereza Joy Kramer authored a four-part series on the state of service-learning in writing centers on the *WCJ Blog Community*, featured on *The Writing Center Journal* website. Davis and Kramer intended to “work toward a revision of service-learning in the writing center, one that better reflects the mutuality at the heart of writing center work.” As they walk readers through this revision, they compare the “substantial” literature available on service-learning and composition to the mere handful of articles on writing center service-learning work printed in the *WLN* and *WCJ* in recent years. The reality that scholarship on writing center community engagement is scarce clearly fuels both Rousculp’s and Davis and Kramer’s separate yet similar intentions, thereby inspiring continued dialogue: cue Brizee and Wells.

In their preface, Brizee and Wells echo the shared observation regarding limited scholarship, acknowledging that while the number of both writing center books and community engagement books continues to increase, these resources are being published independently of each other. Consequently, Brizee and Wells’s aim with *Partners in Literacy* is to “[blend] the two scholarly areas together” (xiv); this combined



approach permeates the presentation of their content. Brizee and Wells mix reflection, methodology, findings, and discussion, alongside a research narrative of their three-year engagement project, beginning modestly from a graduate public rhetoric course assignment. While their project would eventually exceed the parameters of the semester, their positions in the Purdue University Writing Lab allowed them to continue partnering with the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA), a community literacy program for adults, and WorkOne, an organization offering workforce development and employment support (xi), to create and test online GED, ESL, and job document resources. Their initiative responded to a noticeable void on Purdue OWL: the website lacked writing resources for the community beyond the university. As a result, Community Writing and Education Station, or CWEST (pronounced “quest”), was formed.

Overall, Brizee and Wells’s approach to exploring writing center community engagement is similar to Rousculp’s: both offer an honest, reflective narrative of the authors’ experiences with engagement, elucidating how each initiative responded to a specific community need and highlighting the importance of location and place as well as the authors’ own respective relationships as transplants within a community. They also encourage readers to move beyond misguided perceptions of engagement. Throughout their project, Brizee and Wells maintained their mission not to merely be of service to community members but rather to *engage* with them (128). Rousculp argues that, while some felt as though the CWC wrote “*with* the Salt Lake community,” in actuality, “the ‘*community wrote*’ with the CWC” (22–23, emphasis original). Yet it is Brizee and Wells’s emergent methodology that provides readers with a replicable example of the recursive nature of writing center engagement that, although arguably present, is far less explicit in Rousculp’s account of the CWC. Brizee and Wells rely on details of the CWEST project to illustrate the steps leading to engagement and reveal the “messy and complicated parts of the process that the literature of community engagement often omits” (1), somehow making the often-overwhelming task of beginning and sustaining engagement slightly more manageable than if one were to proceed in the absence of their examples. Furthermore, their text takes on Davis and Kramer’s challenge to question the “‘gut level response’ we have about the universal goodness of service-learning,” pushing readers to see beyond outcomes and the “universally positive, even valiant efforts” so frequently associated with service-learning work (Davis and Kramer).

In six chapters, *Partners in Literacy* takes readers from initial inquiry to completion of an engagement project, describing the researchers’ iterative process and empirical methods and offering reflection on their backgrounds and the relationships formed throughout the partnership. The authors begin each chapter with a summary of its goals and a preview of the discussion that follows. As a consequence of each chapter’s introduction, one could take several approaches to reading this book. The narrative lends itself to being read from start to finish; however, the careful organization and thoughtful presentation of chapters also allows readers to utilize the book as reference during an engagement project. For example, those in the early stages of a partnership would benefit from chapter two, “Community Partners and Overview

of Research Methods,” which details the process of reaching out and learning about community partners, as well as the writing required to begin a project and seek IRB approval. Those interested in locating a community partner would benefit from chapter one, “Background and Methodology.” Researchers curious about qualitative and quantitative methods, as part of community-engaged work, could turn to chapters three and four. Chapters three and four also describe the revision process community engagement work requires. And the inclusion of chapter-specific heuristic questions and research protocols in the appendix moves the book beyond a “lore-based” account of one center’s experience to an adaptable model for any center’s future projects. Finally, chapter five provides useful reminders for community-engaged practitioners as well as suggestions for further research and inquiry.

Chapter organization and content aside, Brizee and Wells achieve their goal of a “practical yet readable genre” (xiv) through their use of first-person narrative to discuss their respective backgrounds (6–13). That said, the absence of narrative in later reflective sections of the book—especially the epilogue—is a bit jarring. Given the authors’ emphasis on relationships, it would have been worthwhile to begin and end the book with first person reflection.

Additionally, readers might struggle with a disconnect between the organic nature of engagement Brizee and Wells argue for and the step-by-step process of their methodology. They do directly address this paradox frequently, reminding readers that no two projects are alike and that the methodology and corresponding visuals are an attempt to make the work of engagement more manageable. They reiterate that this process is, in fact, *not* linear, although the layout of their process and book might, at cursory glance, imply a sequential progression. Their task of producing a replicable template is not easy, and most writing center administrators, practitioners, and scholars will appreciate their ability to recognize and illustrate the recursive nature of the process through their own example while still providing a concrete model.

Partners in Literacy contributes much to the limited conversation on writing center community engagement; it also encourages others to chime in. For example, in chapter six, “Engagement as Professional Work,” Brizee and Wells explain how the CWEST project has impacted their respective current scholarly work, thereby demonstrating how community engagement efforts can be balanced with competing responsibilities and, in fact, inform and influence professional endeavors. Their discussion invites writing center administrators, community members, and tutors alike to participate in “engaged scholarship” (106).

Brizee and Wells challenge readers to think beyond obvious writing center community engagement (i.e., one-on-one tutoring); whether one plans on exploring online resources as a source of engagement (like the CWEST project) further is irrelevant. Instead, what readers gain from the book is an enthusiasm for all forms of engagement, a new appreciation for the empirical foundations of such projects, and the confidence that community engagement is feasible despite the day-to-day responsibilities facing each center. In short, writing center practitioners and community members will have much to talk about as a consequence of reading this book. Given their contributions to the currently small but important discussion, surely Davis and

Kramer, Brizee and Wells, and Rousculp all share the hope, then, that we each do our part to keep the conversation going.

Works Cited

Davis, Jaquelyn and Tereza Joy Kramer. "Where we are now: What's being researched and written about in service-learning work in writing centers?" *WCJ Blog Community*, 31 Aug. 2016, <http://www.writingcenterjournal.org/new-blog/where-we-are-now-whats-being-researched-and-written-about-in-service-learning-work-in-writing-centers>. Accessed 3 January 2018.

Rousculp, Tiffany. *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center*. NCTE, 2014.