

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 15
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Community-Engaged
Writing and Literacy Centers*

Article 2

Spring 2021

Guest Editors' Introduction: Community Writing Centers: What Was, What Is, and What Potentially Can Be

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Recommended Citation

Latta, Mark, et al. "Guest Editors' Introduction: Community Writing Centers: What Was, What Is, and What Potentially Can Be." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–6, doi:10.25148/clj.15.1.009361.

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Guest Editors' Introduction

Community Writing Centers: What Was, What Is, and What Potentially Can Be

Mark Latta, Helen Raica-Klotz, and Chris Giroux

Welcome to the *Community Literacy Journal's* special issue of "Community-Engaged Writing and Literacy Centers: A Critical Field Scan of Theory and History, Practice and Place." Our idea for this issue was a simple one. As the title suggests, we hoped to generate a "field scan," illustrating the ways in which community literacy programs draw upon theory, along with their respective regional geographies, past practices, and collective histories, to create community-engaged writing and literacy centers.

Specifically, we hoped to identify the current bodies of theories that guide community-based writing and literacy center work and make visible both the scholarship and humanizing practices that drive this emergent and growing field (Campano; Fine). Additionally, we hoped to showcase the different practices of community-based writing and literacy centers, exploring the ways that specific communities support and sustain this work. And finally, we wanted to trace the history of these various centers, so that we could begin to imagine what might come next.

Through our own experiences in creating and supporting community writing centers, we knew that the critical theories and posthuman practices of community work, social justice, and literacy education informed the planning, shaping, and overall direction of our own efforts. If we could offer our readers multiple models of similar community-engaged writing and literacy centers, then this issue would have value. Moreover, if we could begin to understand the history, context, and theory that informs these centers, we could not only envision possible futures for our own community writing centers but offer these same futures to the field itself. In short, we were excited. We were even more excited when the proposals arrived: a diverse mix of programs and centers from across the country, doing literacy work in a variety of different settings and drawing on a diverse set of practices and theory to do so.

However, the week we received our first draft of the articles in mid-March, COVID happened. Our universities closed, our classes abruptly shifted online, and our community writing centers shut down. Our personal lives shifted dramatically as well: Mark fell ill for a number of weeks and later tested positive for the virus; Helen's daughter, enrolled in a graduate program in the U.K., caught one of the last flights back to the States, where she found herself in long-term quarantine; and Chris, his daughter (a high school senior), and his spouse (a high school teacher) all found themselves on their home computers, trying to patchwork together the rest of their respective school years. At the end of March, we met on a Zoom call, looking at each other in despair. "I have to ask," Mark said, "at this point, does this issue even have

any relevance?” It was a good question. After all, if this issue was based on the idea of “writing *for*, writing *with*, and writing *about* the community” (Deans), what happens when your community is shut away behind closed doors? A few months later, we watched George Floyd’s violent death and the subsequent social uprisings sweep across the U.S. Marching with our neighbors to protest the systemic violence and racism that have pervaded our communities for decades, we paused to ask Mark’s question again: during this time of COVID and social uprising, what relevance might a collection of articles on community-engaged writing and literacy centers have in the larger world?

We didn’t necessarily know, so we decided to ask our writers this question. In our suggestions for revision of their original pieces, we asked our authors if they would consider how COVID-19 and the recent BLM protests might have informed or changed their work. In August, we got their answer: Yes, their work is relevant right now. In fact, it is more relevant than ever.

Many of these articles make the argument that community-engaged writing and literacy centers are uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of the community because of their grounding in the theories of social justice, their awareness of the inherent dangers of white power and privilege, their belief in the voices of people often silenced and oppressed, and their experience in creating communal vs. hierarchical structures. Moreover, many of our authors, particularly in the program profiles, demonstrate the ways that community-engaged writing and literacy centers exist in third spaces; therefore, they are more fluid and adaptable, much more able to hear and respond to the needs of their distinct communities. In this issue we see why the theory underpinning our work matters. It doesn’t just inform our practice; it *is* our practice.

We also believe these articles help clarify some of the ways in which community-engaged writing and literacy centers remain so relevant during times of crises and unrest. Several of these articles point to and illustrate the crucial importance of a common element they all share: that of invitation. The community writing and literacy centers that have been invited into their respective communities were able to recognize immediately their continued relevancy because they were actively listening to the residents in the neighborhoods where they write.

During a roundtable discussion at the 2020 East Central Writing Association Conference (which concluded just two weeks before the Big Close), we, along with K.C. Chan Brose (administrative assistant at the Flanner Community Writing Center in Indianapolis), led a panel discussion related to the creation of community writing centers. Often, when we hold these conversations, we get questions related to funding, location, staffing, and marketing. These concerns are important, but they also focus predominantly on institutional and business logistics, and they neglect the importance of relationships. During the panel discussion, we hoped to encourage discussions related to community writing centers on the *who* and the *how*. With whom will we work? And, perhaps more importantly, how will we know when we have been invited into the communities with which we hope to write—to share their stories; to

provide witness to their gifts; and to sit beside them as they lay bare their frustrations, concerns, and joys? How can we be *in* community together?

“Think about the person you hope will visit your community writing center,” Mark told the small crowd during our panel talk. “When you have been invited by that person to have lunch or dinner with them, then you’ll be ready to open up your community writing center.” While COVID has changed the ways we think about gathering together, the larger point remains just as valid now. When we have been invited into a community, we are then part of the community. This “invitational validity” (Latta and Warren-Gordon) underscores the legitimacy and importance of the relational knowledge-making that community writing embodies. The articles within this issue demonstrate the power of relationships and the durability of invitation. Even in the midst of isolation and upheaval, our authors demonstrate that when we are fortunate enough to be invited into a community, the relevance of this work—while it should be continually negotiated and nurtured—is rarely questioned. As some of the authors point out, the relevance of relationships and invitations remains true even when these relationships may be fragile, when they are defined by moments of tension, or even when their authenticity should be called into question. Relationships are always relevant.

We’re pleased to say the work continues. In the end, this collection of case studies and articles provides models grounded in critical and humanizing theories and practices that show us not only what was, but what is, and what potentially can be.

This potential is seen in Glenn Hutchinson’s “Detention/Writing Center Campaigns for Freedom.” Hutchinson challenges the idea that literacy programs serving the incarcerated are about traditional forms of education. Outlining an initiative linking Florida International University and Krome Detention Center in which students advocated for the release of ICE detainees, he argues such advocacy is also the work of community literacy centers.

Wideline Seraphin talks of her experiences teaching in a community education program for Haitian and Haitian American youth in “Resisting the ‘COVID-19 Scramble’ by Writing towards Black Transnational Futures.” Providing examples of various workshop activities conducted with youth in Miami, Florida, she argues for the need for community literacy centers to meet participants where they are by privileging—and often destigmatizing—their own rich cultural histories and practices, their home languages, and the issues faced in their home communities.

Much like Seraphin’s work, Stephanie Abraham and Kate Kedley’s “‘You Can’t Say Pupusa Without Saying Pupusa:’ Translanguaging in a Community-Based Writing Center” discusses the importance of place and home community in community writing center work. Beyond providing an overview of translanguaging, Abraham and Kedley offer examples of various literacy development activities undertaken in South Philly; these activities encouraged area youth to actively draw upon their home languages as well as the English used in school settings.

In “Beyond ‘Literacy Crusading’: Neocolonialism, the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, and Possibilities of Divestment,” Anna Zeemont asks us to consider the power of language and place in yet another way. By using 826 Valencia as a case study,

by analyzing the lore and cultural artifacts attached to it, and by thinking about the population and socio-cultural history of the community in which the flag-store center operates, Zeemont exhorts us to consider the messages we send based on our various partnerships and initiatives.

Thomas Deans and Jeffrey Austin, Ann Blakeslee, Cathy Fleischer, and Christine Modey talk of issues of networks. In “A Network Approach to Writing Center Outreach,” Deans delineates the ways in which the larger network—rather than isolated binary partnerships—that the University of Connecticut’s long-standing Secondary School Outreach Program has created operates, thrives, and adapts (and sometimes falters). Austin, Blakeslee, Fleischer, and Modey focus on another, newer network of literacy partners in southeast Michigan. In “Building a Community Literacy Network to Address Literacy Inequities: An Emergent Strategy Approach,” Austin, Blakeslee, Fleischer, and Modey draw on the work of activist adrienne maree brown to discuss the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and interdependence in community literacy work particularly in this time of “twin pandemics.”

Issues of flexibility and place are also apparent in many of our program profiles, starting with “Write Here, Right Now: Shifting a Community Writing Center from a Place to a Practice” by Christopher LeCluyse, Nkenna Onwuzuruoha, and Brandon Wilde. In this piece on Write Here, a community writing center in Salt Lake City, Utah, the authors provide an overview of their services and conceptualize their work (and all of our work), particularly during the pandemic, as one of practice rather than geographic location.

“Whose House?: A Dual Profile of Two Spaces for Writers in Camden, New Jersey” offers a glimpse into Writers House at Rutgers University-Camden and the Nick Virgilio Writers House, affiliated with Mighty Writers Camden. Authors Catherine Buck and Leah Falk relate the history, practices, and challenges of these sites; moreover, by examining them together, Buck and Falk remind us of the importance of collaboration and community in this time of social distancing.

Emily Marie Passos Duffy and Ellie Swensson give us a look into Writers Warehouse, a collective operating out of Boulder, Colorado, in their profile “Love and Poetic Anarchy: Establishing Mutual Care in Community Writing.” Duffy and Swensson provide a history of the organization and overview of various projects with which Writers Warehouse has been affiliated, as well as their overriding philosophy, largely influenced by bell hooks, adrienne maree brown, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

In “Neighborhood Writing: Developing Drop-In Consultations in Philadelphia Public Libraries,” Dana M. Walker, Patrick Manning, and John Kehayias round out the issue by relating their work in an embedded writing project in Philadelphia. They discuss the benefits and challenges of this “no-cost” project, started in 2003, in which faculty members at the University of Pennsylvania provide free writing consultations to community members at the Free Library of Pennsylvania.

Tiffany Rousculp concludes this issue by reflecting back on her initial work in this field over twenty years ago, the community she discovered doing work centered on community literacy, and the open invitation she received to come and “sit at the

table.” She outlines, in brief, the field’s origins, key moments and players, and the tensions surrounding “who and what belongs.”

Finally, we wanted to thank our reviewers—Lori Rogers, Grace Pregel, Nancy Grigg, Clayton Chiarelott, Elizabeth Geib, John Trimbur, Melissa Pavlik, and Thomas Deans—for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions to our authors. A thank you also to Nyesha Clark-Young for her photograph featured on the cover of this issue, featuring an image from an exhibit entitled “Blood, Sweat, and Gears.” In Fall 2019, the Public Theater in New York City sponsored a touring production of *Sweat*, a play by Lynn Nottage, which was performed in 40 post-industrial towns in the Midwest. This project supported community dialogue and arts/writing-based projects centered around the inherent themes in the play, and the Saginaw Community Writing Center was fortunate to be one of the community partners for this project. Clark-Young’s photograph of an abandoned auto parts factory in Saginaw, Michigan, demonstrates the themes of resilience, flexibility, and possibility found in forgotten spaces: another recurring theme in this issue of the *CLJ*. And lastly a special thank you to Paul Feigenbaum and Veronica House, senior editors of the *Community Literacy Journal*, for their support and encouragement.

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Editor Bios

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ing Project site. Her scholarship focuses on embedded tutoring and on university and community writing centers.

Chris Giroux, Ph.D., is a member of the English Department of Saginaw Valley State University in Saginaw, MI. He serves as the co-director of the school's Center for Community Writing and as the assistant director of its Writing Center. Giroux is also the co-editor of the community arts journal *Still Life*, is the author of numerous published poems, and is interested in issues related to tutor training, community writing, and representations of trauma in contemporary American literature.