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Write Here, Right Now: Shifting a Community Writing Center from a Place to a Practice

Christopher LeCluyse, Nkenna Onwuzuruoha, and Brandon Wilde

Abstract

In 2013, Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah, established Write Here: A Community Writing Center in collaboration with Promise South Salt Lake. In 2016 Write Here's operations shifted from a community center to the various spaces of Promise South Salt Lake after-school programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this transition with the move to online workshops. The decentering of Write Here exposes the dynamics of place and practice inherent in both community literacy and writing centers. Occupying third space, Write Here consultants navigate changing locations, mentoring, and non-tutoring activities, challenging traditional writing center narratives. Accommodating community partners likewise requires dwelling in a rhetoric of respect. By remaining flexible and recognizing limitations, Write Here has opened channels of communication to reach shared understandings. This analysis models how other community literacy organizations can enter into more effective and meaningful partnerships and adapt to ongoing shifts of place and practice.

Keywords

community literacy, writing center, university-community partnerships, after-school program, space, place

In 2013, Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah, established Write Here: A Community Writing Center in collaboration with Promise South Salt Lake. This partnership among the South Salt Lake City Mayor's Office, the United Way, and other community partners supports fourteen after-school programs and community centers for K-12 students and their families, many of them immigrants and refugees. While Promise South Salt Lake's founding director was inspired by the example of 826 Valencia in San Francisco, we took more local inspiration from the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center (CWC), which has become a model for community writing centers nationwide since its establishment over fifteen years ago. Write Here was first established at the Historic Scott School Community Center, a complex of connected structures that includes a nineteenth-century school building. Since its inception, Write Here has offered individual and small-group writing consultations as well as writing workshops for community partners. Its original location limited access to services, however. Taking a cue from the University of Denver Writing Center, Write Here founder and director Chris LeCluyse decided to go where

the writers were (Micke et al.). In 2016, Write Here left the Scott School in favor of placing consultants in Promise South Salt Lake after-school programs.

Write Here currently places a mixture of paid and volunteer writing consultants, all college students from Westminster and the University of Utah, in after-school programs at Cottonwood High School and Roosevelt Elementary School. A center liaison (Brandon Wilde) regularly contacts consultants and arranges occasional meetings while providing consultations himself. Meanwhile, an outreach coordinator (Nkenna Onwuzuruoha, hereafter Kenna) offers writing workshops for community partners, such as a senior center, a community mental health clinic, and a national girls' organization. Shifting from a place to a practice greatly expanded and diversified the range of writers we serve, as well as increased access to our services for K-12 students. Hard on these successes, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this spatial transition. Since March 2020, Brandon and Kenna have offered online writing consultations and workshops to a significantly reduced number of writers. In this article, we consider what happens when a community writing center grows from being a place unto itself to a practice conducted in others' spaces and, most recently, an online practice in virtual space.

The decentering of Write Here has exposed the dynamics of place and practice inherent in both community literacy and writing center praxis. Nedra Reynolds promotes the use of geography and geographical metaphors to understand "writing as a set of practices more spatial than temporal" (3). These practices are "enacted not in stable, always-the-same places but within shifting senses of space, in the between, in thirdspace" (4). Parallel to Reynolds's focus on writing as a spatial practice is Julie Drew's consideration of the "politics of place" in writing instruction (57). As Drew explains, "Students pass through, and only pause briefly within, classrooms; they dwell within and visit various other locations . . ." (60). In Write Here's situation, consultants have joined the students they work with as travelers across various spaces.

While Reynolds and Drew present place and practice as commensurate, the two concepts have been in historical tension in writing center studies. Writing centers have two possible points of origin: as cocurricular spaces begun with the "writing laboratories" of the 1920s or as a practice developed in the "conference method of late nineteenth-century classrooms" (Boquet 455-456). How this history is told has ramifications for whether writing centers are seen as existing outside the hierarchy and control of traditional classrooms or as a means of controlling literacy (Boquet 466-467). Subscribing to the former perspective, several writing scholars have extended the concept of third space to writing center work. Nanci Effinger Wilson and Keri Fitzgerald frame the writing center as "a metacognitive, flexible third space—a part of the university but also apart from it" (11) while Cameron Mozafari advocates for "creating a 'third space' within the tutoring session" as a form of cultural mediation for multilingual writers (450).

Moving from place to practice, Write Here has occupied a range of third spaces in every sense of the term. As our analysis will show, these border-crossings have challenged the norms of writing center praxis as well as personal and professional boundaries. The ways in which community members perceive and interact with Write

Here practitioners in writing workshops also reveal that our practice has not fully abandoned the confines and expectations of classroom instruction. Moreover, the recent shift to online services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed how systemic inequities and the digital divide can further complicate community literacy practices. As a result of these shifts, a change that we originally conceived as a one-time event has become an ongoing process.

Changes in Individual Tutoring

Write Here maintains its identity not by where it operates but by what it does and who does it. Operating in the spaces of various Promise South Salt Lake after-school programs provides Write Here with its primary purpose and identity. This community partnership also complicates Write Here's work, however, due to the schools' lack of dedicated space for after-school programs, which inhabit additional third spaces, such as libraries, cafeterias, outdoor portable classrooms, and gyms. As Write Here occupies changing places, its practice becomes much more dynamic. Personal space becomes more permeable, strengthening rapport between consultants and students but also blurring professional boundaries.

Under pre-pandemic circumstances, Write Here consultants visited schools at least once per week to conduct individual and small-group consultations. Many of the students attending Promise South Salt Lake programs are multilingual immigrants or children of immigrants, refugees, and at-risk youth. This context, however, challenges established understandings of what a writing consultant is—indeed pushing consultants' work beyond the narrow confines of writing, frequently to worksheets on anything from "Verb Forms of *Be*" to "Math Inequalities." Moreover, students may need the consultant to explain basic concepts and model solutions rather than engage in the nondirective methods traditionally espoused in writing center lore (see, for example, Thompson et al. 81-84). The focused conversation at the heart of writing center pedagogy can also be difficult to maintain amid distractions—other students, technologies, and food among them.

Further complicating Write Here relationships, students may want to approach consultants more as peers than as authority figures. While consultants maintain that they primarily help by tutoring, they often engage in vulnerable discourse with students and can easily be seen as "friends" rather than "friendly." What's more, students may negotiate with consultants to engage in a non-academic activity—for example, soccer or painting or sharing their weekend stories—which can make consultants feel as if they are being unprofessional and not doing "their job." And while Promise South Salt Lake after-school programs are supervised by staff members called prevention specialists, Write Here consultants are often asked to enforce behavioral rules and/or supervise other students when a prevention specialist cannot respond. Hannah Ashley traces similar connotations and uncertainties among college students working with high school students as writing mentors, "not teachers, not other students, but something else not quite fitting into the regular frames of the institution" (180). It is difficult to train consultants on the invisible geography of relationships

with students just as much as on the unpredictability of the changing spaces they must occupy.

As a writing center operating in these varying and challenging third spaces, Write Here joins Jackie Grutsch McKinney in pushing against and pulling at what she calls the writing center grand narrative, that “writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (3). As she observes, however, “[t]he effect of the writing center grand narrative can be a sort of collective tunnel vision. The story has focused our attention so narrowly that we already no longer see the range and variety of activities that make up writing center work or the potential ways in which writing center work could evolve” (McKinney 5-6). In the community spaces that Write Here inhabits, non-tutoring work—navigating changing places, mentoring, participating in non-academic activities—is paramount to the success of building sustainable relationships between consultants and writers, thereby challenging the traditional writing center narrative.

Write Here has especially seen how relationships need to be at the center of its practice when adapting to the changes brought by a pandemic. As schools in South Salt Lake halted in-class instruction mid-March 2020, their respective after-school programs followed. This challenged consultants to continue their work on digital platforms, which expose how rapport built with students beforehand is a prerequisite to effective and rewarding consultations. The few students at one after-school program that were able to attend live-video consultations were not the same students that Write Here consultants had built solid relationships with months before. In contrast, relationships Brandon nurtured with a ten-member refugee family over several pre-pandemic months yielded consistent and effective consultations through the end of the school year in spite of the technological hurdles. Even as COVID-19 disrupted in-person opportunities, a history of flexibility and social courage in third spaces has given Write Here the upper hand in continuing its practice amid a global health crisis.

Changes in Workshops with Other Community Partners

Write Here has similarly challenged writing center norms by offering literacy and skills-based workshops to marginalized populations in South Salt Lake. While community writing centers often provide workshops at their sites, Write Here staff ultimately decided to meet in spaces and at times that were the most convenient for participants. One such partnership was with a substance abuse treatment center in South Salt Lake. High turnover in staffing at the center created obstacles in maintaining a fruitful partnership, however. While the staff expressed that writing workshops would greatly assist clients in the writing-intensive assignments required to complete their treatment, they, like many social workers across the U.S., could not take much time out of their busy schedules to coordinate logistics: when workshops would take place, which rooms and technology would be available, and who would provide supplies and handouts to participants. Despite these communication gaps, Write Here continued to build relationships with the newly hired social workers, though accommodat-

ing the ever-changing staff meant accepting that programming could go dormant at any time.

Write Here was committed to hearing the needs of the clients at the treatment center whether articulated by the staff or by the clients themselves. It did not want to base its partnership on what Steve Parks disparagingly identifies as “a conception of hegemonic change that works by gaining the consent of those in local agencies to expand or broaden the service opportunities offered” (36). However, the nature of building partnerships—meeting with staff speaking on behalf of clients before meeting with the clients—meant that Write Here had to make assumptions based on its contacts’ characterizations of clients’ writing. Thus, the facilitators, Chris and Kenna, created workshops situated in generalizations about their participants’ literacy levels and writing context. Later, the two would revise the workshops based on participant response, aligned more with Parks’ model of partnership-building.

While some Write Here programming has been feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic, the center’s experiences with two community partners—a national girls’ empowerment organization and a substance abuse treatment center—reveal how access to technology and institutional norms can help or hinder online programming. For example, since writing workshops with the girls’ organization occurred during the school year, the participants had access to computers. While gaps in digital literacy posed challenges, the girls had plenty of time and support to grapple with interfacing online through required virtual classrooms. The girls, though sometimes high-energy, were quick to correct their behavior during in-person workshops, and comportment issues were non-existent online. Participants in the outpatient treatment program, however, lacked such access to technology: many have experienced homelessness and do not have the luxury of a home computer and Internet connection. While all the participants at the treatment center are adults, the staff normalized rules for disciplining clients and maintaining decorum that cannot necessarily be enforced using video conferencing tools. Moreover, as the treatment center reconfigured programming, it could not prioritize “nonessential” services, a marker we understood would be rightfully placed on our workshops.

This reliance on channeling our programming through community partners’ programs contrasts with the relative continuity the SLCC Community Writing Center (CWC) has experienced during the pandemic. Since the CWC has traditionally offered both stand-alone workshops in its own space at the Salt Lake City Main Library as well as programming for community partners, they have been able to shift online with the expectation that their established base of writers will come to them. Operating on a much more modest scale with more limited resources, Write Here does not have the infrastructure to draw writers to us and therefore must go to them. Here perhaps is the primary benefit of operating in a fixed space.

As Write Here’s programming with almost all of its community partners has gone dormant, it has treated the pandemic as an invitation to envision what programming will look like in an ever-changing environment. While Kenna and Brandon have been quick enough on their feet to hold onto partnerships with the girls’ empowerment group and after-school programs, reforming the relationship with the substance abuse

center means starting anew when the time is right. Resuming the partnership will involve reaching out to new contacts, finding new ways to skirt foreseeable red tape, and figuring out how to tailor workshop presentation and content to meet the organization's expectations and its clients' needs as well as access to technology.

Dwelling in a Rhetoric of Respect

The factors complicating Write Here's writing tutoring in after-school programs as well as its writing workshops in the spaces of community partners underscore how community literacy work can challenge assumptions regarding what successful or sustainable partnerships look like. As Laurie Cella and her colleagues reflect on the themes they had previously raised in their collection *Unsustainable: Reimagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University*, community "partnerships have the capacity to shift and change as we do, swerving with us through our evolving needs, interests, and resources. What we are guaranteed then is a story that is neither clean nor linear and that, to the extent it fosters true creativity and innovation, equally guarantees deep loss" (42). Central to negotiating the shift of Write Here from operating within its own space has been a reexamination of what we consider to be the work of a writing center. Comparing the issues raised by our individual tutoring on one hand and our writing workshops on the other, we are struck by two competing impulses. While placing consultants in after-school programs has at times led to frustration with work that falls outside the norms and practices of university writing centers, functioning effectively in the workshop spaces of community partners has led us to want to divest ourselves of that university baggage so that we may in Eli Goldblatt's terms "challenge the political limits inherent in literacy and language use" (Cella et al. 44).

In both cases, we find in community literacy scholarship a way of navigating these difficulties by focusing on relationships, both interpersonal and organizational. Crucial to this endeavor is Reynolds's notion of "dwelling":

The concept of dwelling, then, is a third spatial practice I want to claim for geographies of writing: spatial practices related to dwelling have much in common with spatial practices related to textual production; texts, like dwellings, need to be planned, built, and then occupied, filled with meaning, significance, or history. They need to be arranged, and those arrangements are often enacted through memory. . . . Constructed as neither public nor private but somewhere in thirdspace, dwelling is a set of practices as well as a sense of place. (140)

The success of Write Here consultants is dependent on how they dwell and contour their practice to the syncopated rhythm of the places they engage with. Write Here praxis changes with its shifting context; the key is to find a threshold across which we can foster connections with community members free from the cognitive dissonance that we either are not "academic enough" or that we are in fact *too* closely associated with an academic institution. By dwelling and building rapport with writers and com-

munity partners, Write Here practitioners can allow room for surprise and develop transformative and meaningful relationships with writers.

Once established, these relationships can facilitate later interactions. This takes time, however. A first solution for Write Here consultants is building a culture of reliability and consistency. For consultants, this means working in their after-school programs week after week, moving among whatever third spaces are assigned to them, and being present for students in whatever professional capacity their needs require. In the case of working with community partners like Promise South Salt Lake or the substance abuse treatment center, this means opening and reopening channels of communication even as busyness and staff turnover may disrupt them. For example, we approached Promise South Salt Lake to jointly organize a training for both Write Here consultants and Promise prevention specialists on setting and respecting personal boundaries with students. This culture of reliability and consistency can reinvent the stability of a physical writing center while allowing for the diversity of praxis demanded in community literacy work.

At the same time, key to improving such communication is what Tiffany Rousculp terms a “rhetoric of respect” that frames the contributions of all participants from a strengths perspective. As Rousculp explains,

Respect implies a . . . type of relationship . . . grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another—as well as for the self. Even so, respect does not require agreement or conciliation—as “tolerance” suggests; rather, it entails recognition of multiple views, approaches, abilities, and, importantly, limitations (especially our own). In other words, respect needs flexibility and self-awareness. (24-25)

Rousculp’s formulation of respect resonates with the work of many other community literacy practitioners, such as Paula Mathieu, who asserts, “Rather than sustainability, I think a key term in community writing should be relationships” (Cella et al. 44). By remaining flexible and recognizing both our limitations and those of our community partners, Write Here can continue its efforts to take discursive action by opening channels of communication and by reaching shared understandings of our mutual responsibilities, such as through joint trainings of Write Here and Promise South Salt Lake staff. In doing so, our fledgling community literacy organization can take a page from its larger and more established neighbor, the CWC, which Rousculp founded. Like the CWC, Write Here can “avoid falling into the stance that the [center], as an agent of higher education, ‘knew better’ than a partner” by “entering into relationships with ‘blank’ intentions, pushing our own ideas into the background unless circumstances might call them forth” and by “embrac[ing] the chaos and confusion of listening rather than taking comfort in directing the conversation” (Rousculp 27).

Engaging in this relationship-focused work with writers and community partners is a trade-off that requires an ongoing shift in perspective. As the previous analysis shows, effective community literacy work requires adjusting expectations and considerable trial and error. Like Mathieu, we have had to trade an absolute notion of success or performance in these partnerships for something more fluid, “as an action, not

a thing—an act of questioning: What are we seeking to sustain? Why and how?” (qtd. in Cella et al. 46). In the case of Write Here, we have answered those questions by realizing that we seek to sustain these relationships to cultivate literacy in its broadest sense, even if this work requires us to leave our academic comfort zones. We hope that by learning from our experience, other community literacy organizations can enter into more effective and meaningful partnerships and weather the ongoing process of adapting to shifts of place and practice.

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Author Bios

Christopher LeCluyse is the founder and director of Write Here and directs the Westminster College Writing Center in Salt Lake City, where he is also a professor of En-

glish and associate provost for curriculum and assessment. He served as president of the Rocky Mountain Writing Centers Association and co-chaired the 2015 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing and the 2017 International Writing Center Association Summer Institute. His scholarship focuses on language, identity, and performance and draws on both his background as a medievalist and his recent engagement in game studies.

Nkenna Onwuzuruoha is Write Here's outreach coordinator. She previously served as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center. Nkenna also has facilitated workshops for Woke Words, YWCA Utah's multi-genre creative writing and reading series for young women of color, since its founding in 2019. She is currently a Ph.D. student in Writing and Rhetoric Studies and a member of the African American Doctoral Scholars Initiative at the University of Utah. Her research interests include first-year composition, community literacy practices, revisionist historiography, and activist methodologies.

Brandon Wilde was the center liaison for Write Here after working as a Write Here writing consultant. He is currently a medical student at the University of Utah School of Medicine. Within the medical school, he co-leads the RealMD program—a professional development initiative at UUSOM that connects students with their higher purpose in medicine through contemplative writing workshops and guest speakers.