The Sadder the Story, the Bigger the Check: Reciprocity as an Answer to Organizational Deficit Models

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This ethnographic research argues that reciprocity—the attempt to equalize the power dynamics that occur in working relationships—is a way to counteract the widely-used but rarely-critiqued deficit models that dominate the nonprofit landscape. If community work is not done with a near constant attention to power dynamics, programming that is intended to help clients actually replicates and rewards structures that take away agency from those being served in community programs. The practice of reciprocity offers this structure.

The other day I received a phone call from a friend who had been to a brunch for a local nonprofit that connects at-risk youth to higher education. She had been invited by a coworker, and it was my friend's role to simply sit, watch, and write a small check at the end of the program. She did her part, but rather than return home inspired and ready to take action, she reported back to me that she felt guilty, like she had been witness to a bad secret being told about someone, some nasty gossip, and that she was somehow now implicated. On the surface, it was like any other nonprofit brunch—the stale croissants, the reconstituted scrambled eggs, the looming white projection screens, blank and waiting to be filled with pictures of smiling faces, lives made better by your generous contribution. But it seemed like something was amiss, that she had been invited there to celebrate her contribution more than the accomplishments of the people who were to benefit from the brunch in the first place. The bad feeling started with a sense of othering, she later recalled: the brunch opened with a speaker who asked the audience, "Have you ever slept in your car?" "Have you ever had to visit your dad in jail?" She realized the speaker's job was to create difference between the audience and the clients. That difference provided the distance necessary for one group to assist the other. The prevailing notion was, "You can help these people because they are different from you."

What my friend needed in this situation was not to be made to feel like she was different. In fact, that was exactly the wrong feeling. What happened at this brunch—the wrong assumptions, the one-sided approach

to giving, the othering—is symptomatic of the deficit model of funding and programming prevalent today in literacy nonprofits. Instead of asking our communities, "what do people who seek instruction at literacy nonprofits have to offer?" we too often ask, "what is wrong with the people who seek instruction at literacy nonprofits, and how can we fix them?"

Those of us who have spent time working in or with nonprofits know this deficit syndrome all too well: it's the sense of unease when a white volunteer, crisply dressed and made-up, toting an expensive handbag, comes to hand out bag lunches at the men's homeless shelter. It's the feeling of frustration when at a fundraising function, clients from a nonprofit are asked to stand and repeat how helpless they would be without the services of Organization X. At my home organization, VOICES (a nonprofit literacy center), it was the discomfort of asking youth to share their highly personal stories without having to give anything myself. We've all been in these uncomfortable situations. And a lot of us, me included, have come to see it as just an unsavory, but necessary, part of the nonprofit territory. But why does it have to be like this? And what are the longstanding ramifications of turning our heads to the power dynamics that haunt these situations?

This article is an attempt to determine why deficit models are harmful and what can be done about them. I propose that the concept of reciprocity, an attempt to equalize power dynamics in working relationships, is one way to minimize the culture of deficit-based programming and funding that pervades the social service and community literacy landscape. If community work is not done with a near constant attention to power dynamics, programming that is intended to help people actually replicates and rewards structures that take away agency from those being served in community programs.

A Note on Methodology

This article is built around interviews that were collected over one year at VOICES: Community Stories Past and Present, a Tucson-based literacy and media nonprofit where I have been the Writing Director for five years. In order to get the fullest story possible, I interviewed 33 narrators who have been involved with VOICES on a variety of levels: youth, staff, founders, volunteers, and board members. The questions I asked were intended to gauge how narrators view their positions and goals in the VOICES environment. From spending time with the youth (in my role as Writing Director), I knew that they valued their time at VOICES because they were not treated like stereotypical "at-risk" youth, but rather as whole people. What this hunch told me was that there is something unique about how the youth are treated at VOICES, as opposed to other education settings (both in-school and out-of-school).

The narrators cited here and I decided, collaboratively, not to choose pseudonyms. The reasoning for this was threefold: first and foremost, a pseudonym would forfeit the narrators' right to having their name associated with their own literate successes and failures. The practice of providing pseudonyms seemed antithetical to the mission of VOICES: to tell stories in order to humanize the authors and make connections amongst readers and writers, as real people living in the world. By keeping real names, the form of this article mirrors the publishing work that happens at VOICES. The decision to not use pseudonyms was also influenced by my interest in collecting as much (and therefore, more valid and reliable) data as possible. Because the organization is so small (VOICES only has four full-time staff), almost every detail is potentially identifying. If I were to use pseudonyms, the available data I could use would shrink drastically. In addition, many of the stories reprinted here are already a part of VOICES lore, told again and again at board meetings, conferences, workshops, and to facilitate one-on-one mentoring.

Reciprocity: Definitions and Brief History

This section seeks to define both deficit and asset approaches to community literacy, and provide some background on how these two approaches came to be. Without understanding the history behind both models, we are in danger of

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replicating our own worldviews when it comes to instituting change. The deficit model, largely an uncritical approach to community work, is similar to the deficit models of education targeted by theorists like Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. Critical pedagogues in this intellectual lineage point out that the oppressed don't need to be treated as "objects which must be saved from a burning building," a perspective which only furthers the oppressed as a mass "which can be manipulated" (Freire 65). In order for power dynamics to be sustainably altered, Freire has famously argued, the oppressed must make change for themselves. This viewpoint works from an "asset-based" model that recognizes differences as strengths, rather than problems that must be addressed and ultimately fixed.[1] In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that in order to sustainably change hierarchical,

oppressive relationships, oppressors must work in solidarity with the oppressed. "The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others" (66). This approach assumes that the oppressed have assets to offer, that they don't need to be saved, and that they are in charge of their own social change. At the brunch my friend attended, the presentation was focused on saving those who are "at-risk" from burning buildings—even the name "at-risk" implies that they must be saved from something. The slideshow, the keynote speeches, even the practiced testimony from "success story" participants all fed the notion that these people were in some fundamental way, *lacking*.

Asset-based approaches to teaching and research are common in education and composition studies at the high school and college levels. But approaching community work from an asset-based model is still a bit unusual—in my experience working with nonprofits, deficit approaches still garner funding at more rapid rates than do approaches that recognize the good that is already being done in a particular situation. These approaches that couch difference as "needs" are popular because they allow funders and donors to feel as though the money or time they've given immediately helps or improves the condition of someone in need.[2] Nonprofits that provide food, shelter, and clothing are often the most richly funded programs because money that funders give can immediately pay for tangible goods. In nonprofit programs that do not deal with life-threatening basic needs (such as community literacy organizations), program administrators are often encouraged to "sell" their participants' deficits to funders: the sadder the story, the bigger the check. Unmonitored and largely accepted, this deficit model has grown into a dangerous power structure that consistently replicates and institutionalizes colonialist relationships between administrators and participants.[3]

For all the good nonprofits do, as a culture of community activists we sometimes unknowingly perpetuate this deficit model of working with marginalized communities. For example, researchers in community literacy programs often become so mesmerized by the daily struggles of participants that they resume playing the role of the oppressor, rather than one of a collaborative partner. In *Politics of Liberation*, Donald Macedo coins the term "literacy and poverty pimps" to refer to what happens when "pseudo-critical" teachers refuse to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the power of class-based difference on teaching relationships. "Instead of creating pedagogical structures which would enable oppressed students to empower themselves, they paternalistically proclaim: 'We need to empower students'…while they are in fact strengthening their own privileged position" (5). According to Macedo, literacy and poverty pimps "can be empowered as long as the empowerment does not encroach on the 'expert's' privileged,

powerful position. This is a position of power designed to *paternalistically* empower others" (6, emphasis mine). This form of pseudo-empowerment, much like what my friend experienced at the fundraising brunch cited at the beginning of this article, often exacerbates what those being served by nonprofit literacy centers do not have rather than focuses on what they do have and how those assets can help them complete their own goals.

The youth at VOICES have also had similar experiences to this pseudo-empowerment. Hector Heredia, now 29 and a graduate of the University of Arizona, began working at VOICES in the summer of 1997 on an oral history project called *Looking into the Westside*, a collection of oral histories that documented the Mexican-American culture and history of Tucson's Westside *barrios*. Hector recalls a time when he realized that the way people outside of VOICES were talking about him and his social position was very different from the way Regina Kelly, his VOICES writing mentor, spoke about him:

> After the whole *Looking into the Westside* project, people were really interested in knowing who we were. [Regina and I went to] this benefit. It was a conference about this other organization. They were taking what they considered "youth at risk" and building them up and then teaching them that they can also be whatever, right? So these people are talking about how this organization really helped them and really helped focus who they were. There was a lawyer that came up and said, "If it wasn't for this program I wouldn't have had the chance… they really opened the door for me."
>
> But at one point, all I could hear coming out of their mouths was, "youth at risk," "youth at risk," "youth at risk." My blood started boiling. One time, all right. But two times, three times, four times? Pssh. Like, I was just on *fire*. There came a point where they just asked [for audience] questions. I took the mic and I was like, "I can't believe you're up here praising these kids and putting these kids on a pedestal, but then you're slapping them down buy calling them youth at risk? I mean, what kind of an organization *are* you? It seems like you're doing a good job, but then it's like you're using them and then hurting them at the same time! You're building and destroying them at the same time!" I was all, "They *were* youth at risk. *They're not anymore*. Don't label them that." After that I just dropped the mic and walked out because I was so pissed, you know.
>
> I hate those fucking words! You're building these kids to think that they have the opportunity to be somebody and then you're slapping them down by calling them "youth at

risk." That's contradictory to me. If you're going to give them a label or call them anything else, make it positive, don't make it negative. "Youth at risk." *So*? Who are *you* pointing your fucking finger at?

Hector's story is an example of how deficits (often, the deficits of individual clients) are often stigmatized and then used as evidence for arguments that may or may not have personal significance to the person whose experience is being used. Hector's story raises some questions: "who is community literacy for?" "Why are we doing it?" and "At whose or what expense?" If we know that deficit models of education are counterproductive, and we know from individual experience that deficit models of community literacy work are counterproductive (in Hector's case, they just induce anger and hostility), then what tools do we have to use instead of this model? As community literacy professionals, people who are in charge of our own professional language, we have the responsibility to make sure that the aims of our organizations and of our field are in sync with the aims of the people we serve.

One of the ways that we keep participants of community literacy programs oppressed is by not letting them give back. This is one of the strengths of VOICES—partially because the organization is so small, it has relied on the help of former VOICES youth to run programs. For example, many youth return year after year to co-teach courses, lead workshops, or volunteer their time as mentors. In my interviews with these youth, many of them cited the desire to "give back" as their motivation. In Hector's case, he simply wasn't allowed this opportunity. Although he had spent years with VOICES, had published stories in our publications, the conference facilitator focused on what youth like Hector don't have, cementing his position as someone who would always be in the position of needing help. In doing so, the audience members couldn't see that Hector had changed in ways that he was proud of. Imagine how Hector's story would have worked differently had he been given the opportunity to speak about his successes—if he was on the panel, rather than the "educational expert" that was speaking. Telling his own story would have put Hector in a position of power and would have positioned him as an expert of his own experiences. Hector would have been able to categorize his own stories and his own identity in ways that more accurately described the situation than relying on the term "at-risk." The downside? What if the audience didn't understand the language that he used? What if he called himself a "normal kid" instead of an "at-risk youth"? The experience of not having the language fit the situation must have been what it was like for Hector to sit in the audience and listen to someone describe, incorrectly, how *he* fit into his own social landscape.

Recognizing that deficit models are unhelpful is the first step in changing them. The second step, of course, is finding a new way of working.

I propose "reciprocity." Reciprocity, in place of the deficit model, can be defined as an attempt to equalize the power dynamics of a given relationship. This can be done in any number of ways. No relationship is ever perfectly equal, of course, but the process of working toward equality involves reflection and communication—even those things alone are reason enough to practice reciprocity. At VOICES, a media center with real-life publishing outlets that require the sharing of personal experience (i.e. opinion columns and photo blogs), both youth and adults practice reciprocity by sharing individual experience not only with the large audiences that read their work, but also with each other. Sharing a story makes us vulnerable in many ways—will the listener like the story? What if we tell it wrong, or leave something out? What effect will it have? Storytelling can be risky business, especially for those of us who are generally uncomfortable with language (as are many of the people who wind up in community literacy programs). But the sharing of an individual experience is an easy and cost-free way to practice reciprocity.

There are lots of words for what we sometimes call "storytelling": gossip, truth-telling, testimony, witnessing, reporting. But the ability to share individual experience is an invitation to creating shared vulnerability and reciprocity. When one rhetor is unable to return a story, s/he is at risk for being indebted to the other. Pierre Bourdieu calls gifts that cannot be returned "unpaid debts." When I think about Hector's story, I think about all of the gifts he received from VOICES: confidence, access to technology and educational resources, the opportunity to make friends.[4] These gifts were "paid back" to VOICES over the years as Hector returned to volunteer, provide guidance and input on the direction of the mission and vision, and make presentations to other youth about his experiences—this time, from a position of having "made it" as a graphic designer with a 4-year college degree, supporting himself and his family. What is frustrating, but also fix-able, about Hector's story is that the larger community—symbolized by the educational expert and the audience at that conference that was supposed to celebrate Hector's achievements—could only focus on what he didn't have growing up, not what he had built for himself in the present. When the audience wasn't impressed, Hector was left with a debt. When he told me that story over the front table in the VOICES office, as youth were streaming out the front doors after program, he was still angry about the situation: his voice was raised, he leaned into the recorder and paused for emphasis. Kids stopped to look at what all the commotion was. The conference took place *ten years ago*, and he's still carrying it around.

In this way, reciprocity is about invoking balance as a way to avoid debts of responsibility. Giving a gift, for example, implies that the giver has enough resources that s/he can afford a little extra to be taken off the top. It also implies, of course, simple kindness and the desire to enhance

the receiver's life. But gift-giving can be dangerous, and make matters of inequality flat-out *worse* if we forget that receiving can sometimes be uncomfortable. "A man possesses in order to give. But he also possesses by giving," writes Pierre Bourdieu. "A gift that is not returned can become a debt, a lasting obligation" (126). This concept of a lasting obligation, a debt, can be uncomfortable. Think of how you respond to "unfinished business" with a friend (even an unresponded-to email): while some of us may tackle the problem head-on, many of us are happy to avoid the issue until we are forced to confront it. When we ignore the power dynamics that influence community work, we allow those hegemonic practices to replicate themselves, even without our knowing it.

Reciprocity isn't a new practice, by any means. It shows up repeatedly in Ellen Cushman's writing on research methodology, albeit from a more individual stance rather than an organizational one. The link between research ethics and community ethics are similar, though: both research and community situations deal with individuals who may not be familiar with universities, their politics or procedures, and who may unwitttingly become embroiled in university politics that they do not want to be a part of. In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," Cushman explains that in order to justify her reliance on community participants, she establishes a system of checks and balances that allow both her and her participants the opportunity to give. She says of her research subjects:

They've enabled me to achieve a primary goal in my life: getting my PhD. They've let me photocopy their letters, personal journals, essays, and applications. They've granted me interviews and allowed me to listen to their interactions with social workers, admissions counselors, and DSS representatives. […] They've also lent me their status. They've legitimized my presence in their neighborhood, in masque, and in some institutions simply by associating with me (17).

What Cushman gives to them, she says, is the "prestige of language resources" she brings from Rensselaer (15). While the women she's researching, the community, allow her access to their lives, she allows them access to hers, and in doing so gives them access to resources that they might not otherwise have. The street goes both ways.

But as it is painted in her article, this give-and-take relationship evolved relatively naturally for Cushman, who describes her own "white trash" upbringing as pivotal in the process of befriending her research subjects: "[T]he women in the neighborhood and I identify with each other in many ways: we're no strangers to welfare offices, cockroaches, and empty refrigerators" (18). In many ways, Cushman was already friends with these women. What are we to do in community literacy situations when we don't have a shared background with those whom we are teaching? Cushman's model can't be replicated with just any population: following her lead, we

are left to either serve the populations that are most like our own, or teach ourselves about how to create systems of reciprocity.

What Cushman gives us is an understanding of how delicate and complicated the relationships involved in community literacy and research can be. Because scholars working in the community must work to gain the trust of their community counterparts, the relationships are appropriately enduring and multi-faceted. And rightly so, the dynamics of these specific relationships cannot be replicated universally—but while every situation is different, we should recognize that reciprocity is something that can be learned and taught, and that it is flexible to fit various environments. In short, reciprocity is performative and rhetorical.

In 2005 Josh Schachter and Kimi Eisele, the founding Writing and Photography Directors at VOICES, created a definition of the VOICES model of mentoring which they called "collaborative mentoring." It is also reciprocity in action. This document, which now serves as a foundation of the organization and is used to train other nonprofits and community literacy organizations, is basically a summary of how VOICES enacts trust and respect between youth and adults. The primary idea behind the concept of collaborative mentoring is that adults who work with the youth learn something new or take something from the relationship, so that the youth aren't the only ones who are learning. According to Josh and Kimi's guidelines, collaborative mentoring has three primary components: collegiality, inquiry, and the myth of talent. The professional environment at VOICES has adopted these rules as the foundation for how we work with youth: new volunteers are trained in these techniques, and staff create their curriculum around these methods. A "collegial" relationship, according to the document and at VOICES, means that adults do not subscribe to the "youth are broken and must be fixed" model of youth development and nonprofit work. According to Schachter and Eisele, collegial suggests "equality, companionship, and respect as a mentor and mentee embark on the storytelling journey together" (1). "Inquiry" refers to the climate that is created around curiosity at VOICES: curiosity is good, curiosity is the genesis for stories. We also encourage the youth to follow a line of inquiry in order to create their stories through writing and photography. Interviewing is a part of this line of inquiry. The third component Kimi and Josh refer to is the myth of talent, which basically means that "talent"—"So-and-so is just a talented writer/photographer. She doesn't even have to work at it!"— is a misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the work that is necessary to consistently create projects that go into print. It is not advantageous, for example, to allow beginning writers and photographers to believe that if they don't try, they might have a shot at succeeding, anyway. Believing that "talent" is a myth allows everyone to begin on equal footing: everyone has a shot at being successful, not just those who are mysteriously pre-selected.

Reciprocity = Sharing Vulnerability

VOICES allows youth to share their stories with the wider public: we encourage them to be personal, to tell stories that aren't being told in the mass (or even regional) media. By doing so, youth are able to humanize topics that are often not tied to individual experience (for example, welfare). This process of using personal experience to make a larger point about a community issue often requires that they dig deep, and share things about themselves that "regular" journalists aren't often asked to do. For example, a quick look back at VOICES' articles from the past few years will yield an article about the joys of talking to a brother in Iraq over Instant Messenger, another about the institutionalized parenting of Child Protective Services, and another about how Benedictine Sisters choose to live in cloisters; all require personal experience as evidence for their larger arguments or to establish an exigency for the article. Jackie Enriquez's article on the Benedictine Sisters, for example, was able to be printed because it examined both how sisters live and also Jackie's *interest* in how they live. Just a story about nuns was neither timely nor appropriate—just voyeuristic.

We have found at VOICES that the best solution is to create opportunities for youth and adults to share personal experience—everyone has it, everyone can contribute. Stories have come to be the great equalizer in the VOICES office, as they serve a variety of purposes: grants, publishing, and mentoring. As Rachel Villarreal, former Associate Director puts it, the stories we carry around with us are what have the greatest ability to link us to other people, particularly those who we might have nothing, at least on the surface, in common with. She says,

> Your own story is what brings you that strength. Your stories are your power. Your stories are what make you who you are. And if you learn a way to actually share those across cultures, across class—if you can relate to someone who you have nothing in common with, if you can find a story to share with that person and they can find a story to share with you, then suddenly, you have a totally different relationship with that person. That's how you get to college. That's how you get a job. That's how you get ahead. That's how you get a partner, that's how you raise your children. That's how you have good relationships. That's the ultimate skill that you can give.

Sharing stories is central to the best practices at VOICES. We share stories when we're hiring, when we recruit youth, when we're teaching, when we're fundraising, when we're interviewing and photographing, when we publish, when we explain to people why the organization exists. One way that VOICES has leveled the playing field has been by asking its mentors, staff, and even board members to also share with the youth *their* personal

stories. This culture of sharing individual experience encourages reciprocity in that no one is free from contributing—everyone must be able to connect their own lives to the public sphere. That's the price of admission.

When she was asked to be a part of an interviewing training activity, writing volunteer Tracey Menten was allowed the opportunity to share a story about herself that had never come up before: her wedding. Tracey, who taught in the public schools for seven years before coming to VOICES as a volunteer, often reflected on the reasons she left teaching: as a lesbian teaching in a conservative school district, she was unable to share information about her personal life with her students, who often provided information about themselves. Reflecting on her time at VOICES, Tracey recalls an interviewing activity for which she was the guinea pig, volunteering to answer questions about her life so the youth could practice their interviewing skills. As part of the activity, a group of 10 or so apprentice journalists were charged with determining the significance of an artifact Tracey gave them. Tracey, in a hurried moment, chose her wedding ring:

> When I handed it over I was a little panicked. [But] it was fine! There was no reaction—that was the point. So my armpit sweat kind of dried up a little bit. But then they started asking questions about teaching, and for me, I got to share like, how that was very difficult, as a teacher, not to be able to be open.

> When I left that day, that was a really—I had never in all the years I was a teacher, I never came out to kids. Ever. I wasn't allowed to. I was told I was going to be fired, I was told all kinds of really horrible things. It was really horrible to live like that. Especially because I was very close with my kids who I did yearbook with. We spent a lot of time together, working. And so they were always very respectful. It was like they understood. I didn't talk about my private life, but they didn't ask questions, either. Whereas, that's normal stuff that you ask your teacher. Kids ask their teachers stuff all the time. But because I never shared, they never asked.

Just like many of the youth when they first begin sharing stories with wider audiences, Tracey's expectation (illustrated by the armpit sweat!) had been that her immediate audience would be unwilling to hear the story. Once the story came out, though, Tracey realized that not being able to share personal stories with the youth she was teaching in high school was a large part of her unwillingness to continue teaching at all. Tracey felt as though she was driven out of her teaching position in the public schools because she was not allowed to be a whole person, sharing stories about her life with the students. When she was teaching, it felt like she was hiding a secret—

this was distracting and uncomfortable. This is why the reciprocal action in storytelling is so powerful; unless both parties are allowed to share their experiences, the transaction is incomplete.

For many adult mentors who have been interviewed by youth, the process is a profound experience because it allows for greater understanding between youth and adults. It is also a building block for a more reciprocal relationship, one where the adults are encouraged to share just as much as the youth. After the interviewing exercise, when Tracey got in the car that night, she realized that she had never come out to youth before. In her words, she had never been able to be her "whole self" with kids she was teaching:

> I was getting to be my whole adult self with these youth that I'm mentoring…that had never happened before. So when I get in the car, I'm like, 'holy crap.' I never thought I would have that. It was bizarre in a good way. It felt safe, and that's not something I often associate with being a lesbian. […] It's not just youth who get safety [at VOICES]. It's also the adult staff, the adult mentors. You get to be in this environment. You just blend in. It's not like, 'Oh, she's the gay mentor, she's the such and such mentor.' You're just part of it.

For Tracey, the ability to just be "one of the group" was a feat accomplished through storytelling. At her high school teaching job, when she was unable to share even the most basic information about her personal life, she didn't feel like she could fully contribute as a teacher—she couldn't model behaviors that she wanted to encourage in her class. The safe space that Tracey mentions is yet another way to enact reciprocity: not only the youth get access to feeling like they can be their whole selves.

One of the common responses to Cushman's work is that it is not easily replicable. Cushman was in a prime spot to conduct her research: not only had she lived in a similar neighborhood as her subjects, she had "made it" out of the neighborhood, gone to college, and was on her way to finishing an advanced degree. At once, she was the same (she shared their background) and different (she was university affiliated). Reciprocity allows those of us who work in the community the ability to create common ground, rather than simply rely on what's already in existence.

When we ask the youth at VOICES to share their stories for publication, we are asking them to be vulnerable. In order not to replicate power hierarchies, adults have to be vulnerable, too. One way VOICES has worked the sharing of stories into its curriculum is through an adaptation of the YWCA Unlearning Racism Workshop, which seeks to humanize difference through a series of questions that are shared within a group of participants. Jonathan Schoffel, a youth apprentice for the 2005-2006 issue of the annual VOICES publication and a youth leader during the 2006-2007

year, remembers the identity workshop as one of the primary reasons he stuck around VOICES for the whole school year, even though he ended up dropping out of the University of Arizona during his time at VOICES:

> [Sticking around] started with Kristen's identity workshop. I think doing that immediately created a bond between all of us. Like I said, I was still motivated to do my story, but not only that, now I had a group of friends that I was open with. So, that's why I stayed. [The identity workshop] asks people to be vulnerable on the spot, immediately. And that's hard. But once people can do it, it's automatically creating bonds, because connections are being made between person to person: "Oh yeah, my dad died, too." "Oh yeah, my parents got divorced as well." "Oh yeah, I'm fuckin' poor."

The structure of the workshop is fairly basic: everyone, youth and adults alike, sits around in a big circle, with snacks and drinks in the middle so people have to get up as little as possible (the entire process takes about 6-8 hours total, over 2-3 days). Participants share narratives, oftentimes personal ones, about key events that can somehow be linked to larger community issues. For example, the Identity Workshop does not factor in time for people to talk about why their pets are unique, or why they particularly love shopping at Target. The stories are a place to highlight difference in a personal way, so the questions lend themselves to community-based issues: "Have you ever experienced racism? If so, how?" The questions, which are adapted every year according to the tastes and intuitions of the youth leaders, are at once based in the personal but also reflective of issues that are of importance to the larger community. This reflexive action is what we call "taking the I to the we": using personal stories to access larger issues that, without personal evidence, are relatively inaccessible to mass audiences. The end result of the workshop, as Jonathan says, is to create possibilities for friendships and alliances amongst the youth and adult staff. But it also creates a culture of sharing and storytelling that is focused on community, not just the self.

Growing Reciprocity

The model of working from deficits rather than assets has seeped into the structure of the nonprofit world. Many of the professionals who work in community literacy are female (and easily feminized), underpaid, and highly transitory. The funding for out-of-school literacy projects is often cut, at least in our conservative Arizona, in the name of faith-based providers ("While we can't extend financial support to XYZ Organization, we are happy to offer after-school childcare at Trinity Lutheran School." … the assumption being that somehow faith-based childcare is the same thing

as literacy instruction.). On a recent lobbying trip to Phoenix, I was one of over one hundred female out-of-school educators greeted by a friendly, gray-haired lobbyist who blindly shared how thankful he was that we after-school professionals "sacrifice, so others can learn." It's this kind of under-the-radar discrimination and low expectations that perpetuate the deficit model in out-of-school education and community literacy work.

In order to counteract the negative stereotypes and indebted relationships that occur in literacy nonprofits, we need to be explicit about enacting reciprocal relationships and structures in our organizations. Reciprocity can exist in a number of different levels: between staff and participants, staff and funders, funders and administration. Reciprocity has much to offer both other community literacy programs as well as university and other school-based learning environments: it allows participants in community literacy programs to connect in meaningful ways with the people who are teaching or running the programs and it allows for more honest and open discussion about difference and inequality. It also has the potential to decrease turnover in programs, and has the ability to do the same in classrooms, as it builds relationships that bolster the learning process. With all of the positive results of reciprocity, we must grow the concept so community literacy organizations can serve more participants in more programs. If we don't create the opportunity and structure for reciprocal relationships to thrive, then we run the risk of replicating hegemonic power structures.

Endnotes

1. For more information on asset-based approaches to education, see Giroux and McLaren, "Writing from the Margins: Geographies of Identity, Pedagogy, and Power" and Moll, Gonzalez, and Amanti, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms.*

2. I use the term "funders" to connote the foundations, granting agencies, tribes, and government partners that provide significant funding (i.e. more than $10,000 per fiscal year) to a nonprofit organization. The money provided by funders often relies on the reporting-out of goals and objectives that have been accomplished by the organization through the money granted (for example, a nonprofit may promise that 55 teenage parents will learn "citizenship skills" after one year of night classes at a literacy center). Funders may retract their funding if the goals and objectives promised in the application for funding are not completed. I use the term "donor" to mean any private individual who gives money to a nonprofit organization; other than designating how they would like for their money to be used (i.e. toward a "general fund" or to be used specifically in programs), these individuals do not retract their money if they dislike what the program has done with it. (This would be like you, or me, calling the local homeless

shelter to request our $25 Christmas donation back because we are unhappy with their programs. Individually, we do not have enough power to request to do this.)

3. The term largely used for those who take part in community literacy programs is "clients." In order to undercut the provider-served hierarchy, I use "participants" as a way to imply agency on the part of the "served."

4. Hector is the first to talk about what he received from VOICES, noting "It was just so amazing, what [Regina] helped us accomplish. It wasn't one of those like, miracle stories that starts and ends at one point. It was one of those things that's ongoing. She's living proof that [you] can change lives. All you have to do is dedicate yourself to something positive and work. And the whole thing is, that this project—we wanted people on the negative side of things to become positive, and to become competent members of their own community and to be able to voice their own opinions and concerns. We just want that same respect that you want. And even though we were only teenagers then, we understand the dynamics of the world we're living in, and we clearly understood what we lacked and what we needed. So, even though we didn't know how to express that, she brought it out of us because she made it OK. And she made us feel like we *were* somebody, and that we *were* competent, and that we could be successful, that we could be whatever we wanted. I think that's how all this came about, her ability to make us shine.

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