

Fall 2007

Writing for a Place: A Writing Workshop for McDowell County, West Virginia

Mark A. Roberts
Virginia Intermont College

Casey Clabough
Lynchburg College

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

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Mark A. and Clabough, Casey (2007) "Writing for a Place: A Writing Workshop for McDowell County, West Virginia," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

DOI: 10.25148/CLJ.2.1.009614

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol2/iss1/15>

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.

Writing for a Place: A Writing Workshop for McDowell County, West Virginia

Mark Roberts and Casey Clabough

Two literary scholars struggle with the intersections between regional theory and public policy as they attempt to devise a writing workshop manual for a county in southern Appalachian coal country.



Editor's Note: This article presents the experience and emotional responses of the two authors and the content of the Writing Workshop Manual that they created for the Caretta Community Center in McDowell County, West Virginia. Their technique shows not only the contrast of their private and public personas but also some of the outsider/insider dialogue that goes on whenever outsiders—well-meaning academics, church workers, or social service providers—decide to fix something that Appalachian insiders would maintain was not broken.

In New Literacy Studies, theorists talk and write about literacy events and literacy practices. They define a literacy event as a happening around a text; literacy practices are cultural ways of using reading and writing. One instance of a Writers Workshop would be a literacy event. A series of such workshops might become a recognized literacy practice in a community. Roberts and Clabough, academics for whom literacy events are commonplace and literacy practices are given, chronicle their attempts to get a visible literacy cycle going for residents of McDowell County. In the process they discover a powerful literacy practice already in place that surprises them.

Let's Write!

A community-based writing workshop is a good way to encourage local folks to create and tell stories and to receive helpful advice from writers and friends. The writer's

workshop should be a safe place where people can communicate without fear of harsh criticism. It is important to remember that the purpose of such a community activity is to be supportive of writers, both artistically and emotionally. Everyone's writing improves when you help each other.

Community workshops may be run in a number of ways. For instance, community members may feel a need to offer a "Women's Writing Workshop," a "Men's Writing Workshop," or even a "Children's Writing Workshop." Ideally, the organization interested in promoting and sustaining these kinds of support groups should weigh the wants and feelings of the community members. This may be done by advertising the possibility of a writer's workshop to the community. Flyers may be posted at highly public places, such as the local restaurants, grocery stores,

NEH Institute, "Regionalism and the Liberal Arts: Appalachian Up Close"

June 2004

McDowell County, West Virginia

There were two of us, the authors of this document, charged with devising a writing workshop manual for the Caretta Community Center in McDowell County, West Virginia. Ours was one of many service projects aimed at applying the latest studies in regionalism, globalization, and public policy to the community needs of McDowell County, one of the poorest districts in West Virginia with a high illiteracy rate, the sixth-poorest county in the United States.

Having spent three weeks in the Virginia Blue Ridge on the campus of Ferrum College absorbing theoretical and artistic constructions of southern Appalachia in general and the coal country in particular, we had traveled west, faced with the challenge of attempting to translate our intellectual themes and techniques into some variety of community benefit. We had studied the history, culture, and economics of the region very closely. We arrived with a sound grasp of globalization theory and a new understanding of public policy. We hoped we could employ these abstractions as a means of doing some real good for the people of McDowell County. We were two very ignorant and naïve young men.

and libraries. It is also good to spread the word at churches, schools, video stores, and community social groups (such as bridge clubs and hunt clubs). Share the idea and see what folks say!

After advertising to the community and getting your group together, the creative work begins! Here are some ways to start workshops; they have worked well in other places.

Workshop Members

A Moderator or Group Leader: The group leader is in charge of introducing the writer and his or her work, giving out copies of the writer's stories to readers/respondents, and shepherding the group discussion.

A Writer/Author: The writer provides copies of his or her short fiction, poetry, or nonfiction for the group. Copies are handed out one week before the piece of writing is discussed; this gives each member time to read and think about the writing. If the writing group can't or doesn't want to make copies, it may simply have each of its writers read his or her work aloud at the meeting. Don't let things like photocopying get in the way!

A Group of Readers/Respondents: The reader's job is to give the writer opinions or ideas he or she can use. The reader should begin by explaining to the writer what "works" or what is "praiseworthy." Feedback is helpful, but be sure to give ways to make it better, and avoid attacking the author's work or person. Be a friend to your fellow writer. We are all in it together!

One Way To Hold A Writing Workshop

Create a Safe Place

The first and most important task is to create a sanctuary where group members feel comfortable enough to share their writing with others. Here are some things to do:

- Sit in a circle to help create a sense of fellowship among members
- Allow the members to talk and decide on rules for the meeting, like making time limits for author's readings and audience comments
- Let the members figure out the way to run the workshops
- Allow members to speak about trust and support in the group; honesty and fellowship are important parts of any writers' group. Respect the other writers, and you will earn their respect!

We were in it all right, for sure—well over our heads—because southern Appalachia is a different kind of South, and coal country is a different kind of southern Appalachia. Each of us has centuries-old ancestral ties to the Smoky Mountains of Sevier County, Tennessee—the cartoon hill-billy capital of southern Appalachia: Dollywood, Gatlinburg, and a menagerie of mountain stereotypes hemmed in by the stunning beauty of misty peaks. Yet, our rural and commercial experiences in the Smokies left us wholly unprepared for West Virginia coal country, crumbling landscapes with mountains closing in, some mountains with no tops stripped flat by big machines that extract the coal, some mountain-sized piles of slag and debris naked in the woods. These are remote wastelands of the industrial era, twisted nightmarish episodes of once beautiful landscapes briefly turned modern and then abandoned. Small dilapidated company houses press against rusty railroads; company towns boast a slightly less-decomposed company store. All—the homes, the railroad, the store, even the roads that lead to them—are now partially sunken in and defunct, the rare figure or vehicle that moves among them suggestive of an unlikely survivor from some twentieth century apocalypse.

For the land that is mined there is no recompense, advantage, or silver lining; it is irrevocably maimed and torn. Some of the deepest wounds may be invisible, save for the brackish, acidic ground water and befouled wells; the inexplicable sink holes in the terrain; the uprooted trees; the suddenly eroded slopes; the deadly floods. It is a place fraught with many trials and dangers, and our visceral ignorance of it placed both us and our project in the greatest peril.

Leading the Workshop: The Moderator

Next, workshop members elect a leader, also called a moderator, to help shepherd the group during the meeting. The moderator's job is to:

- Introduce the writer and his or her work
- Hand out copies of the story/poem (if there are any—remember, he or she may just wish to read aloud!)
- Make sure the reader and the people who give feedback stay within time limits
- Take notes for the author on what members liked or disliked about the author's work.

We were nervous about encouraging too much conflict, even though a writing workshop would seem, at least on the surface, a harmless, abstract activity. The region was home both to a romanticized tradition of feuding and a very real legacy of domestic violence fueled by the pervasive poverty, lack of education, and drugs (Crystal Meth in particular). Home to broken promises and crippling frustrations, it is a place where pain and rage often simmer just below the boiling point.

Once flourishing and home to every modern convenience, many of the coal camps are now ghostly places, hollows where steel cankers and vines wrap about the broken sidewalks and abandoned railroad tracks, trees grown up through roofless houses and schools that were the best that could be built when their foundations were laid in the 1920s and 1930s. The population is aged. The youth flee in search of work and a different kind of life, propelled by an indefinite need to escape. Those remaining tend to be indigent and unemployed, drugged out and uneducated, living under hardships worse than conditions many Third World countries in a county that lies three hundred miles from the capital of the United States, richest country in the world.

Reading Before Reviewing

At the end of each group meeting, the moderator can hand out a new piece of writing by a new author. Group members

- Take these pages back home and read them carefully
- Make notes about the story or poem that will help the writer understand where his or her work “entertains” or “confuses” the reader.

If there are no copies to be had, it is always good to check out a novel or book of poems from the library in War. Good writers are good readers—books will give you ideas about how to sow your own writing.

Make Comments about the Work Not the Author

Members of the writing group must keep in mind that writing is oftentimes very personal. A bad comment by a group member can easily be taken as an attack on the author. Each member should take extra care to always refer to the story or the poem, not the author, when making comments. Remember that the person whose work you are judging will be judging your work at some point.

It is helpful to use the following words when describing the author's work: clear/

unclear; accurate/inaccurate; organized/unorganized. Also, phrases such as these work well: “this verse touches my soul” or “this verse leaves me cold”; “this passage works for me” or “this passage doesn't work for me.”

It is always good to be detailed about why a verse or sentence does or doesn't “work.” Quoting a passage may help to explain what you mean. It is best to avoid words

that attack such as “wrong,” “stupid,” “ignorant.” These words bring doubt and strife to the writers.

The Author Reads the Work

When the group gets together, the moderator reminds the group of the rules so that everyone can work together. The moderator then asks the author to read his or her work aloud to the group.

The author should always respect the time limits set by the group. Here are some things the author might think about before reading the work: 1) if the story or poem is long, the writer should select two or three sections of the work to read aloud 2) the writer should select passages that he or she wants feedback on. Always show polite attention while the writer reads.

The Author Hears the People

After the author reads his or her work, the author needs to stay silent and listen carefully to comments made by members. This is very important. It keeps the session from getting bogged down in discussions or arguments.

As the author listens, he or she should:

- Write down the comments
- Avoid strong emotional reactions to the comments
- Consider carefully what each member says and try to understand
- Write down questions for members who make comments that are unclear

The people who settled McDowell County in the early nineteenth century were similar to our frontier ancestors in East Tennessee—independent, stoic, poor folk happy to have arrived in a place where they could finally afford land and carve a living, however humble, out of the close-pressed ridges and hollows of the southern Appalachians. And, they got by, enduring rather than prospering, but doing so on their own terms, decade after decade. The arrival of modern coal operations dramatically altered the traditional local economy from one of hardscrabble agricultural subsistence to an even more tenuous, crude, industrial one. The absentee coal barons wanted the land and/or what lay beneath; they took it coercively as well as forcibly. The people were herded into coal camps; they or their children became miners; both the wild and the terraced hillsides were abandoned for dark subterranean passages, cribbed with lumber, dank with water dripping amid the creaking of timbers, and alive only because of the clink of pick or shovel as a crew shuffled past, hunched and silent in the pale glow of headlamps.

Give Positive Feedback First

When members talk about the author’s work, members should first make good comments about the writing. Members should focus on what the author should not change. It is also helpful to be as clear as possible about what is “good” about the writing. Commentors should

- Point to words, sentences or paragraphs that are pleasing to read
- Point to passages that explain tough feelings and emotions
- Point to sections in the writing that help create strong feelings in the reader. Such comments help the author know what is good about his or her work.

Such comments help the author know what is good about his or her work.

Offer Ways to Improve

The purpose of a writing workshop is to make a piece of writing better. But members need to be gentle with their advice because authors sometimes become angry when their work is attacked. Remember: the writing workshop is a sanctuary of safety and you have entered into a covenant of respect.

Here are some ways to make comments about improvements without hurting the author's feelings:

- Tell the group and author one problem with the writing you had as a reader
- Next, suggest how a writer might try to solve the problem
- Remind the author that the suggestions are “just suggestions” and are not “commandments” for making the story or poem better. Remember that the author is the only one who can change his or her writing. Never holler out comments without thinking.

Here some things group members might look for when reading the work and making comments to make it better:

- When reading, watch how the story or poem moves from one happening to another. Then ask whether it is believable or not
- Watch what might be missing from the story or poem. Maybe the author's work could get better by adding more information to make certain parts clearer
- At other times, a story or poem can be improved by taking things out. Things that do not help the story or poem move forward can sometimes be cut, making the writing better.

The best thing to remember about giving advice is that no one but the author can change or write the story or poem. The author will meet fate on his or her own terms. It is not our place to judge or interfere. The group should not try to re-write the

During McDowell County's coal company era, people often were paid for their underground labor in scrip, which allowed them to buy goods only from the company store. The company provided everything, ensuring that all or most of the real money it paid and spent upon miners and their families eventually made its way back into the coffers of the company one way or another: if not the company store, then the company doctor, the company church, etc. The psychological impact of such a society was much worse than its nefarious practical exploitation, for over time it encouraged and produced an unhealthy culture of paternalism, with miners, stripped of the formidable initiative and independence of their forefathers, expecting the company to provide everything. When the coal industry failed and the companies pulled out of the region, few knew where even to begin. The lucky ones moved away; those who remained struggled with unemployment and resulting poverty and watched the slow disintegration of their communities. Many of them yearned in despair for the return of the very system that had exploited them.

Today, in McDowell County—only three hundred miles from Washington, D.C. and yet one of the top ten poorest counties in the United States—eight-tenths of the land is owned by people who don't live there. It is home to staggering rates of illness and illiteracy. There exists, to some degree, a troubling marketing of victimization, advertised human deprivation that openly attracts and recruits philanthropic groups and tolerates their various ideologies for the purpose of attaining whatever material benefits may be involved. Sometimes, a measure of genuine good is accomplished. Overall, though, one can't help but feel distressed because those who arrive with aid are, in some sense, not all that different in their paternalistic material capacities from the coal companies of old. A new benevolent crutch replaces the old malignant one. Unfortunately, a crutch is always a crutch.

work for the author. Group members are there only to help the writer see the story or poem from other people's points of view.

The last thing we wanted to do was make the workshop manual overly obtuse or heavy-handed, yet that is precisely what we unknowingly had been doing. The kind woman who read over a draft at the Caretta Community Center stunned us with the comment, "Y'all realize the person who will be running this thing might only have an eighth-grade education." There was much we had taken for granted and a lot we still didn't understand.

Making Things Clear: The Author Asks For Clarification

As group members comment on the writer's work, it is good for the author to take note of comments that are not clear. Sometimes it is hard to behold where someone else is coming from. If some members are not very clear in their comments, the author should ask the group member to explain again their comment of praise or improvement. The understanding of words is the beginning of meaning.

Review Changes

During the time when members are commenting on the author's work, the moderator should be remembering or keeping brief notes of good comments and suggestions for improvement. These notes do not need to be detailed, but they should help the author remember comments after the meeting is over.

Readers Thank Author & Author Thanks Readers

At the end of the session, it is nice for the author to thank the group members for their interest and goodwill. Also, members should thank the author for presenting the story or poem at the workshop.

We worried about slipping into this trap and agonized over the best ways by which to apply our knowledge in a manner that would be helpful without appearing unduly prescriptive or outright incomprehensible. In Summer 2003 we both had attended a month-long seminar on the globalization of culture at Research Triangle's wonderful National Humanities Center. One of the recurring questions that kept coming up in our discussions involved how exactly to apply the theoretical salves and prescriptions of globalization theory through the arm of public policy. One of our visiting lecturers, Rey Chow, confessed that this was something that troubled and haunted her with regard to her own work, especially her writings on China. Another visiting scholar, Tim Brennan, appeared less concerned, offering that theorists should probably simply do their jobs and let the policists do the same.

In West Virginia, our particular site, we had received sound, informed feedback on our endeavor; it was up to us to transform our document—readable to us but obtuse to those who mattered—into something that might actually be useful. We wracked our brains a good while before coming to the somewhat unlikely realization that the Bible held the answer—not a particular passage, but rather the book's general vocabulary and the way it was written.

Literacy may have been tenuous in McDowell County, but religion was not, and the language of King James, one of the foundations of western literature, is a rich resource of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Biblical rhetoric became what was for us an unlikely compositional model. And behold! All who read our newly-altered passages were now able to discern their meaning...

Hand Out Copies of Next Author's Work

Next, the moderator should ask the author who will read during the next meeting to hand out his or her writing. If copies are available, the moderator can also remind the group members to read the work and make comments or check out a library book in War. It's time for everyone to read and write again.

Clear the Air

Because writing workshops can cause emotions to run high, it is good to end the meeting on a light note. It is good for the moderator or author to redirect the conversation by telling a joke or making announcements of other cultural activities in the community. Be sure not to tell offensive jokes that will hurt the covenant of respect.

Now Let's All Go Write!

Mining operations persist in many regions of Appalachia today, the black specter of coal omnipresent though often less pervasive than in the days of the big operations. The smaller, modern mines are tucked back among the hills, the grinding and clanking loaded-down Mack trucks barrel along, brakes burning—spewing the odor of roasting rubber and hydraulics—as the heavy vehicles rumble down the mountains, going in slow and bursting out fast of the tight switchbacks.

Schopenhauer said, “The world is my idea—this is a truth for every man, since the world as it is depends for its character and existence upon the mind that knows it.” Our notions of the coal fields remain ill-defined, incomplete, for it is an Appalachia we still struggle to know—to which we remain foreigners: strangers with other pasts, for whom the people of these areas are, by turns, familiar and alien.

Appalachian coal country is a different kind of southern Appalachia than the one we knew in the Smokies, from what people eat or think about all the way to the traditional means of heating a house. In McDowell County, the smell of coal smoke on the evening autumn air long ago replaced the sharp sweet odor of kindling aflame or the slow, smoky simmering of wet wood, set for the night at the back of the wood stove. In southernmost West Virginia, at day's end, the waning sun sinks behind hollowed mounds—tragic, riddled peaks, the wounded heights West Virginia writer William Hoffman once called “the dark mountains.”

Yet, there are people who know and love this damaged land and are willing to share. Among them, the Muncy sisters, leaders in their local church and dedicated ATV enthusiasts, who have constructed a family compound in the hills above War and spent an entire afternoon helping us forget our project. They rode us around the summits and gas fields of all the local ridges, telling us about the people who once lived there, showing us the rusty ruins of an old still. “Virginia is way over there on the other side of them hills,” one of the sisters told Casey, pointing into the evening sun from the mountaintop where we stood. “We can take four-wheeler trails anywhere you want to go. Point and we'll go there . . . I could ride you all the way to Grundy.” There are still such people in McDowell County, those who gaze beyond their poignant history and suffering, even in the wake of its telling and who scan the horizon; for them there are still possibilities.

Strange and wonderful stories hover and drift amid West Virginia's southern hills and hollows, and the people there have been sharing them with each other for genera-

tions. The stewardship of local tales rests in strong, capable hands. Surely one of the most humbling and important lessons we learned is that no one needed us to help tell them.

Recommended Weblinks

- *The Caretta Community Center and Big Creek People in Action*
<http://www.bigcreekpeopleinaction.org/>
- *McDowell County Photo Album*
<http://www.geocities.com/mcdowellcounty/photoindex.html>
- *Information on McDowell County and Washington and Lee University's Service Program*
http://campuslife.wlu.edu/leadingedge/volunteer_venture/war.htm
- *2004 NEH Institute, "Regionalism and the Liberal Arts: Appalachian Up Close"*
<http://www.ferrum.edu/neh04/>
- *Appalachian Women Writers Group*
<http://www.appalachianwomen.org>
- *Appalachian Writers Club*
<http://appwc.proboards26.com>
- *PLoPs Writing Workshop Guidelines*
<http://jerry.cs.uiuc.edu/~plop/plop98/workshops.html>
- *Abou Patterns*
<http://www.hillside.net/patterns/>

Much of the compositional theory in this document is drawn from pattern-based applications of architectural concepts as formulated by computer programmers. They argue that all spaces are inundated with interrelated patterns that repeat, which is useful in creating computer programs and robotics. Such patterns generate solutions to problems indirectly—a necessary approach for the most difficult problems of design. They describe largely irresolvable relationships involving deeper system structures and mechanisms. Since all software/theory serves human comfort or quality of life, the best patterns explicitly appeal to aesthetics and utility.

Mark A. Roberts is Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Literature and Creative Writing program at Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, VA. His creative and critical work has appeared in *The Asheville Poetry Review*, *Thin Air*, *Oyster Boy Review*, and *The Chariton Review*. Since 2000, he has served as Literature Editor at *Nantahala Review*, an online journal dedicated to publishing writers and photogra-

phers from the Appalachian region (www.nantahalreview.org). He lives, with his wife and four children in the valley of the Holston mountain range. His e-mail address is MarkRoberts@vic.edu.

■
■
■

Casey Clabough's most recent book is *The Warrior's Path. Reflections along an Ancient Route*. He is Associate Professor of English and English Graduate Coordinator at Lynchburg College in Virginia. Clabough also serves as literature editor for the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' *Encyclopedia Virginia*. The author of scholarly books on James Dickey and Fred Chappell, his work has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Shenandoah*, *The Hollins Critic*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. His e-mail address is clabough@lynchburg.edu.