

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 17
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Access as Community
Literacy*

Article 11

Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation

Bloom-Pojar, Rachel (2022) "Co-Creating Stories of Confianza," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 11.

DOI: 10.25148/CLJ.17.1.010655

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol17/iss1/11>

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Co-Creating Stories of *Confianza*

Rachel Bloom-Pojar

As I reflect on my community-engaged work from the past eleven years, I know that any successful partnerships I've had have been because my collaborators and I took the time to get to know each other as people and build *confianza* ("trust/confidence") together. As someone who works with Latinx communities but is not Latina, I am aware of how fragile that *confianza* can be, and I do my best to keep building on it by showing up and being mindful of how my actions are read in relation to the harm and objectification they may have experienced from other white academics. Researchers, especially white researchers, often aim to keep their personal lives and identities separate from the work they do. But when your work entails hearing stories about other people's lives, bodies, and relations, then you need to account for who you are in the emerging relationship and what you will do with access to the stories that anyone may share with you.

My commitments to community and orientation as a researcher today have been shaped by my relationships with a group of *promotores de salud* ("health promoters") at Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (PPWI) and the director of their program, Maria Barker. Maria and I first connected in 2017 when I first moved to Milwaukee. We met once in fall 2017 to get to know each other and discuss the program, reconnected in winter 2018 at a retreat on Cultural Humility, and started regularly meeting and working together in 2019. Part of that work included co-designing an ethnographic project about reproductive justice, the *promotores*, and health communication. I met many of the *promotores* at four focus groups I held in October 2019. Those focus groups and my larger ethnographic project were designed with Maria's input about what she also hoped to learn from the research and how it might lead to practical findings that would highlight and support the work of the *promotores*. When I met many of the *promotores* during the focus groups, they trusted me to a certain extent because Maria trusted me, but many were also skeptical of what I would do with the things they shared, and they told me that they often didn't hear about what happened with the research they participated in. It would take a lot longer to build *confianza* beyond this initial interaction. Around that same time, I applied for a fellowship that would allow me to be in residence with the program for the following academic year. The need for this time became increasingly clear as my normal responsibilities at the university severely delayed my ability to work with the focus group transcripts or follow up with the *promotores*. I hated how this might reinforce the idea that I might be just like those other academics that they met with and never hear from again. Thankfully, I did receive that fellowship and our weekly interactions the following year helped alter the course of my research and our relationships as we got to know each other.

It's important to note that these promotores and my work with them have connections to community-based sex education and reproductive justice (SisterSong; Bloom-Pojar and Barker). So, when I write about *confianza*, I'm drawing from knowledge informed by the promotores and their experiences creating it within their communities. While the promotores create *confianza* to talk about lots of different health and community issues, the heart of their work includes the ability to create *confianza* and safe spaces for community members to talk about sexual and reproductive health. When individuals enter into *confianza* with the promotores, they often feel comfortable enough to start talking about culturally taboo topics like birth control, abortion, and sexuality, and many of them open up about experiences with unhealthy relationships, abuse, and/or wishing they better understood sex or personal bodily autonomy at a younger age.

I began my remote work with the promotores amid the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. At this time, I was also navigating new aspects of my identity and reproductive health as a new mother. In May 2020, I delivered my first child and began parenthood amid the chaotic and uncertain start of a pandemic. Three months later, my father suddenly died. Three weeks after that, I began my fellowship work with PPWI. I had never had so many highs and lows happen within such a short period of time. I leaned into things that helped me feel connected and rooted to other people even when we couldn't be together in person. I experienced a chaotic merging of my personal and professional life as remote work, daycare shutdowns, quarantine periods, and more made any sustained separation of those things impossible. It was a lot, but this did help me share more of myself with the promotores than I might have previously. They didn't just get to know me as a white researcher attending their meetings. They got to know me as a mother who attended meetings on the floor of her son's room while playing with him, rocking him to sleep, and periodically turning off her camera to breastfeed him. They got to know me as I contributed to conversations, shared resources, and met with small groups of them for different projects. And I got to know them as they shared about their work, struggles, and communities along the way. They taught me that it was good to bring my full self to our work together as any separation would have further distanced us and negatively impacted how I might learn from them about parenting, reproductive justice, and making research meaningful.

One day while discussing how academics can make higher education more accessible, Maria asked whether I could do a writing class for the promotores someday. I was interested but unsure how it might work in relation to my other teaching responsibilities. And while I did teach writing, I had not ever taught it in Spanish. The idea was general at the time: provide access to something many of them might not have had access to before and do it in a way that fits within their schedule and interests. We spent months talking through options for this class as something that could help the promotores write their own stories. We regularly mentioned the idea to the group of promotores to get a sense of interest and invite feedback. I also drew from what I had learned from the promotores in my research thus far to develop a course design that might resonate with their experiences and interests.

So, during the fall 2021 semester, I facilitated a community writing class in Spanish with a small group of *promotores* via Zoom. The course design was informed by reproductive justice pedagogy (Ross), community literacy studies (Alvarez; Pritchard), and key concepts about *confianza* from my research with them. While the class began as a weekly group meeting, we ended up shifting to one-on-one meetings for the second half of the semester since that was what the students preferred. This preference was in part because of their busy schedules but also because of the sensitive things they were working through in their stories. They all had a clear sense of who they wanted to write for and what impact they wanted to have, but many of them had not shared certain parts of their stories with others before then. As we began to enter into *confianza* with each other, the *promotores* opened up about deep and difficult topics with their own experiences with relationships, immigration, and reproductive justice. I mostly served as someone to listen, support, and give recommendations for getting their story written down in a way that was guided by their own goals for it. The class began with ten students and ended with six. Those six writers continued working with me on their stories after the class ended to prepare them for a website and public humanities project we were co-creating called *Cuentos de Confianza*.

The initial idea for *Cuentos* began the spring before the class began as Maria and I discussed ideas for helping the *promotores* share their stories with others beyond the class. One of my PhD students, Danielle Koepke, was interning with me at the time to help with conceptualizing some sort of public programming with my research as part of the fellowship I had received. At that point, my research goals and plans for this community writing class began to blend. Danielle and I discussed a variety of ideas for providing an opportunity to publicly share stories, but every step of the way we kept coming back to: what do the *promotores* want and how can we create something that meets their goals? We went into the fall semester sharing the idea for the website as an option for the writers in the class, but also with the recognition that it might not come to fruition if none of them wanted to contribute to it. And as I said many times, we had to be okay with that. What we learned was that the six *promotores* who completed the class did want to share stories with members of their families, their communities, and other audiences for them to better understand what it is that they do as *promotores* and to inspire others. We navigated uncertainty about who the project “belonged” to—My university? PPWI? The writers, themselves?—but ultimately did our best to keep insisting that it be something in the middle—a collaboration of sorts that kept the interests of the writers at the heart of it and that didn’t let university or organizational interests take control of decision making and design. Through conversations with the writers in the class, and with the help of an undergraduate student, Juan Arevalo, we developed a bilingual—Spanish-English—website that would host stories written by *promotores de salud* about their work and experiences with reproductive justice (see <https://www.cuentosdeconfianza.com>). We launched the site at a community event that focused on our primary audience from the start: the *promotores*’ family, friends, and supporters. We held the event at a high school on the south side of Milwaukee in June 2022, and over 70 people came to eat, connect, and learn about the project.

While this all sounds very neat and successful, the process was anything but. Many weeks were filled with stress and uncertainty for me as I took on my new role of coordinating this community writing project we had dreamed up. I constantly checked in with the writers to be sure I was supporting them in the ways they needed and that we were developing the website in a way that reflected their interests and goals. And even at the website launch when it felt like all our hard work had resulted in a beautiful product, I realized that it was just the beginning of something more. We would need to develop educational materials to help introduce people to the project and encourage certain kinds of engagement with the stories, we would want to get community feedback on how they were receiving the stories, and we would need to add resources as specific issues that came up in the stories—like domestic violence and pregnancy loss—might resonate with readers who could use extra support with those issues. As this project keeps evolving, so does my orientation to the “work” that I’m doing. I don’t always know how to delineate what it is that’s my community-engaged research versus teaching versus something else these days...but what I do know is that it feels meaningful and driven by good relations.