

# Feeling Like a Writer: Composing & Publishing Writer's Memos in a University-Adjacent Writing Group for Low-Income Adults

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## *Abstract*

In this article, I describe a pedagogical practice that I argue can augment community publishing's potential to help adult undergraduate students' writerly confidence to help them *feel like writers* and build affirming relationships with wider audiences: writer's memos. Because writer's memos are opportunities for writers to demonstrate and build their rhetorical awareness and skills, they serve as mechanisms for building (and act as living representations of) one's writerly self-efficacy. However, other than *Community Literacy Journal's* Coda Section, which asks for reflections to accompany the creative work it publishes, the use of writer's memos in community publishing for marginalized individuals has not been widely adopted or explored. Data from semi-structured interviews and collaborative field texts suggest that including writer's memos in community publishing efforts can have positive implications for writers themselves and reader-writer relationships in community writing. Writer's memos can help build meaningful and affirming relationships across difference between readers and writers: they can showcase how writers and readers can work together to revise socially constructed notions of who gets to read and be read, thereby enacting social change via community publishing.

**Keywords:** writer's memos, community publishing, writerly self-efficacy

## *Introduction*

The editors of *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* describe community publishing as “the consistent effort to develop pedagogies and practices which allow marginalized individuals and groups to self-organize and gain a platform to speak publicly on their own terms to the larger community” (Mathieu, Parks, & Rousculp, 10). Relatedly, Laurie J. C. Cella and Jessica Restaino, editors of *Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning, and the University*, assert that students can come to “a deeper understanding of their local communities” through a community-engaged composition curriculum that emphasizes the exchange of ideas and information (3). Both edited collections frame community-engagement—in the form of community-university

partnerships/projects for Cella and Restaino and community publishing for Mathieu et al.— as a *pedagogical practice* that builds skills, knowledges, and discourses for the community writers and/or student writers involved.

Community publishing has the potential to dismantle deficit perspectives that adult undergraduate writers themselves and others hold about their writerly identities (Perry et al.). According to Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp, community publishing champions “community control over their own representations,” which in turn allows it to help enact social change (Mathieu, et al. 10). The *Circulating Communities* editors explain how ‘being in print’ helps situate various people—such as academics, politicians, celebrities, etc.— as “‘intellectuals,’ or at least as demonstrating that their lives have a value to others” (Mathieu, et al. 2). For the population considered in this article, however, multiply-marginalized adult writers, the positioning of writers as “intellectuals” that Mathieu et al. attribute to ‘being in print’ isn’t necessarily so easy due to this diverse group’s complex relationships with writing and readers (Wells; Greenberg; Rosenberg). Nonetheless, it is important to help them strengthen their abilities to *feel like writers*. Feeling like a writer is a concept I adapted from literature on writerly self-efficacy that emphasizes connections between being successful at writing tasks and writerly development. While writerly self-efficacy literature often addresses K-16 contexts and does not take into account race and class, I find it useful for thinking about the potential of community publishing for multiply-marginalized adult undergraduate writers. Writing studies scholars know that writing (re)produces possibilities for inequity (Adler-Kassner & Wardle; Byrd). This is especially true for adult undergraduates, students who have taken alternative paths to and through higher education. Adult undergraduates have often been academically disenfranchised due to structural oppression and inequities such as colorblind racism, neoliberal disenfranchisement, and the literacy myth (Schantz; Miller Brown; Lundberg et al.; Wells; Greenberg; Rosenberg; Graff). This exclusion negatively affects their writerly self-efficacy.<sup>1</sup> Community publishing’s potential to help dismantle deficit perspectives on adult undergraduate writers’ self-efficacy is likely because of “the resonant meaning of ‘being in print’ that carries importance for many individuals” (Mathieu, et al. 2). This helps being published gain a sense of prestige (Mathieu, et al. 2): as Sara Guest, Hanna Neuschwander, and Robyn Steely write about in “Respect, Writing, Community: Write Around Portland,” “the chance to be published is a huge and lasting boost of self-esteem” (51).

In this article, I describe a pedagogical practice that I argue can augment community publishing’s potential to help adult undergraduate students’ writerly confidence, to help them *feel like writers* and build affirming relationships with wider audiences: writer’s memos. Writer’s memos (also referred to as process memos or reflective writing) have typically been used in composition classrooms to enhance student-instructor dialogue, reinforce and self-assess lessons learned and/or growth, as well as enhance metacognition, among other uses (Sommers; “The Writer’s Memo”). In addition to helping writers become more effective readers and revisers of their own work, writer’s memos also position readers “to adopt constructive roles as respondents” (“The Writer’s Memo”). These functions of writer’s memos are particularly

important to community literacy projects and community publishing efforts because they can help amplify the boost to writers' self-esteem mentioned by Guest, Neuschwander, and Steely. That is, because writer's memos are opportunities for writers to demonstrate and build their rhetorical awareness and skills, they serve as mechanisms for building (not to mention, act as living representations of) one's writerly self-efficacy. And when community writers are confident in their own writing competence, they can be confident in how they represent themselves in their writing, helping them achieve their social change goals via their writing projects. However, other than *Community Literacy Journal's* Coda Section, which asks for reflections to accompany the creative work it publishes, the use of writer's memos in community publishing for marginalized individuals has not, to my knowledge, been widely adopted or explored.

Here I offer a description of the impetus for and impacts of composing and publishing writer's memos alongside creative writing by members of a community writing group for adult undergraduate students called Our Writing Group (OWG).<sup>2</sup> This pedagogical practice not only helped the members of OWG build skills, knowledges, and discourses regarding writing but also stimulated their active and positive engagement with readers, thereby enhancing their abilities to *feel like writers*. In the sections that follow, I will provide more details about OWG and my research with the group and use data from semi-structured interviews with OWG writers to establish how group members' previous reader-writer relationships impacted their writerly identities. Then, I will use excerpts from writer's memos authored by participants and published in OWG's publication, *OWG Oracle*, to illustrate how this pedagogical practice can help amplify the positive effects community publishing can have on writerly self-efficacy. Overall, the results of this analysis indicate that including writer's memos in community publishing efforts can have positive implications for writers themselves and reader-writer relationships in community writing and that this pedagogical practice is useful beyond the composition classroom. Writer's memos can help build meaningful and affirming relationships across difference between readers and writers; thus, they belong in community publishing, especially for multiply-marginalized authors.

### *Community-University Context & Data Collection*

Our Writing Group (OWG) is a community writing group for alumni of Venture, a humanities-based, university-sponsored program, through which low-income adults can earn six college credits.<sup>3</sup> Venture's mission is to reduce financial barriers to continuing education for adult students, help students develop literacy practices that build individual student confidence, foster whole class community, and cultivate a sense of hope for the future. OWG aims to help adult writers who've graduated from the two-semester Venture program continue (and augment) the literacy work that Venture begins in an open-ended way—that is, without necessarily moving toward a degree. OWG creates a space for adult writers with economic barriers to feel capa-

ble of and supported in accomplishing creative, professional, academic, and personal writing projects.

In order to align my IRB-approved research with OWG and also with my values and goals being involved *with/in* (rather than simply giving to) participants/communities and to seek a balanced, reciprocal relationship with others in my scholarly endeavors, I built a strong relationship with the faculty, staff, students, and alumni of Venture over 18+ months before founding OWG. During this time, I recognized that after the initial two-semester course ends, opportunities to continue writerly development and build solidarity are limited. Thus, in Spring 2020, I developed and piloted Our Writing Group (OWG) to fill this gap by providing consistent time, space, and support for program alumni to write with others. OWG represents my effort to remain true to my values and goals for research, aligning my scholarly and personal aspirations with community and stakeholder objectives to increase access, benefit, and opportunity for those involved.

As mentioned above, OWG is an optional weekly writing group for alumni of Venture with the goal to help adult undergraduates feel capable of accomplishing their writing goals. Most OWG participants are intermittently enrolled in credit-bearing postsecondary coursework; the predominantly BIPOC and low-income members of the group range in age from 20s to 60s and include gig workers, retirees, parents of grown and young children, the un- or underemployed, etc. I used the three iterative phases that typically characterize community-engaged research (Flower) to make my methodology humanizing and social justice-oriented, to strive to empower the writing group members to achieve their literacy and social goals by working *with* the writers in the group from an asset-based perspective. I aimed to make my methodology more participatory by supporting members in sharing their experiences and desires with audiences of their choosing through writing. I worked toward these goals in three main ways throughout my research with OWG:

1. OWG members and I worked to create horizontal leadership structures that aimed to set members of OWG up to maintain and sustain the writing group with or without a campus representative like me. I provided training for members on the collective leadership of the group and participated in group meetings as much as possible. However, my positionality as a professional writing instructor affiliated with the university's writing center, as well as my experience as a 'successful' student who followed a very traditional educational path and who self-identifies as a 'good' writer, position me as an 'expert' in the group. Thus, I worked to (re)define a role for myself as someone who acts on behalf of OWG to help identify and secure resources from the university and Venture to help the group continue as a space where members feel comfortable and empowered to write and share their writing.
2. My overall research with OWG endeavored to identify what kinds of practices, pedagogies, community relationships, and life experiences can help OWG participants self-identify as writers through participant-observation of OWG meetings and the *co-composition* of the meaning of multiple primary sources of information about adult undergraduate participants' writ-

ing experiences, including their stories about writing in various settings gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews, collaborative field texts written by group members, and pieces of writing written and/or shared during/ through OWG. During the 2020-2021 academic year, OWG meetings focused primarily on the writing projects of participants at three of the weekly meetings each month and specifically on conducting research (engaging in self-reflection, collaboratively composing field texts, etc.) at one weekly meeting per month. This means that the members who signed consent forms to be my co-researchers had the opportunity to write together in response to the same questions, such as “Why do I write?”; and “How is OWG affecting what and why I write, if at all?”; and “How do I want to use my writing?” in a Google Doc, being able to see and respond to what others were writing in real time (I call these Google Docs “collaborative field texts”).

3. Finally, beyond the regular opportunities to work on and share their personal writing projects as well as compose field texts about their writing experiences in relation to OWG, members of the group engaged in co-analysis of their experiences and de-identified data gathered from semi-structured interviews, writing group field texts, and corresponding primary researcher memos with me by co-presenting about OWG at conferences and on campus. This practice helped me to develop collaborative codes for analysis, such as “feeling like a writer” and “writer-reader relationships.” Additionally, OWG writers shared their experiences and findings during OWG readings (open to partner, community, and university stakeholders); at academic and community conferences; and in OWG student publications (circulated to partner, community, and university stakeholders online). Opportunities to share their writing, experiences, and ideas with wider audiences positioned members as experts of their own writing experiences and encouraged them to use the information gathered to take action in ways that centralize their voices (Bautista et al 2-4).

Through collaborative field texts and co-facilitation of OWG meetings, my research with OWG enabled me and members of the group to identify and investigate adult undergraduate writing topics and experiences, such as going public with one’s writing and giving and receiving feedback, together. Additionally, the processes and products of this participatory action ethnography were “an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock 455). This article attempts to place writer’s memos within OWG’s community publishing efforts into a fuller, more meaningful context using data from the semi-structured interviews with OWG writers as well as writer’s memos authored by participants and published in OWG’s publication, *OWG Oracle*, to “reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors” that help adult undergraduate community writers in the group *feel* like writers (Tedlock 470).

### *Writers Need Considerate, Generous Readers to Feel Like a Writer*

Participants from this study have received messages throughout their education that they are not writers, let alone good writers. Nevertheless, writing is important to them because it allows them to share their stories, make sense of their experiences, and connect with others. Importantly, the reasons for writing expressed by OWG members require generous readers/ listeners; such audiences can be invoked via writer's memos, examples of which will be given later in this piece.

Notably, all ten interviewees mentioned readers in their explanations of what helps them feel like writers. To illustrate, here are a few representative responses from semi-structured interviews with writers in OWG to the question, "Do you feel like a writer?" Echo, a 26-year-old multiracial woman, said, "Define a writer. Do I write emails? Yes. Do I write books? No. Will I write a novel? Probably not. It will be too steamy. *Fifty Shades* has nothing on me. But I don't, I don't think I'm a writer. I don't know what makes you a writer." When I replied that, in my opinion, what makes people writers is regularly engaging in the practice of writing and asked her if that changed her answer at all, she was more definitive: "No. I mean, I write, but do I—I am I a writer that gets paid for it as a job? No." I proceeded to ask Echo if there were times when she felt more like a writer than others. She had to think about it. She reluctantly replied,

I mean, once I read back on old stuff I wrote, I'm always impressed that I wrote it. Or like when [my professor] reads my work back to me, I'm like, 'Wait I wrote, I wrote that? Okay! Come through, writer.' Like once, like when I'm writing it, I don't feel any different. I feel like this is just what I write. But when someone, when I hear it in someone else's voice when they read it back, it somehow sounds, like, different. I sound smart, like when I write like, 'Huh. Okay, look at you, putting your words together like that.'

As found in previous literature (Matheiu, et al.; Norton), Echo's answers begin by connecting feeling like a writer to writing books and getting paid to write: she is not paid to write (books); therefore, she does not feel like a writer. However, she feels more like a writer when she thinks about being read.

Similarly, Dean, a 23-year-old Black man, told me:

No, I don't feel like, I mean, [...] Does a cow feel like a cow? Like objectively, that's what you are, like, you know, you got the spots, but I don't feel. Like, I wouldn't go up to someone and say, like, I'm a writer. I'll go up to someone and say, like, I make music, or like I'm in a poetry group. But I don't go up saying, and say, like, cuz then, like, you know what I'm saying, they're just like, Where's the novel? Or like, you know what I'm saying, Do you have published work? And it's like, No, not really. And then that's kind of dismissive...

Dean knows he's a writer because he writes and shares his writing with others; however, his lack of formal publication leaves his claim of the title, "writer" open to questioning by others outside of OWG and his rap group. Overall, Dean's and Echo's an-

swers suggest that being read helps them feel like writers. Their answers imply that their previous encounters with writers and writing have precluded anyone who isn't a *published* writer from being called a writer. Therefore, how could they confidently answer my question in the affirmative? Nevertheless, when their writing communicates, shares, and connects with others, they're able to *feel* more like writers—their writing accomplishes its aim and their writing competence grows, as Echo describes in our exchange. But when one's writing competence is questioned or dismissed, as Dean suggests, feeling like a writer becomes harder.

Echo's and Dean's reluctance is not dissimilar to how OWG participants Claudia and Sol—both poets and storytellers—answered the same question during their individual interviews; in fact, their responses shed more light on what it takes to feel like a writer for the adult undergraduates in OWG. Claudia, a white 41-year-old who was experiencing houselessness at the time of our interview, shared with me that she was “warming up to the idea” of feeling like a writer because of OWG. She explained that while she normally would not share her writing with many people, she feels more like a writer now “because [she has] people to share it with.” Claudia's sense of being a writer is also at least partially dependent on sharing her work with others. In accordance with the literature on writerly self-efficacy (Bruning and Kauffman 161-162), as her readers/ listeners in OWG continue to treat her like the writer she is, instead of questioning her claim to the title due to a lack of formally published work, Claudia is more convinced that she is indeed a writer—because she writes and shares her writing with readers/listeners.

Sol, a 36-year-old Mexican mother, teacher, and activist, also feels like a writer when she has readers. She said, “Well, I feel like when I am sharing my writing with others is when I feel like a writer.” However, she went on to explain that she feels like a writer specifically with readers who know what it takes to face a blank page and create something. Pointing to the importance of mastery experience— or successful writing experiences— for her writerly self-efficacy or confidence (Bruning and Kauffman 161-162), Sol explained that she experiences inner conflict when she has high expectations for herself to conform to a socially constructed idea of a writer as someone who can create something out of seemingly nothing at the drop of a hat, for any occasion, about any topic. But, as Sol says, writing and writers don't “work like that.” Like Dean's response, we see how socially constructed definitions of the title writer and having an audience impact OWG participants' ability to *feel* like a writer.

Taken together, it becomes increasingly clear that the responses shared about feeling like a writer indicate these writers' levels of writerly confidence (or writerly self-efficacy) and imply that their confidence is strongly tied to reader reactions to their work. Having a generous and understanding audience for one's writing has helped enhance OWG writers' writerly self-efficacy, and therefore whether or not and how much they feel like writers. Responses like these from OWG writers about feeling like a writer support looking at writing development as nonlinear and unpredictable because it is informed by complex interactions between various motives, challenges, and opportunities for writing over time, which in turn inform writing practices, models, and skills that vary from person to person (Bazerman, et al.). They

also highlight how the development of one's writerly identity, their ability to *feel* like a writer, is influenced by what that individual needs and wants from writing. Members of OWG need and want considerate readers to *feel* like writers.

The next section details how OWG writers engage with their readers through a specific writing genre—the writer's memo—as a means of actively developing their own understanding and identity as a writer. Our community publishing efforts in OWG aim to elicit the considerate, generous readings OWG writers need and want by including writer's memos that serve as accompaniments to the poetry, personal essays, short stories, and other work that grace the pages of OWG's semiannual publication, *OWG Oracle*. Writer's memos can explain the purpose of a piece, why it was written, and what the author hopes the piece will achieve for readers. They are meant to help orient readers to a piece, give them important background information, and/or simply explain what inspired the writer. They also help members of OWG speak to their readers on their own terms via direct address. OWG writers invoke their readers in these memos, and this seemingly simple act actually positions these writers as aware and in charge of their own meanings and intentions.

### *Writer's Memos: Invitations to Read and Be Read*

OWG's participant publication, *OWG Oracle*, is published in the winter and spring of each academic year. It is meant to reflect the ethos of OWG. As a collection of poetry, personal essays, short stories, and excerpts from larger works addressing a wide variety of topics as well as corresponding writer's memos, *OWG Oracle* is participant-driven. Everyone in the group can submit to the publication, and every piece submitted is workshopped and accepted for publication. Members choose their works; choose what editorial suggestions from me and other group members to take and which ones to disregard; and describe the purpose of each piece, why it was written, and what the author hopes the piece will achieve for readers in corresponding writer's memos.

Through participants' writer's memos, each issue of *OWG Oracle* coached readers into examining and perhaps even disregarding their expectations of published writing, of "established" writers. Rachel Jackson and Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune's concept of "community listening" is useful for conceptualizing how the members of OWG invoked readers with the writing they chose to publish and their corresponding writer's memos. Community listening is "a literate act that engages listeners as collaborators in meaning making across multiple sites" where "listeners work together with storytellers to construct and sustain cultural knowledge by building storied connections across difference" (Jackson & DeLaune 41). The predominantly BIPOC, low-income writers in OWG engaged their readers as collaborators in making meaning through their writer's memos, thereby acknowledging and even leveraging the fact that they come from different intersectional positionalities than their readers. For example, Sol's writer's memo for her piece "Although the Cage is Made of Gold, It is Still a Prison" challenged readers to "put themselves in the shoes of the undocumented immigrant." In so doing, Sol constructed the experiential knowledge of the

undocumented immigrant as similar to the experiential knowledge of worry we all gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such, she worked to build connections across difference.

It helped OWG writers use their writer's memos more purposefully to think of the memos as a chance to directly address readers of their work. Here are some examples:

- In Song's memo for "A Reason to Smile," she explained to readers that the poem was meant to reflect her belief in the power of "a simple smile" to "warm someone's heart, make their day or even save a life."
- In Puff's memo for a poem entitled "Passing Off Normal," she challenged readers to rethink what's considered normal through a trip to the zoo.
- The writer's memo for Miz's piece "(taste)percep-tion" asked readers questions to help them think about how empathy can change our perception of feelings and actions in an effort to help readers think about how they feel and act in a different way.
- Heaven's writer's memo for "The Sound of My Relaxation" acknowledged that everyone relaxes differently and encouraged readers to think about how they relax in terms of sounds.
- Claudia's writer's memo for "The Skins I Shed as an Isabella Tiger Moth" mentioned her specific consideration of people's familiarity with wooly bear caterpillars.

Importantly, none of the above examples are my own analyses of these writers' works; they are the writers' own characterizations of what aims their pieces accomplish and what authorial decisions they made that helped them accomplish those aims. In articulating these authorial decisions and aims, OWG participants position themselves as empowered over their own meanings and intentions.

This important collaboration between OWG writers and their readers couldn't be done without community publishing because when one's writing is published, it lasts, it can travel, it has a farther reach than it would if it had stayed in a notebook or on a personal device. Community publishing is important to helping writers make meaning on their own terms; as previously indicated, publication, broadly speaking, and more specifically the pedagogical practice of composing and sharing writer's memos bolster mastery experience and social persuasion (Bruning and Kauffman)— they signify success in writing and a belief in an author's writerly potential for both writers in the act of choosing to publish their work and readers in the act of collaborating with writers to arrive at shared meaning. I see this use of OWG *Oracle* writer's memos as reflective of OWG writers taking greater ownership of their texts and the work they want their pieces to do for readers (Parks 525; Mathieu et al. 10) because writer's memos encourage intentional reflection on their writing.

Rather than a push-pull (Smitherman) between what you do as a writer and what a classroom or academic discourse community (or even a particular reader) might expect of you as a writer, OWG writers fostered their own community that made our writing values and the purposes of our published pieces clear to anyone and every-

one in their memos. I sought to highlight this and support the writers' work across difference in the editor's letters I wrote for each issue where I called attention to readers' expectations of writers, in the general sense of the term, and encouraged them to shed those expectations by championing each writer's individual voice as well as their own writing conventions and intentional writerly decisions: "Thus, I encourage you, dear readers, to read each piece with special attention to the voice of each writer. Those commas, capitalized words, ellipses, emojis, periods and lack thereof are meant to be there to guide you to hear— no listen— to each piece in the way it was meant to reach you." In essence, the writer's memos and editor's letters in *OWG Oracle* encourage readers to pay attention to and value "the wisdom that comes to us intuitively" (Okun) while reading each entry.

I assert that the writing and publishing of writer's memos alongside each entry in *OWG Oracle* helps the adult undergraduates in *OWG* feel like writers because they put the writers themselves in charge of their own meanings and intentions, and writer's memos give writers the opportunity to clearly articulate those meanings and intentions to their readers. Furthermore, writer's memos encourage writers to consider their own intersectional experiences as readers, and actively work to build affirming meaning-making relationships with readers. To take this control, to wield the power of being a *published* writer in this constructive way, not only demonstrates *OWG* writers' writerly prowess (thereby enhancing their writerly self-efficacy) but also showcases how writers and readers can work together to revise socially constructed notions of who gets to read and be read.

For example, by explaining to readers the purpose of, inspiration for, and rhetorical/ literary strategies used in a piece in their memos, writers in *OWG* did not make assumptions about what readers do and do not know. For example, Dean's writer's memo for "I arm wrestled racism" went into deep detail about the WWE wrestling match that inspired his poem. By explaining these things to their readers, members of *OWG* published in *OWG Oracle* demonstrate that it's okay for readers to not share their same experiences, background knowledge, etc. Instead, Dean pulled the curtain back on the WWE wrestling match he watched to help readers better enjoy his instructive poem. When *OWG* writers made moves like this in their writer's memos, they demonstrated that their writing is not just for their personal benefit but to benefit the community of readers their pieces reach. Claudia's memo for "Letter to Squanto" did this by sharing what she learned from a particular group meeting: she specifically mentioned using terms introduced during a session facilitated by Heaven about Thanksgiving and the Wampanoag Indians throughout her piece. Overall, the writer's memos made clear that the pieces in each issue of *OWG Oracle* were written by individuals who have intersectional identities that influence what they write and how they write it. The information shared in writer's memos clarifies that each piece is reflective of individual experiences and ideas helping level the playing field between the writers and any readers who may have different experiences and ideas.

Some *OWG* writers directly asked readers if certain rhetorical moves were successful and clarified the intent behind their pieces of writing in their writer's memos. For instance, Sol asked if readers were successfully transported to her wedding day in

her memo for “Lipstick.” In so doing, OWG writers established a more equitable and un-hierarchized relationship with their readers; they acknowledged that the success of their piece depends on both the reader and the writer— that the success of their piece was not only under the control of the writer. This relates back to OWG writers’ reasons for writing, which include to connect and share with others. The *OWG Oracle* writer’s memos emphasize connections and collaboration between readers and writers. This can be seen in Song’s encouragement for readers to let her story inspire them to dream, be creative, and get their rewards in her memo for “Symphony Boyd’s Award.”

Finally, OWG writer’s memos can directly engage readers in a discussion about emotions. I found this especially apparent in Miz’s writer’s memos, which explicitly engaged with feelings of fear, love, and doubt. For example, in her writer’s memo for “Out my Wind-ow,” Miz wrote, “In this poem, I’m asking you what the view is like, what’s it like? What exactly is your interpretation of my window? My view is fogged; I do not see myself the way you see me: I love that and it saddens me.” The memos in *OWG Oracle* explicitly worked against the disembodiment of words, ideas, and language from writers (and readers), and instead articulated and embraced the contexts that inspired each piece. As Miz wrote later in that same memo,

I have transitioned between various stages of self and the process continues to fascinate me. When a piece like this comes from a deeply humbling and painful process, it is beautiful to release, but more so, healing. This interpretation of myself no longer blocks the window OR my view AND the older version of me is no longer welcome to view. What is left is the imagination.

Therefore, writing and publishing writer’s memos in *OWG Oracle* helped members of OWG make strides toward kinder, more inclusive understandings of writers and writing that do not rely on hard and fast rules nor engage in hierarchized power dynamics through invocations of readers who were open, inclusive, and willing to meet writers where they were. And this is an empowering exercise: it yields “self-esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity,” as linguist Neville Alexander has written about (quoted in Baker-Bell 27). Publishing these memos alongside their entries in *OWG Oracle* empowered writers in OWG to share those more inclusive understandings of writers and writing with larger audiences, positioning them as rhetorically savvy authors. Via sharing their own thoughts, experiences, intentions, and questions in their memos, OWG writers engaged in acts of vulnerability that served as a foundation for building affirming meaning-making relationships with their readers. These affirming reader-writer relationships positively recast socially constructed ideas of who can read and write.

## Conclusion

In this article, I’ve explained how OWG’s community publishing efforts help the writing group’s adult undergraduates *feel* like writers by providing opportunities for them to invoke and interact with readers in an affirming, equitable way through writer’s memos. Data from the semi-structured interviews with OWG members suggest what

helps these adult undergraduate community writers feel like writers are generous and considerate readers. The examples from participants' writer's memos shared in this piece indicate how these writers instantiate such readers. This is further supported by data from collaborative field texts written by group members: OWG writers mention writing for others who feel challenged by society, others who are interested in political issues and equity, "the survivors of the world who were silenced and are now lost and found" (March 2021 Collaborative Field Text). Many times, OWG members expressed a desire to write for anyone who would read/ listen, and they understand their audiences to be "people like me and people like you. Anybody who appreciates writing, either written or vocalized and has a heart is who I write for" (March 2021 Collaborative Field Text). So, in addition to writing for other OWG members, their family, and their friends, writers in the group describe their audience as "any and everyone that desire change because we all dream and have faith for a better tomorrow" (April 2021 Collaborative Field Text). When they write for such audiences, they not only see themselves in their readers but can also exercise power as writers to connect with readers unlike them via their writer's memos. To exercise this power of being a *published* writer in this constructive way demonstrates OWG writers' writerly prowess, helping them *feel* like writers. Furthermore, this practice showcases how writers and readers can work together to revise socially constructed notions of who gets to read and be read, enacting important social change via community publishing.

Thus, through writing and publishing writer's memos alongside each of their pieces, members learn about themselves as writers, and upon learning about themselves as writers, OWG members more confidently self-identify as writers. As writers, then, they can create texts with social weight— texts that accomplish their goals, texts that can create change— and confidently share those texts with wider audiences, thereby undermining previous messages they received that implied that more, better, or different literacies can transform their lives (Graff). Instead, the literacies that writers bring to the group are enough; they are worthy of publication. OWG and its *Oracle* create space for adult writers with economic barriers to contribute to the world of writing by advocating for transformed perceptions of "good" writing and writers in their interactions within the group as well as their writer's memos specifically and their community publishing more broadly. That is, when discussing *why* we were publishing work and our identity and ethos as a group of writers, many members expressed a desire to "be real" with their work, to challenge readers to "transcend" judgment, to "be the future." This is not to say that OWG writers did not struggle to find a balance between being authentic, knowing that all writers make mistakes, and wanting *OWG Oracle* to be taken seriously by others with more stereotypical expectations. In the end, however, OWG writer Miz made a point about seeing "the survivor" in language with accents, pauses, typos, etc., and Dean pointed out that OWG is not a *class* with strict standards or curricular requirements, but a *community writing group* where the only mandates for their writing are the ones individuals impose on themselves. Thus, writing groups and community publications like ours offer opportunities to gain more confidence around the writing we produce and the processes we take to produce it. That is, Our Writing Group is a space where our unique individual writing

processes are not only accepted, but celebrated – and where our writing products are treated as important manifestations and representations of the identities and values we want to put out into the world.

I interpret these desires for the writing published in *OWG Oracle* as enacting the orientation change urged by writing studies scholar Steve Parks, who recommends moving from exchange value (or the exchange of one text for another) to use value (or value being determined by a communal process to determine a literacy product's use) in community publishing (524). Rather than simply wanting to put out a publication, the reflection prompted by composing writer's memos to accompany each of their pieces helped members of OWG decide how they wanted their publication to be used, what values it would espouse, and accordant editorial decisions. Thus, this orientation change has helped OWG develop a “model of aesthetic and cultural production that not only provides alternative cultural products for use inside and outside our classrooms, but also alternative systems of production for our students and community partners” (Parks 516). That is, the biannual publications are founded on a belief in “the right of communities to create their own aesthetic self-definitions” and serve to “[expand] access to the means of [literate] production” (Parks 516). OWG writers are in control of how they go public, what they go public with, why they go public, and take advantage of opportunities to learn how to do this public work themselves as a collective. Putting the power to go public in the hands of OWG writers themselves helps OWG revalue publication and the title *writer*, moving it from something only outside readers/ listeners determine to something that is collaboratively achieved between writers and readers. Such a reorientation to publishing one's writing helps empower OWG writers to go public with their writing on their own terms, which in turn helps enhance their writerly self-efficacy and encourages them to *feel* like writers.

Showcasing their work through publication and the explanatory space provided by writer's memos is one way that helps members of OWG feel like writers. This pedagogical practice helped the members of OWG build and demonstrate skills, knowledges, and discourses regarding writing and stimulated their active and positive invocation of and engagement with considerate, generous readers. I contend that the writer's memos authored by participants and published in *OWG Oracle* amplified the positive effects community publishing can have on writerly self-efficacy. OWG and *OWG Oracle* are opportunities for multiply-marginalized adult undergraduate writers to directly interact with their readers— to share their insights, truths, experiences, and lives with others through their writing. Members' writer's memos reveal that writers in Our Writing Group are intentionally arranging their words on the page to achieve desired effects, opening space and dialogue for readers to appreciate and interpret alongside the writers themselves. Thus, including writer's memos in community publishing efforts can have positive implications for writers themselves and reader-writer relationships in community writing, indicating that this pedagogical practice is useful beyond the composition classroom. The publication of writer's memos provides an important opportunity for writers to be recognized by themselves and others as just that: writers.

## Notes

1. I recognize and acknowledge that there is other important work in Writing Studies that helps us better understand adult writers' needs, desires, experiences, and even self-efficacy; however, I do not delve into that body of work because it is beyond the focus of this article, which is to explore the potential of *writer's memos in community publishing* for multiply-marginalized adult writers.

2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, including Quest and Our Writing Group (OWG). Participants of the writing group chose their own pseudonyms while I chose the pseudonyms for the group, our community partner, and all others.

3. To apply for admission into the Venture program, a prospective student must be at least 18 years old, have a high school diploma or GED/HSED, and demonstrate financial need (income at or near the federal poverty level).

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