Bridges, Not Towers: Connecting Universities and Local Communities for Community Writing Projects

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Abstract

It has been argued that by bridging the educational resources of institutions of higher education with local, community literacy initiatives, adult literacy can be promoted outside of the university while imparting teaching and learning experiences to the on-campus community. The purpose is not to impart the values of the Ivory Tower but to create bridges through collaborative work and dialogue to achieve social or political action for the community members. This thesis will show how writing centers can foster transformative community and public writing spaces using the Montclair State University’s Center for Writing Excellence Seminar for Lifelong Learners as a model.

For analysis and examination for community literacy work that can be accomplished by writing centers, I will explore a theory of community literacy based on the work of theorists such as Linda Flower and Elenore Long in order to define community literacy as both a field of inquiry and a political and social movement. I propose that the development of community literacy, through experiencing literature and developing as writers, has a meaningful and empowering effect on participants, thereby benefitting their communities. I further propose that community literacy, when structured through a university program, has a reflexive, mutually beneficial effect for participants and university staff. Universities find themselves in unique positions to offer educational experiences and personal development to those who live locally but are not part of their infrastructure. My interest is informed by the work of Peter Elbow, specifically his book *Writing Without Teachers*, which serves as a challenge
against traditional methods of teaching writing and a helpful guide for forming accessible writing groups and workshops. I will also incorporate work on collaborative learning by Kenneth Bruffee, which supports the practices of writer-centered approaches and what community participants bring with them when they enter a writing group. James Britton will also play a pivotal role with his scholarship on the cognitive value of “talk,” a critical part of community partnerships.

This research will present literature on community literacy to show what is already known, provide some primary resources on this subject, examine the extent that community literacy can serve as a vehicle for teaching writing, and propose best practices. By providing an alternative discourse, various perspectives and methods for meaning-making emerge within communities. By bridging reading and writing experiences to those outside the university, we can improve critical thinking through reading and writing in a way that is engaging and provides accessibility to personal development, with the ultimate goal of producing social action.

I will identify the elements of successful community literacy programs and the theories that shape them. I will then showcase an example of a well-known, model community literacy program, selected by how it embodies the theories I have examined. For this section I intend to use the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center as a model of a highly successful community literacy program. In addition to an in-depth review of the Center for Writing Excellence
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Seminar for Lifelong Learners, this study will conclude with the implications for creating community literacy partnerships.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

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by

Alicia Remolde

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Introduction: Why Study Community Literacy

Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. But while to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone—nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.


Carefully and effectively bridging the educational goals of institutions of higher education with local, community literacy initiatives can promote adult literacy outside of the university while imparting teaching and learning experiences to the on-campus community. The development of community literacy, through individuals experiencing literature and developing as writers, has a meaningful and empowering effect on participants, thereby benefitting their communities. Community literacy projects can form bridges between outsiders and members of distinct and separated groups, uniting them in powerful ways that contribute to lifelong learning and meaning making. Individuals from the university will experience outsider identity when they enter community groups and members of community groups are often outsiders to the university. Community literacy, when structured through a university program, has a reflexive, mutually beneficial effect for participants and university members.

Universities find themselves in unique positions to offer educational experiences and personal development to those who live locally but are not part of their infrastructure. In turn, community literacy groups invite the university to join them in the world outside academia, to see how its ideas and goals apply to life outside the traditional college classroom. By building these bridges,
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boundaries are blurred; the knowledge, experiences, and lives of community members contribute to the knowledge, experiences, and lives of university students and staff, resulting in lifelong learning for all. More than a multicultural celebration of voices, the inclusion of outsider voices and knowledge changes perspectives and questions the goals, purpose, and privileges of the university. I believe that writing centers are especially well suited to become sites of community literacy, in the form of writing groups within and beyond campus walls. Furthermore, by devoting resources to community literacy projects, writing centers can fulfill their missions in enhanced, meaningful ways. Through its community writing partnerships, the Center for Writing Excellence, for example, provides a reflective response to Montclair State University’s mission statement, as stated on its website:

The University will play a role beyond the campus community, partnering and collaborating at the local, state, national and international levels to make positive contributions to addressing issues of importance to society . . . and to share the rich array of intellectual and cultural resources of the University with the people of New Jersey. (Montclair State University, 2002)

How we interpret literature is determined by social and cultural forces, so by bridging reading and writing experiences to those outside the university, we can improve critical thinking through reading and writing in a way that has appeal and provides accessibility to personal development. Community participants benefit from skills they can apply to interpreting and analyzing the world around them.
My rhetorical model is largely informed by the work of Peter Elbow, specifically his book *Writing Without Teachers*. I will also incorporate work on collaborative learning from Kenneth Bruffee. James Britton plays a pivotal role with the scholarship on the cognitive value of “talk.” I will present the research and literature on community literacy to show how it has developed historically. I will also learn to what extent community literacy can serve as a vehicle for teaching writing and propose best practices. I intend to identify and explain the theories that shape an understanding of community literacy and will end with an example of a community literacy site where these theories are exemplified. I will also examine community writing initiatives sponsored by Montclair State University's Center for Writing Excellence (CWE). In Chapter 1, I provide a survey of definitions and background to explore community literacy. Chapter 2, contains relevant pedagogical framework. Chapter 3 argues that writing centers can be effective sites for community literacy projects. Chapter 4 provides a case study of a successful community literacy project—the Center for Writing Excellence Seminar for Lifelong Learners.
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Chapter 1: Community Literacy—Definitions and Backgrounds

Defining community literacy is an important place to start in order to understand community literacy as a field of inquiry and a movement. Definitions of literacy often change depending on whether they are situated as critical literacy, cultural literacy, academic literacy or basic literacy. Of these, community literacy stems most directly from critical literacy, which is simply defined as the tools and knowledge to read and think about texts (with the reader as an active participant who questions and examines power relations) ideally resulting in transformation and social action. This definition of critical literacy is based upon Paolo Freire’s seminal work for literacy campaigns around the world, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2002). As one of the most influential and internationally recognized modern educational theorists, Freire’s work in adult education informs Pedagogy of the Oppressed, emphasizing learning as liberation from dominant, tyrannical culture. Social change and its relationship with writing is a primary factor in understanding community literacy.

Linda Flower, a key theorist of community literacy, defined community literacy along with Wayne Campbell Peck and Lorraine Higgins in their 1995 NCTE article, “Community Literacy.” Peck et al.’s definition of community literacy is a search for alternative discourse comprised of four aims that build upon historic and cultural traditions of public discourse. Of foremost importance, community literacy supports social change; writing is seen as a tool for action where problem-solving takes precedence over canonical texts (Peck et al., p. 205).
A second aim of community literacy is to counteract those who have the ability to speak the loudest and most frequently (those in power or privileged positions) by bringing diverse and often unheard perspectives into the public/political conversation, thereby supporting genuine, intercultural conversation. Writing is critical to the dialogue that allows for collaboration amongst multiple viewpoints that “seek out diverse perspectives of the purpose of reaching mutual aims” (Peck et al., p. 205). The definition of community literacy requires another layer, however, since it aspires to do more than achieve a basic representation of various viewpoints. Ultimately, the third aim of community literacy is to “bring a strategic approach to this conversation and to support people in developing new strategies for decision making.” To do so, the conversation is restructured into a collaborative action where individuals share expertise and knowledge by planning and writing about jointly defined problems (Peck et al., p. 205). Inquiry is the fourth aim of community literacy as defined by Peck et al. More than a simple acknowledgment that one’s ways differ from others, true inquiry operates outside the binary of me/you or us vs. them. Inquiry actively explores the logic of how you and I use our literate practices to make meaning where diverse practices are not good or bad but rather good for or insufficient for the purposes in question (Peck et al., p. 205). The definition of community literacy presented in the article “Community Literacy” embodies a vision of an alternative discourse that attempts to find balance in the space where civic and personal life meet while working against polarizing, unjust, and inequitable social forces.
The definition of community literacy by Peck et al. is seen in an examination of the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This center is rooted within the settlement house movement, which began in England in the late 1800s and then spread to cities in the United States. The settlement house movement was motivated by a vision of social change through inquiry and politically self-conscious cultural interaction (Peck et al., p. 201). Linda Flower would continue to explore the facets of community literacy in her book, *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (2008), where she examines the various (literal and symbolic) versions of community. In regard to universities and community literacy initiatives, Flower shows that institutional practices have their own role in community literacy, and her work is informed by John Dewey’s theories and vision of progressive education. Flower’s definition of community literacy (that builds upon the 1995 article) combines Dewey’s progressive education ideas with Freire’s reflective classroom practices, and Ira Shore’s essay, “What is Critical Literacy?” (1999). Flower narrows down an explanation of community literacy to the following three key components. First, “An intercultural dialogue with others on issues that they identify as sites of struggle. Community literacy truly begins its work when community folk, urban teens, community supporters, college-student mentors, and university faculty start naming and solving problems together” (2008, p. 19). Second, “It does its work by redefining and constructing a more public dialogue across differences of class, culture, race, discourse, gender, and power shaped by the explicit goals of discovery and change” (2008, p. 19). Third, “In this rhetorical model, community
literacy is a site for personal and public inquiry and theory building” (2008, p. 19). So for a community literacy project to be effective, goals must be defined cooperatively, dialogue must be reshaped and rebuilt to encourage progressive action and transformation, and the project must serve as a tangible presence that makes ideas and theories real. A community literacy project that follows Flower’s model is consciously constructed to be inclusive, diverse, and collaborative.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries universities in the United States would undergo significant changes in demographics as well as purpose. As education become democratized, people of various backgrounds entered universities at higher rates and increased the interest in the needs of all parts of society (Long, 2008, p. xiii). In the post-World-War-II and Civil-Rights eras, universities became increasingly engaged with community issues and what became known as “urban missions”; composition and rhetoric programs have not surprisingly engaged with community projects where ordinary citizens gain public voice (Long, 2008, p. xiii). This period marks a significant point in the field of community literacy since it was a shift in the goals of composition and institutions of higher education where the goals had previously been to prepare students for academic success as well as the professional success that should follow. Composition programs and universities had more reason to look outward and engage with the issues in their local communities, and public engagement now had a major role. In her analysis of community literacy studies, community literacy projects, and potential pedagogies, Elenore Long (2008) notes the
importance of understanding the “community” in community literacy as discursive sites where ordinary people go public (p. 15). Long (2008) further explains community from a rhetorical perspective where community refers not to existing geographic locales but to symbolic constructs enacted in time and space around shared needs, known as “local publics” (p. 15). These communities are consciously and purposefully constructed around “distinct rhetorical agendas” which Long says range from socializing children into appropriate language use (Trackton’s street theater) to eliciting stakeholders’ perspectives on a shared problem (Pittsburgh’s community think tank) to demanding respect under conditions that lack it (Angelstown’s shadow system) (Long 2008). It seems important to note that an attempt to locate community literacy cannot depend on one standard version or theoretical underpinning. While most interest in community literacy is inspired by ethical visions of change, those specific goals and visions vary. Long (2008) compares the visions of several well-known community literacy scholars.

Flower anchors her vision in Reinhold Niebuhr’s “ethics of love and justice” . . . a “spirit of stubborn generosity . . . that acknowledges the undeniable—the social and economic substructures of power, racism, of identity that will not be erased by goodwill.” Coogan anchors his vision in West’s “love ethic” that is neither sentimental nor culturally separatist. Affiliated with Karl Marx, Cushman’s vision upholds “reciprocal relations” as a standard for “ethical action in the research paradigm to facilitate social change.” Rooted in Ernest Bloch’s utopian ideal, Paula
Mathieu's street-based literacy projects enact “hope”—a gesture that seeks to move out of abstractions about a better world toward actions devised to change the current world. Inspired by Alinsky, Goldblatt's vision is “the promise of true mutual benefits for postsecondary schools and their off-campus partners.” (pp. 25-26)

The implication of vision is critical to the goals and purpose of any community literacy project. The work of these scholars provides a method to enter the community literacy field, which is heavily dependent on ideology. Long (2008) further explains that despite the numerous differences in language, politics, and theoretical orientations, the thing these scholars share is their attraction to the potential of local publics to dismantle university/‘white’ privilege and to reconfigure writing instruction outside the academic classroom in terms of mutual learning, linguistic and cultural diversity, and rhetorical action (p. 26). I had not considered the critical nature of the theoretical foundation that needs to support community writing projects before conducting this research; I am unsure if I was even aware of the various ideological differences within the field. After conducting this research, I see the obvious necessity for having a solid theoretical framework behind any such project. If community literacy partnerships aim to dismantle university-white privilege by repurposing and repositioning writing instruction outside the academic classroom as Long proposes, these partnerships can move closer to Freire's vision of a world where education imparts freedom and empowerment. I now understand that a solid theoretical framework is essential for such partnerships if learning and knowledge are to be a source of
power that contributes to the struggle for agency and democracy.

Since the role of the university in community literacy projects is inseparable from the practice of teaching and learning, pedagogy must be carefully implemented in any project. Much of the scholarship on community literacy focuses on service-learning courses, where students work with public groups under the guidance of a university instructor and a community member who usually has a coordinator or supervisory role in the organization. Long provides a model for five distinct kinds of relevant pedagogies which she borrows from Thomas Deans’ NCTE publication *Writing Partnerships* (2000) which argues that community literacy pedagogy is noted because of its emphasis on “writing with the community” in contrast to other service-learning pedagogies where students write in or for the community (Long, 2008, p. 48). The five community literacy pedagogies are:

1. interpretive pedagogies: students venture somewhere new, building relationships to confront and to revise familiar stereotypes;
2. institutional pedagogies: students learn professional research methods to elicit and represent the interests and expertise of community residents;
3. tactical pedagogies: students learn to circulate their own public writing that challenges the status quo; these often boisterous public acts activate shadow systems that mimic and critique the dominant culture;
4. inquiry-driven pedagogies: students learn to deliberate pressing social issues with community partners; they circulate documents that serve as catalysts for social change; and
5. **performative pedagogies**: students learn to engage as rhetors with others to gain the practical wisdom required to build inclusive communities for effective problem solving. (Long p. 48)

By identifying the specific guiding philosophy and strategies used by students and educators, the goals for community literacy projects will be not only more clearly defined but also more achievable. We must consciously understand *what* we are doing but also *why* we are doing it. Long states the importance of theory and practice building on work by Flower in “Community Literacy,” Simmons and Grabill in “Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places: Invention, Performance, and Participation,” and Swan in “Rhetoric, Service, and Social Justice.” The significance of careful analysis and investigation into the practices of community-university partnerships is required to attempt successful projects that move beyond mandated exercises in service learning or brief forays off-campus by university staff that result in fragile, unsustainable projects. As Long argues, “taken together, these pedagogical practices stress that for college students, going public entails not only crafting one’s own public arguments, but also assessing one’s institutional position and from that position listening to and representing the expertise, interests, and agency of others” (2008, p. 48). Long’s point here is relevant for any university participant in a community literacy project. In order to best serve the community, a significant amount of background work must be completed to identify and clarify theoretical, philosophical, pedagogical, and logistical positions and goals.

Scholarship on community literacy indicates the authoritative roles of
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universities. Such authority harbors values, agendas, and the dangers of exporting knowledge and practices into public groups without responding to specific community needs. Community literacy scholars are understandably wary of any project that consciously or unconsciously attempts to superimpose ivory tower beliefs or academic systems onto community groups and participants. Writing centers, however, can operate outside these concerns because their missions to help writers, and their frequent positioning in the margins of academia allow them entry that is independent from the constraints of service learning goals. The ability to help the writers of the university aligns with the needs of writers in the outside community.

The majority of the scholarship on community literacy and university-related projects focuses on undergraduate service-learning or Writing Across the Curriculum programs. A review of these types of projects is useful for writing centers looking to branch out into community writing projects. Knowing what off-campus work one’s university is involved with and what relationships already exist with specific groups will provide contacts and networks but will also help writing center administrators decide what areas to research. At Montclair State University, the Center for Community Engagement website (2015) defines service learning as “a form of experiential education which links academic study to real world experiences in community settings. It fosters civic responsibility by focusing on critical, reflective thinking and an appreciation of larger social issues inherent in a democracy.” Since the goals of various service-learning programs across the United States share similar goals and values, they can be valuable
The Center for Writing Excellence at Montclair State University, which will be used as a case study in the last chapter of this thesis, has not used the service-learning model for its community writing groups. CWE writing consultants are extensively trained graduate students or those have received advanced degrees and have worked with writers or writing in professional capacities. CWE writing groups aim for participants to see lifelong learning through writing as a goal of the program; continuity and staff leadership are two important elements that contribute to the success of its programs. Furthermore, by giving autonomy to the CWE, it is not limited to constraints from other departments or programs and curriculum, outcomes, and assessments are fully aligned with the CWE’s mission and goals. Writing centers, like the CWE, can examine and transfer their best practices and experience working with writers into broader settings with diverse groups who will represent a spectrum of needs, backgrounds, and experience with writing.

The perception that the services of Montclair State University’s Center for Writing Excellence (CWE) should be extended to local taxpayers is an argument that has been presented numerous times by community members seeking writing assistance. The CWE’s main focus is to provide services to the on-campus community of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and alumni, in addition to participants of CWE sponsored off-campus writing groups. Housed within Academic Affairs in the Office of the Provost, the CWE is not dependent on a departmental budget and uses grant funding to supplement its community
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literacy initiatives. To extend services to the residents of the two large counties where the campus is geographically located, in addition to the entire state, however, is far beyond the current resources and capability of the CWE. An off-campus satellite location or on-campus program specifically structured to meet the non academic needs of writers would require significant funding so as to not interfere with the services required by Montclair State University’s writers. The need is present, as evidenced by the frequent emails and phone calls asking for writing classes for adults in the midst of career changes, immigrants, students with insufficient support at other academic institutions, and other writers seeking support in various areas.

A search for free community writing programs in Essex and Passaic counties returned a serious deficit of visible resources aside from two creative writing groups, Writing from the Heart at the Ringwood Public Library and The Write Group, a writer’s support group/social club that meets at various locations in Montclair, NJ. While the existence of these two groups is encouraging for an investigation of local community literacy initiatives, they are hardly sufficient for such heavily populated and diverse areas of the state. Additionally, these groups do not appear to support literacy initiatives beyond writers gathering to share their own work, mostly creative in nature. Universities, like public libraries, are often seen as resources for community-related projects, the difference being that universities function through service-learning courses and programs. Another key difference is that university staff can offer programs based in theory and pedagogy, supported by professional teaching experience. Writing centers
especially, can use their models for working with writers in an academic setting and restructure their approaches to fit the needs of community writing groups and projects.
Chapter 2: Pedagogical Framework

When considering a pedagogical framework for working with writers in community settings, the work of researcher and theorist James Britton is essential. Britton asks us to examine the role of teachers in teaching writing and how writing, reading, speaking and listening symbiotically work together. Britton’s concepts, based on the cognitive value of “talk,” are critical to community literacy programs resulting in useful strategies for teachers, students, and community participants. For Britton, language is the means by which we create the world, illustrating why language is so important in the classroom. If we see the “classroom” as any space where literacy goals are enacted, we can easily apply a pedagogical framework that works in the academic classroom to that of a community writing project. In *Language and Learning*, Britton states that language is the primary means by which human beings symbolize experience. If language, embodied through the practices of talk and writing, and talk *about* writing, these concepts, while hardly new, must be a formative part of any community writing curriculum and its goals. Meeting the needs of community participants may involve a shift from the academic discourse of the university to “the language of ordinary, informal face-to-face talk” (Britton, 1993, p. 28). Writing center staff are experienced translators of academic discourse for inexperienced or confused students, international students, and other members of their on-campus communities on a daily basis. It is not only their work and experience working with writers that prepares them to bridge communication between campus and community, but their ability to serve as helpers, engaged
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audience, listeners, advocates, and translators of discourse. Writing center staff serve as translators and key holders to ivory tower values and practices who can operate within and outside the structure, transforming ideals through accessible language and support of literacy goals and writing practice.

Much of Britton’s work focuses on the development of writing abilities in children; as a theoretical framework for working with writing groups who may have limited experience with writing or writers who may be more familiar with writing as a solitary act with limited literacy benefits, Britton’s work provides a clear position from which working with community participants can be viewed. The goal for community writing projects should not involve assessment of product, rather the experience of writing that meets the writers needs and engages literacy outcomes. As Britton notes in his examination of spectator and participants roles necessary for reflective writing development, many of the features we find in poetic discourse (the language of literature) we find also widely distributed in many other forms of discourse (Britton, 2011/1982). This equalizing treatment of discourse reflects the far-reaching influence and hope that Britton, along with his colleague and friend Nancy Martin, sought to achieve throughout their careers. Gordon Pradl (2004), retired professor of English Education at NYU, who worked closely with Britton and Martin, summarizes, “the best way of honoring the memory of Nancy and Jimmy is to continue the struggle for democracy and the kinds of engaged literacy that make it possible” (p. 525).

The work of Britton and Martin, as Pradl notes (2004), has implications
that reach far beyond the teaching and learning of school-aged children and which
deftly applies to the work that can be done through university-community
partnerships:

By questioning the social order, they sought to empower those who
traditionally have been underserved in Western societies. If there is to be
fair and equitable access to the fruits of our economic culture, then each
student must be able to exercise the cognitive powers made possible by
actively deploying language, both talk and writing. What Jimmy and
Nancy tirelessly cultivated in England, and eventually around the globe,
involved listening intensely to all students and then providing rich
materials and a wide range of engaging performance opportunities.

(p. 525)

Pradl’s chapter “Learning Listening” in *The Word for Teaching is Learning*
(1988) highlights the deceptively simple tools needed for all students, including
the lifelong learners found in community writing groups, who may be students of
life, yet are not classroom students in the traditional sense. A third and equally
important tool used in the CWE as well as in its writing groups is active and
responsive listening. Reflecting on Britton’s work, Pradl (1988) reminds us that
“the continuing challenge of teaching/learning involves creating the right
conditions of mutually intended attention, which inevitably leads us to the
imperatives of the relationship—of dominance and control, of sharing and trust,
of collaboration and cooperation” (p. 33). Following in the footsteps of Britton,
the CWE focuses on language and learning through writing, of which listening is
a crucial part. In an attempt to balance an authoritative, dominant role (both perceived and real) with a writer/participant-centered group, actively and constantly practiced talk, listening, and collaboration have resulted in the group’s cooperation, sharing, and trust—resulting in lasting and meaningful experiences. Talk and listening become more than tools for relationship building and successful classes; they become a much more powerful act of “taking in the other’s world” and “caring for the expression of the other” (Pradl, 1988). More simply put, “In a good conversation, the participants profit from their own talking, from what others contribute, and above all from the interaction—that is to say from the enabling effect of each upon the others. It is for these reasons an important mode of learning” (Britton, 1970, pp. 239-240). To extend the importance of the concept of talk, when writing centers work in community writing groups that represent underserved populations such as senior citizens, the taking in of the other’s world and caring for the expression of the other allows for significant contributions to lives beyond academia. At the same time this work extends the opportunities of the university, offering learning to all, even those not enrolled and paying for college courses.

An upcoming chapter will illustrate the CWE’s community writing group work in the Seminar for Lifelong Learners and how the role of talk in any community writing group may be the most crucial element for the group’s successful outcomes. Through dialogue and individual engagement, be it between participants, facilitators or participants and facilitators, the work of the group is achieved. Writing cannot exist or develop in isolation, nor can the needs of the
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group be met without thorough discussion, discovery, and observation by the group facilitators. Although the works takes the form of a writing group it is talk, listening, and collaboration that are at the heartbeat of the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. Britton’s work in *Language and Learning* (1970) remains useful to the work of writing groups despite its focus on language development in children. Drawing from theories of philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, the text contains insights for community participants who may be unfamiliar with the conventions of a writing seminar or writing group or for those unpracticed in sustained writing activity. Britton speaks to the relationships between language and experience, refining ideas and experiences through speaking, the entwined roles of participants and spectators and the handling of those experiences, and the development of language and thought. For adults, the seemingly intuitive practice of language and meaning making (through talking and writing), relies upon the childhood development of language and learning; the role of the social functions of speech is as relevant for the communal writing group participant as the adolescent negotiating her identity as she learns about the hierarchical and collective structures of society (Britton, 1970). The work of theorists such as Britton and Elbow (1998) may seem outdated in the current high-tech world of digital practice and pedagogy, of sounds bites and memes, however, the lasting truths of careful and thoughtful interaction with writers (whatever their level of ability) as individuals with valuable knowledge to share with the world through writing, cannot be ignored.

Kenneth Bruffee’s 1984 article “Collaborative Learning and the
‘Conversation of Mankind’ is critical to an understanding and practice of collaborative learning in the classroom, whether that classroom is inside or outside of the university. Bruffee’s work builds upon the theories by the philosopher and political theorist Michael Oakeshott (1962) and the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978): “the human conversation takes place within us as well as among us, and that conversation as it takes place within us is what we call reflective thought” (1984, p. 639). The connection to Britton’s work seems undeniable and it is arguably the act of writing and sharing writing that created an explicit connection: “Writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation” (Bruffee, 1984, p. 642). Although Bruffee is focused on the college student’s participation in and transition from normal to academic discourse, the concept of conversation and collaboration as transformation applies to the broader scope of community writing groups.

Collaborative learning is another aspect of the community literacy “classroom” whose value should not be ignored. Working with others, sharing knowledge, expertise, and understanding, and communicating ideas is integral to the outcomes for community literacy. The empty vessel/lecture style class is too passive and archaic for any classroom and should certainly not be replicated in the space of a community literacy project. As Bruffee (1984) importantly notes through his discussion of Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) trail-blazing and frequently cited work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, “knowledge must be a thing we make and remake. Knowledge is maintained and established by communities of
knowledgeable peers. It is what together we agree it is, for the time being” (p. 646). This is exactly what happens when collaborative learning succeeds, allowing for knowledge to be created and then evolve and change. Bruffee believes that knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation. Education is not a process of assimilating ‘the truth’ but a process of learning to “take a hand in what is going on” by joining “the conversation of mankind” (p. 647). Collaborative learning allows for different personal knowledges to experience each other through active participation and creating or remaking a new understanding based on the intersections of those various knowledgeabilities (each student is a resource because of their knowledge and experience in different communities). Bruffee’s article shows us that collaborative learning provides the space for a negotiation of beliefs/knowledge/truth and works against problems of replicating particular values instead of allowing for meaning making. Bruffee’s work on collaborative learning offers an ideal place to contextualize the work of community literacy, specifically in writing centers, which are already positioned and designed to help writers before they enter their local communities.
Chapter 3: Sites of Community Literacy: the Role of Writing Centers

Just as writing centers can take various shapes and forms with diverse missions and purpose, community literacy centers likewise vary in scope. By their very nature writing centers serve as literacy sites for their campus communities although they may not explicitly define themselves as such. An in-depth study of community writing centers, how they were structured, and their impact on college education in the United States provides a beneficial and informative survey. One exemplary community writing center has been identified that serves as a model for higher education literacy centers: the Community Writing Center at Salt Lake Community College (CWC) in Salt Lake City, Utah. The CWC was the first of seven writing centers (as of 2014) to receive the CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence and the only writing center named and listed as a community writing center (NCTE, 2015). Of the six other writing centers who have received the CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, three show clear evidence of community writing projects: St. John’s University and the University of Connecticut, along with Montclair State University’s CWE.

At St. John’s University, the Writing Center director, associate directors, doctoral fellows, faculty, and consultants are “actively engaged” in several community outreach programs. Their six current programs work with high schools, each with its own goal. Goals include preparing high school students for college-level writing, setting up a high school writing center, and working with administrators and teachers on writing pedagogy. Additionally, the St. John’s
writing center previously had a community outreach program with Bread and Life Soup Kitchen and Community Center in Brooklyn, New York. Twice each month writing consultants lead writing/literacy workshops for Bread and Life guests: “Workshops center on fostering an outlet for the guests’ voices, which can often go unnoticed” (“Community Outreach,” 2015). Although no longer active, this program aimed to provide “practical employment-related writing exercises” whose purpose was to “empower the guests to move forward in their lives and deal with their hardships and hurdles.” Other past projects include five additional high school programs working with students or teachers to foster writing literacy (“Community Outreach,” 2015). The University of Connecticut has conducted community outreach programs with area high schools and middle schools since 2005. On its webpage, the University Writing Center states, “Part of the reason that public land grant universities like UConn were founded was to serve their state and regional communities. The University Writing Center carries on that spirit of service through our collaborations with Connecticut middle and high schools” (2015). The Writing Center partners with the Connecticut Writing Project (a site of the National Writing Project) and area schools to create and develop writing centers based on writing across the curriculum, peer tutoring, and writing as process. Concerning its vision for its community outreach, the University Writing Center states, “The writing centers we envision do not work on a deficit model of remedial education but instead enrich a school culture where writing and revision are valued” (“Writing Center High School Outreach,” n.d.). Partnering with one
school each year, as of September 2015 the University Writing Center has launched eight peer tutoring centers at high school and middle schools. As explained in a recent online story in the *Hartford Courant* 's “From the Community” section, the most recent collaboration with UConn’s Writing Center took place at Two Rivers Magnet Middle School, a science and technology magnet school, located in East Hartford, Connecticut. The tutoring center will be located in the school’s library and staffed by students with teacher supervision. Except for standardized testing days, the center will be open each day for students and teachers.

The writing centers at St. John’s University and the University of Connecticut provide models that illustrate responses and commitments to the needs of their local communities, a critical component for any community writing center. The CWC lists four other community writing centers on its Links page that provide notable models for examination: the Writing Center at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 826 Valencia in San Francisco (a nonprofit organization not attached to an institution), the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University, and the Community Literacy Program at the University of Washington (Salt Lake Community College, 2015). Although the internet may be an obvious place to begin researching community writing and literacy initiatives, it serves best as an initial stepping stone due to the limited nature of university websites. For more thorough investigations into specific programs, researchers are advised to contact writing center administrators directly. Through her research of communication in higher education Melinda
Knight (1999) advises critical assessment of online resources in her article, "Management Communication in US MBA Programs: The State of the Art." Community literacy center websites are few and far between; the majority of website info is generally listed as writing center outreach. “Despite the dominance of the Web as the preferred channel for delivering information, many program websites were extremely difficult to navigate. . . Some websites served primarily as marketing tools and not as resources for specific information” (p. 14). Aside from the CWC's website, a distinct lack of information about community writing centers is available online. Even the CWC provides a surface level understanding of the depth of its work. One may spend a great deal of time searching for relevant information that is not readily apparent or simply not available through the Internet. The lack of online resources should not be a deterrent as there is much excellent scholarship available in print. The websites that are available, while lacking in practical information, can still provide insights into possibilities for the initiatives of other centers.

A critical component to successful community writing centers is undoubtedly the relationship between theory and practice. Writing centers can employ mission statements to explain the ideological foundations that shape their practices. Mission statements are not treatises on “what we do” and serve instead a more important role, which is to share purpose with the communities that they serve. While mission statements may say what their centers have to offer, they are not about logistics, but beliefs; beliefs about writing, learning, and the purpose of their centers. Mission statements can serve as a platform between theory and
practice and are critical for programs to serve not only their institution’s community but the broader communities that await them beyond their college campuses. Peter Elbow’s work in *Writing Without Teachers* (1998) is a useful place to examine how theory and practice inform each other while offering specific strategies for working with writers. While teaching at M.I.T. during the 1960s, Elbow volunteered, teaching evening adult writing courses in Boston’s Black community (Elbow, 1998, p. xix). It was his volunteer work that helped him develop his theory and practice since this is where he began to experiment with teacherless writing groups. It took Elbow years to be able to use his theory to improve his practice and it may take writing programs time to do the same. Mission statements, however, can be useful places to begin.

One such example (that could be found in most writing centers) can be seen in mission statement of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center. It states,

> The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Writing Center helps undergraduate and graduate students in all disciplines become more effective, more confident writers. We believe that writing is a powerful tool not only for communicating existing ideas but also for discovering new ones; that learning to write is a life-long process; and that all writers benefit from sharing work in progress with knowledgeable, attentive readers. (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012)

Like most university writing center mission statements, the community that the writing center serves is identified, followed by beliefs about writing. If we
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remove the specific campus community of undergraduate and graduate students, what remains is a mission that could serve any one who writes, inside or outside the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The belief that "writing is a powerful tool not only for communicating existing ideas but also for discovering new ones; that learning to write is a life-long process; and that all writers benefit from sharing work in progress with knowledgeable, attentive readers" can serve as a platform to take these important ideals out into the world and serve the communities that surround the university (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012). The mission statement of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Writing Center directly reflects the work of Freire, Long, and Bruffee, and easily translates into justification for off-campus initiatives for the writing center.

If a writing center and its university believe that it should use its significant influence and resources to promote values such as literacy, then identifying the beliefs it currently holds and applying those beliefs to the larger community it is part of stands as a critical first step. Mission statements can be problematic if the university does not reflect it goals and values in its practices. Interesting to note is that many writing centers embrace shared values and attributes, arguably positioning them as university programs that can best make literacy inroads into their local communities. As Isaacs and Knight found in their article, "Bird’s Eye View of Writing Centers" (2014), "Mission statements can be valuable indicators of an institution’s public face and the practices embraced" (p.51). Their survey of 97 schools with writing centers showed that 100% of those schools had mission statements or statements that functioned as such.
Furthermore, they note the similarities among the mission statements since the mission statements may “reflect shared values.” Writing centers are often staffed by those who understand and value helping writers and it is not difficult to see how writing center mission statements reflect those values. “Mission statements ideally reflect what an organization perceives itself to be doing, its goals, and how it intends to achieve these goals” (p. 51). Programs wishing to create community literacy projects and centers are advised to closely examine their university’s mission statement and the mission statements of similar on-campus programs such as community outreach centers or service-learning programs. Writing centers can then compare their own mission statements or goals to those throughout the university. Aligned goals that create connections that reverberate throughout the on-campus community can provide networking, contacts, and resources for community writing and literacy initiatives.

Not every center will have the necessary resources to build bridges into their off-campus communities, however I believe that in the space where theory and practice meet and inform each other, there is also room for writing centers to include work that can benefit writers beyond the writing center’s walls. Community writing centers need a well-developed mission/theory that informs their practice and the two should reflexively and continually work together. In their article “Centering Community Literacy: The Art of Location within Institutions and Neighborhoods” Michael H. Norton and Eli Goldblatt argue that the most crucial consideration for university/community literacy partnerships is “the institutional positioning of a project in both its campus home and its
Sometimes a “center” for community engagement is not particularly central to all parties on a campus interested in literacy. Other times a project may be heavily involved in a sector of a community but contribute relatively little to the postsecondary school in which it is housed. Indeed, no initiative can be all things to all groups on and off campus, and the term “center” may ultimately be misleading. (2010, p. 34)

Norton and Goldblatt’s ideas on location and space illustrate an important aspect of community writing centers. The ideal community writing center needs to play multiple roles and showcase various guises to fulfill its mission and remain a viable project. A successful community writing center should be clear on how it benefits the communities it works with, how it contributes to the climate and outcomes of its institution, and how it represents its initiatives and outcomes to the public—which may consist of current and future donors, other community writing centers and universities, current and future writing partners, and the wider world through its Internet presence. Community writing centers need to have reciprocal relationships in order to survive; institutional support is critical for resources, reputation, and support. The projects themselves cannot be created without acceptance, need or desire from local groups. And writing centers themselves need highly trained, dedicated staff who believe in the work; this may be the most critical tool in the community writing center’s toolbox.

Another imperative tool for the ideal higher level education literacy center or community writing center is a well-developed website. In fulfilling its various
roles, the ideal community writing center will showcase its past and current
writing partnerships along with resources and direct information about who it is
and what it does. Besides a clearly defined Mission Statement, the work of the
community writing center and the groups that have access to their programs must
be transparent. The website plays a pivotal role for the community writing center
as it serves as the public face and representation of the community writing center
to its institution, its partners, and its community, both on and off campus. In my
research, I often had to thoroughly search through writing center websites for
their community outreach sections. Many of the community outreach pages were
underdeveloped, not clearly defined, and failed to give direction to groups and
individuals on how to work with writing centers on future projects/partnerships. I
believe that the invitation as well as an explicit statement of purpose is necessary
for both community writing centers and writing centers who may not identify as a
“community writing centers” but have community outreach initiatives.

Community writing centers need not all take the same shape and form in
order to be viable, successful programs, although there are certain aspects that
should be consistent such as best practices for working with writers. The ideal
community writing center is in fact reflexive and responsive to the needs of its
institution and campus community as well as the off-campus groups with who it
partners. Sharing its work with both sectors is vital. Without the support of its
institution and members of the campus community, funding and resources will be
scarce, making viable programs impossible. Furthermore, community writing
groups simply cannot survive without the enthusiasm and dedication of writing
center staff to create, structure, develop, and support these initiatives. Writing centers need to provide clear goals and purpose for their work to garner support from both university and community administrators. The writing center ultimately becomes the voice of the community on campus, creates a bridged space off-campus in community places, and represents the university in the outside world. The writing center transforms the roles of the university and the community by connecting them in profound and meaningful ways, providing mutually beneficial outcomes.

One state of the art community writing center that stands out among its peers and is an example of the transformative role a writing center can hold within its community is the previously noted CWC in Salt Lake City, Utah. The CWC has a well-earned list of awards and publications earned since opening its doors in 2001. The CWC, organized and directed by college faculty, is the very first community writing center to exist in the United States and has been the model and inspiration for other community writing centers around the country. The programs are developed and run by students at Salt Lake Community College through volunteer work and service learning courses. Students from other local colleges and universities also participate in the work of the CWC, which has become an important resource of the larger Salt Lake City community. In 2005, the CLC moved its location into the Salt Lake City Library to better fulfill its mission of serving Salt Lake City. Fully supported by Salt Lake Community College, "Partnering the Community Writing Center with the City Library seemed a natural fit, a collaboration that would serve the city's residents in ways that
neither of us could do alone” (Salt Lake Community College, 2015). The goals and values are stated in their mission statement on the CWC website:

The SLCC Community Writing Center (CWC) supports, motivates and educates people of all abilities and educational backgrounds who want to use writing for practical needs, civic engagement and personal expression. In addition to an open space available for writing, we provide opportunities to enhance writing abilities through such programs as Writing Coaching, Writing Workshops, the Diverse City Writing Series, Salt Lake Teens Write, and Community Writing Partners. These programs are open to all Salt Lake area residents. (2015).

This mission statement is not only descriptive (while remaining succinct), but it also presents the CWC as an established organization with diverse programs and events. The final line in the above quotation illustrates an important distinction between the resources available to the students of the CWC’s home institution (Salt Lake Community College) and the wider community of Salt Lake City.

The CWC has an impressive list of over one hundred “Writing Partners” consisting of community organizations, city agencies and governmental programs with who they have collaborated with to provide writing workshops and education for their clients, staff and volunteers. As explained on the CWC website, “Writing Partners are non-profit organizations, government agencies, businesses, and educational institutions that work with the CWC to address their writing needs. This service can be used to empower clients, staff, and volunteers through workshops and individual consulting. Topics range from grant and business
writing to creative writing and public service announcements” (2015). The CWC’s list of Writing Partners is impressive and is a helpful idea generator for other writing centers looking for a model of community outreach initiatives. Examples of the CWC’s Writing Partners are The Salt Lake City Public Library System, the Utah Humanities Council, the Salt Lake County Jail System, KUER FM90 radio station, the Disabled Rights Action Committee, the Rape Recovery Center, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, the Cancer Wellness House, and the Utah Department of Workforce Services. These Writing Partners are only a small sample of the wide-ranging scope of diverse groups and organizations with which the CWC has collaborated. The importance of this information is the scope of possibilities that is inspired and the model that is provided. An entire study can be done on the CWC alone. Tiffany Rousculp, the founding director and an associate professor at Salt Lake Community College, has written an extensive book detailing the CWC’s history, evolution, challenges, and contributions, which serves as a primary resource for other community writing centers: *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change at a Community Writing Center* (2014).

The CWC shows its commitment to being responsive and responsible to its institution and the Salt Lake City community by arranging for two committees that evaluate, develop and guide the CWC with its mission. The Academic Advisory Committee is comprised of educators from local higher education institutions and K-12 schools/districts who advise the CWC on innovative pedagogical approaches, facilitate opportunities for research and scholarship and explore avenues for student involvement in and through the CWC (Salt Lake
Community College, 2015). The Community Advisory Committee “is comprised of active community members and/or professional writers and editors who advise the CWC on innovative ways to achieve its mission of supporting, motivating and educating people of all abilities and educational backgrounds who want to use writing for practical needs, civic engagement and personal expression” (2015).

The incorporation of these two committees into the ongoing development of the CWC shows a commitment to the CWC itself and to the citizens that it serves. If, as Norton and Goldblatt argue, the most crucial consideration for university community literacy partnerships is “the institutional positioning of a project in both its campus home and its community base” then the CWC has achieved this both in physical location and ideological position (p. 32). The use of these committees reveals a responsive, reflective nature, that considers the knowledge and values of both the academic institution it belongs to and the local people that it serves. For a community writing center with the breadth and scope of the CWC, an advisory committee appears to be a necessary support for such a significant and sizeable operation.

In order for a university writing center to begin its own explorations into becoming a community writing center, it will need to conduct research to determine what is feasible. What may not be possible now, can become reality, but not without knowing what resources are needed. A critical first step is for the writing center to determine pre-existing literacy initiatives at its university; projects should not be duplicated and contacts may be obtained who will be helpful in defining the administration’s interest and commitment to such
endeavors. A second step for the writing center's leadership is to identify staff who have an interest in community outreach projects focusing on community literacy. A third step in the initial research process is locating contacts and possible groups that would be interested in writing partnerships. By researching these three initial aspects, a writing center can begin to identify what sort of work it can do in its community and decide if becoming a community writing center enhances and furthers its mission and values of helping writers.

Once a writing center finds itself able to begin working with community groups, it may want to start off with the vision of becoming a community writing center as the goal on the horizon while gaining experience from one or two beginning initiatives. The local goal of what these early programs will aim for may benefit from some commonality, although the groups themselves may be quite different. The Center for Writing Excellence (CWE) at Montclair State University, for example, is not yet defined as a community writing center but has worked with two separate groups that have allowed it to apply, redefine, and refine its work within the local off-campus community. By starting small with two groups, the CWE has been able to focus on careful practice and responsive approached to writing with community members, some who have no college experience or ties and others who have never written for personal reasons rather only for professional or academic purposes. The experience had with the Center for Writing Excellence Seminar for Lifelong Learners has been personally and pedagogically transformative for participating CWE staff. The response from
participating writers is the primary motivation for the ongoing status of both groups.
Chapter 4: Case Study—the Center for Writing Excellence Seminar for Lifelong Learners

Now in its fourth year, the Center for Writing Excellence Seminar for Lifelong Learners has had a surprising impact on its staff as well as the participants. In 2012, when the Director, Assistant Director, and a writing consultant began the initial planning, the potential for transformation was unrecognized, although the aspiration for a meaningful connection between the group and the CWE (and thereby the university) was always present. The CWE was focused on offering a community writing program based in theory and pedagogy, supported by professional teaching experience. The center took its model for working with writers in an academic setting and restructured the approach to fit the needs of writers working outside the university. The CWE’s writing groups aim for participants to see lifelong learning through writing as a goal of the program. The CWE has examined and transferred its best practices and experience working with writers into broader group settings off campus where there is a spectrum of needs, backgrounds, and experience with writing—not unlike the environment in its diverse on campus writing center.

Through experience and careful planning, the CWE has found that staff selection, leadership, and continuity are three important elements that contribute to the success of its programs. The CWE does not use a peer tutoring model, nor does it currently participate in Montclair State University’s Service-Learning Program. Writing consultants employed by the CWE are extensively trained graduate students and professional staff with advanced degrees who have worked
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with writers or writing in teaching or other professional capacities. Staff who participate in its writing groups are carefully chosen with several key elements in mind: an expressed interest in writing groups and/or community literacy, more than two years of experience as a writing consultant, and strong leadership skills with the ability to collaboratively work with diverse groups in off-campus settings. Staff who are able to participate for more than one seminar are prioritized, since the development of relationships has become a significant element of its writing groups.

The Seminar for Lifelong Learners has created a community literacy program that connects an off-campus group of senior citizens to the on-campus academic community. The CWE wanted to do more than send its staff into the community to meet and work with these writers. The CWE wanted to create a strong connection between the group and the university, inviting them to become a part of our campus culture, and the life of the writing center. The initial plan was for an annual summer workshop centered around the selection for the Montclair Book program, a common reading program for first-year students at Montclair State University. Introduced by Montclair State in 2011 and housed in the CWE, the Montclair Book program has created a beneficial, sustaining link for the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. The program, jointly sponsored by the Center for Writing Excellence, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the First-Year Writing Program, and Student Development and Campus Life, brings the authors and related speakers to campus for keynote events (which the Seminar for Lifelong Learners participants attend) while encouraging discussion
The book selection for the first Seminar for Lifelong Learners in 2012 was *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, the second year of the Montclair Book initiative. In the Seminar for Lifelong Learners, participants read and discussed the selection “alongside” entering first-year students who were assigned to read the book over the summer before starting classes their fall semester. The summer was chosen for the first year of the Seminar for Lifelong Learners, since many programs for senior citizens model traditional school calendars, with programs and services becoming less available during the summer months. Additionally, senior citizens may find themselves with more time on their hands as social groups and family members travel away during the summer.

Since 2012, the CWE has found that the Montclair Book selections have provided engaging springboards for discussions and writing activities in the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. Participants read books they may not have otherwise chosen and contribute significant insights connecting stories from the past to life today—the stories are both those found in the books and from their own lives. Additional Montclair Book selections include *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea and *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* by David Margolick.

Planning for the first seminar began with uncertainty. Staff did not have much knowledge of the number of participants, their experiences as writers, their interests, or their motivations for joining the group. The CWE did know that the participants were members of a large fellowship circle that met regularly throughout the year and that they knew each other as acquaintances but that was
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all. CWE staff scheduled regular meetings to begin planning goals and assignments for an eight-week seminar with an overview that was designed similar to a syllabus. Building on the participants’ experiences as readers and writers, writing tasks were designed to aid participants with developing strategies that would help them share their own life experiences through memoir writing. These memoirs would not necessarily be the writer’s “life story,” but rather the story of an important or defining moment from the writer’s life. Each participant would have the opportunity for feedback on his or her writing from the other participants as well as from CWE staff. Guidelines and goals were introduced to set a collaborative tone for the seminar. Besides discussing major themes in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, the seminar was focused on gaining insight through close reading, developing strategies for effective writing, and experience how writing leads to self-discovery.

The initial approach, while extensively planned out, was also experimental. CWE staff lacked the knowledge of what the participants were expecting, what participants would hope to gain from the seminar, and how the participants would respond to working with members of the university. CWE staff decided that by presenting the seminar in a traditional format, participants would not be discouraged or daunted by its newness or unfamiliarity. For organization and clarity purposes, an agenda was predetermined for each meeting. Predetermined discussion questions contextualize the agenda. While these questions are designed to “get the wheels turning,” the discussion usually takes its own course once the participants take control of the conversation. In the first third
of the seminar when focused on reading and writing about the text, questions are
designed that relate to the story and its issues. Later, the focus shifts to questions
about the writing process, both in general and for each individual writer.

While the seminar is focused on writing, the spaces where talk and
dialogue take place are where many of the most profound and lasting moments
occur. Although many of the participants knew each other for years (some for
decades), they shared that the seminar was finally allowing them to “get to know
each other,” establishing and defining new relationships and friendships. Some of
the participants now commute together for seminar meetings or meet for lunch
after. They have discovered common people, places, and experiences as well as
interesting differences. The participants often share personal anecdotes about
how the conversations and writing they do for the seminar extends into their
personal lives. The time before and after each session is also an important part of
each meeting that provides the opportunity for individual conversations between
participants and participants with CWE staff. Although deeply appreciative for
the opportunity to write about and share their lives, the participants often
comment on how they look forward to each meeting with the CWE staff, and to
hearing the work of the other writers.

After the discussion portion of the meeting, writing is produced in the
form of a guided freewrite, explained in the agenda. During the first few weeks
when the participants are still deciding on topics to write about, the freewriting
prompts are focused on events or specific items from the text that ask for their
reactions as readers. Later, prompts are created that relate to the participants’ life
experiences and larger themes presented in the book. The agenda changes form as the seminar progresses. When the workshop meetings appear later in the seminar, meetings begin with an activity to prompt reflection on the participants’ current drafts. A guide is prepared for responding as readers, and instructions for the following week are also included. Every agenda includes the goal for the following week’s draft, directions or a note for the next meeting. Each agenda is planned in advance in a collaborative effort by the participating CWE staff. Weekly preparation meetings review and discuss the previous seminar meeting and modify the goals of the next session in order to be responsive to the participants’ progress, needs, and interests. Strategies and theories in scholarship about writing groups, teaching writing, community literacy, and writing studies are included during preparation meetings. Research branches out into aging and memory to best support beneficial activities that can be incorporated into the seminar such as the Harvard Medical School study of adult development by George E. Vaillant, *Aging Well* (2002), and *The Nostalgia Factory* by memory specialist Douwe Draaisma (2013). CWE staff also find themselves investigating and sharing topics of interest to the participants. One summer included researching the history of tattoos since a participant wanted to write an essay about how tattoos can have deeper meanings and help people find belonging. Staff gave this writer a reading list of books she could find at her local library and online essays and learned more about the topic in order to sustain a dialogue about this writer’s topic of interest.

Each year the Seminar for Lifelong Learners offers new types of writing
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and in-class activities that model different ways to listen, interact with texts, recall events or memories, or think about writing. Participants enjoy the writing guides that are designed for them such as handouts on descriptive writing or adding details as well as activities like the mad libs poem or imagine the story behind the photo. As a result, the CWE staff is committed to making each seminar engaging, reflective, and relevant. Staff take turns leading the meetings and work together to design activities. Observations from each seminar meeting are shared which are useful to determining whether more time in required for a certain stage of the writing process. Each meeting is structured to guide the participants through the writing process while allowing for individual needs. The longer the CWE works with this group, the more knowledge they gain about the participants strengths and the types of reading, writing, and activities they enjoy the most; this helps staff plan an experience that supports the participants' enthusiasm for the seminar, as evidenced by their return over a four-year period.

Each seminar provides participants with peer feedback as well as staff responses. Two weeks of workshopping provide a variety of responses to their work, as participants are paired in small groups with different partners. Around the sixth week, staff obtain copies of the drafts so that a written response to each writer is provided the following week. The participants always express eager anticipation for their “letters,” as they call them. Although the participants embody a range of educational backgrounds, reading speeds, and writing experience, they have done well keeping up with each week’s assignments.

A core group of ten women have participated since the first year in 2012,
with additional participants coming and going each year. The Seminar for Lifelong Learners currently meets twice a year, at the request of the participants, who expressed the desire to continue meeting, writing, and working together with CWE staff. After two summers, the year in between the summer workshops became too long too wait—they had much more to write. So in 2014, the Assistant Director and two consultants who had been consistently participating in the summer seminars, started the winter workshops. The winter workshops meet for five weeks as opposed to eight weeks in the summer. Readings on a particular theme are provided, but the focus is on writing. Participants are free to choose their subject, however, staff have found that most enjoy engaging with the theme. Winter seminar themes have thus far included tradition and place.

Two culminating events are significant elements of the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. One of two culminating events is attendance at the Montclair Book keynote event. Held each fall, the author or related speaker addresses the campus community about his/her book. Hundreds of people from across campus attend this event. The Seminar for Lifelong Learners participants always remark on the special experience and excitement of attending a large event with so many students and meeting the authors. Their participation in the event has been received with interest and enthusiasm by the authors and speakers as well as the campus audience in attendance. The Montclair Book keynote event serves as a strengthening tie between the two often separated groups of students and senior citizens who have participated in work around the same book, have been thinking about similar issues, and are in that moment of the keynote, experiencing a text
together. Each year the newsletter of the fellowship group the participants belong to publishes a photo of the group’s attendance at the event.

A second culminating event is the final seminar meeting where participants read their compositions. Guests are invited to attend and the reading serves as a showcase of the work the participants have achieved during the seminar. Some will continue to work on their pieces while others will proudly submit their final drafts for publication. The reading is eagerly anticipated; a sense of accomplishment and community is felt by readers and audience alike, as evidenced by feedback given to CWE after each reading. Additionally, there is another element that has had a profound impact on the participants, and that is the publication of their writing. The final drafts from each seminar are printed as a collected body of work. Participants request multiple copies to share with families and friends, extending their work into their personal communities which makes a difference in their lives. Several participants have repeatedly discussed the importance of preserving their life stories for their families and how meaningful it has become. During a recent summer seminar, one participant shared with the group that she was surprised that even her young grandson enjoys her stories. After joining the group and writing about the past, more memories began to surface. As she shared them with her family, they wanted to hear more, as did CWE staff and other members of the seminar. This participant was especially touched when eight year old grandson remarked, “That was neat, Grandma. Let’s do that again.” They now have a regular date for story time.

Some participants have gone on to publish their pieces in neighborhood
newsletters. Others have won awards, such as the Essex County Division of Senior Services annual Senior Legacies Writing Contest, for pieces they began writing in the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. And some of the participants are seeking ways to publish the writing they have proudly accomplished in the Seminar for Lifelong Learners. Many are committed to continue writing the stories and memories of their lives, to leave behind for the families. From the perspective of CWE staff, it has been a transformative experience to work with this group. The participants have changed from an uncertain and sometimes hesitant group of writers to a group who eagerly awaits each seminar, is proud of being a part of the Montclair State community, continues to write outside the seminar, and now identifies themselves as “The Ner Tamid Authors.” At the end of each seminar, the CWE is asked to return. Their hope is that as long as the Ner Tamid Authors have stories to write and want the CWE to work with them, that they can continue to do so. In sum, there is a list of positive outcomes resulting from the Seminar for Lifelong Learners.

1. Long-term relationships have been established between the participants and the university.

2. Participants who have known each other for years as acquaintances established new personal friendships; some women had never spoken despite being part of the same fellowship circle.

3. Senior citizens ranging from age 70 to 94 have produced writing in new forms; the majority had never before written for personal or
creative reasons despite having stories they wanted to share with others.

4. Grant funding from an external donor is renewed to continue support of the seminar.

5. Participation from the local community is increased and extended through the Montclair Book program.

6. CWE staff develop solid practice in curriculum design and implementation for writing seminar goals.

7. The Young Writers Workshop, a second community writing seminar, was created for young writers at a local public library.

8. New research interests and professional activities are developed for CWE staff.
Chapter 5: Conclusions—Implications for Creating Community Literacy Partnerships

After a review of the scholarship, models, and the CWE’s experience with an ongoing local literacy partnership, the significance of the role of writing centers in establishing community relationships and sponsoring literacy is profound. Writing centers are uniquely positioned to act as sites of literacy and sponsor lifelong learning, especially for the underserved populations in university neighborhoods. As centers of learning, whose purpose is to assist writers so they can achieve their goals, writing centers have the training and ability to connect their universities and communities in ways that may not be accessible by other programs and departments. A one-size fits all template does not exist for a successful project, as writing centers will have varied limits imposed by funding, staffing, community response, and institutional support. Some programs may rely on service-learning models; others may be dependent on the outreach goals of their institutions. Some centers will have staff that can devote time and resources seeking grants and external funding; others will be limited by the demands of inexperienced or limited staff. Careful planning is required for all such endeavors but one thing that all writing centers share is the potential to act as agents of change through programs that encourage of literacy. By carefully considering theoretical frameworks and preexisting models, writing centers can create meaningful, lasting programs that will affect writers inside and outside their institutions. The following texts are offered as resources and examples of the scope of community literacy programs for further study: Across Property Lines:
As the fall semester of 2015 closed, the CWE is busy preparing for its third winter workshop with the Seminar for Lifelong Learners, which will begin in late February 2016. The staff look forward to the workshop, as they know the Ner Tamid Authors do. The relationships that have been established over the last four years create reflection that reaches deep into the lives of staff and participants. During periods between seminars, staff discuss who has continued with their writing projects, how the health of the aging participants has been, if challenges have been overcome, and how to make the next seminar better than the last. Between seminars, as the participants meet with their families and friends, they will share their writing, their experiences as writers and being a part of the Montclair State community, and the university’s presence in their lives, through the CWE. The university, through the writing center, takes on a new role in the participants’ lives, giving them work, identities, and contributions as writers that did not exist before they joined the seminar. The CWE has made a meaningful difference in the lives of this single group; the possibilities for further engagement
are profound and encouraging.

Writing centers, as places of assistance and support for their students and on-campus communities, can extend their resources thereby increasing the potential for transformation outside campus boundaries. Critical literacy can be effectively nurtured to construct meaningful public dialogue across differences, with the goals of discovery and change, as Linda Flower encourages, resulting in lifelong learning for community participants and universities. Learning together while making positive changes that directly affect us happens every day in writing centers; to withhold that experience, guarding it from those outside university gates, reinforces ivory tower values and erodes democratic practice. As James Britton would suggest, if writing centers view language as the way each person creates the world, we can use our experience, knowledge, and pedagogy to extend the teaching of writing, increasing the ways that off-campus writers broaden their life experience through writing, reading, speaking and listening. If we believe, as does Paolo Freire, in the power of each person’s words to change the world, “to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone (2000, p. 88),” the special resources of the writing center can be shared to meet the varied and great needs beyond campus walls, connecting and uniting the university with the world.
References


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