Service Learning in Graduate Creative Writing Programs

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Community outreach in the form of service learning can potentially assume a significant role in graduate creative writing programs, providing opportunities for students to connect with at-need and at-risk local populations. However, graduate programs must first integrate service learning into their academic curriculum to make such outreach opportunities feasible and attractive to graduate students. With the university-wide growth of seminars, workshops, and programming that cater to graduate students who may potentially pursue alt-ac careers, creative writing programs can offer such hands-on experiences for students through service learning. In *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, Argie Manolis defines service learning as "the use of community-based, participatory learning projects outside the classroom to complement and enhance students' academic experiences" (144). Carey E. Smitherman and Stephanie Vanderslice hone that definition further, noting that service learning should provide "authentic writing situations" in which creative writing students assume responsibility for an underserved population (154-155). While there are numerous benefits that current national community outreach programs bring to both participants and facilitators, I will focus on a specific underserved population, group home adolescents, because of this group's marginalized status and connection to a local community where I co-facilitated a weekly writing group.

To begin with, these kinds of programs function nationwide through organizations such as the Writers in the Schools (WITS) Alliance and the PEN Prison Writing Program, which serve primary and secondary schools and prisons. Administered by writing organizations or faculty and students from nearby institutions of higher learning, these programs offer creative outlets for participants. For instance, by broadly addressing primary and secondary school students, the WITS Alliance facilitates "active involvement in the literary arts," which "increases student engagement in school and contributes to improved academic performance" ("The WITS Alliance"). Serving

the marginalized prison population, the PEN Prison Writing Program advocates that "inmates […] express themselves freely" and "encourages the use of the written word as a legitimate form of power" ("Prison Writing"). These programs empower participants through active involvement in workshops, outlets for self-expression, and acknowledgement within and beyond the workshop setting in service of larger social justice goals.

In my own case, the group home adolescent population is of concern to me because I closely worked with this group during my MFA program as part of my formal coursework. Unlike many service learning opportunities in graduate creative writing programs, which are affiliated with national programs like WITS or PEN, or serve an "unofficial" part of the curriculum, the writing group I assisted in developing and leading was part of my MFA academic curriculum. Entitled "Writer in the Community," this course connected MFA students with underserved groups in the wider community, focusing on local at-need populations rather than attempting to join with national programs (although, of course, this is certainly a possibility for programs that want to incorporate service learning into their curriculum). The course included readings on expressive writing, as well as the impact of writing on mental and physical health, requiring us to relate our writing group experiences through weekly reflections and a final paper. Within the first few weeks of the semester, we were assigned into small groups based on common interests. Then, we established a semester-long writing group with a community organization, managing the logistics of the program, designing writing activities, and implementing weekly workshops at the chosen organization.

The results of this project were surprising in ways that may inform how graduate students may be best prepared for and mentored through service initiatives. For instance, with two of my classmates, I facilitated a workshop for female adolescents who lived in a group home in the downtown area. To my surprise, my peers were initially reluctant to work with this group—I was the only member of the class who had listed working with this population as my top choice. Many of my classmates assumed that the teenagers in the group home would be challenging, having behavioral problems and potentially posing physical threats to themselves, their peers, and the facilitators. These peers thought that a program at the group home would not leave a lasting impact, as demonstrated previously through the intermittent implementation of the program at the group home compared to the steady continuation of programs at other sites, like a local nursing home. My classmates were willing to work with older residents in the community, inmates, or after-school programs, but these group home adolescents were, by far, the least desired community members due to preconceived notions about their behavior and their unwillingness to cooperate in a writing group setting. After a few weeks of conducting the writing group, my co-facilitators got to know participants through their writing activities, and began to shed their assumptions about "troubled" teenagers. While there is no single strategy for graduate students to overcome their preconceived

Journal of Creative Writing Studies   *2*

notions about community populations, many students in the course came to understand participants through the sharing and discussion process of each participant's writing. The required weekly reflections for graduate students also allowed them to privately share their thoughts and to work through any reservations during weekly classroom discussion. We often brainstormed ways to deal with difficult participants, uncomfortable situations, and our own thoughts and feelings about the group in a receptive, productive setting led by our instructor.

Although my experience is anecdotal, it speaks to the larger existing framework for writing groups and programs that were either started by, or partnered with, graduate creative writing programs. Scant attention has been paid to how such programs can serve as an intervention for at-risk youth living in group homes or as part of aftercare treatment. This population consists of over 100,000 children in foster or group care on a daily basis, with 80% of these youths exhibiting clinical behavioral problems (Lee and Thompson 32). Inconsistencies within the group home, such as varying or incomplete lengths of stay and rotating staff, do present challenges when establishing programs. Despite these obstacles, the group home, and similar settings, is a high-priority focus for founding workshops sponsored and administered by local writing organizations or universities.

Because this article presents a mosaic of approaches, rather than a streamlined methodology, faculty should investigate and choose what works best for their situation. The pedagogical strategies I have outlined in this article for service learning writing groups are not exclusively drawn from creative writing pedagogy in the college-level creative writing classroom. Community programs, while sharing some overlap with academic classrooms, are not the ubiquitous workshop and revise model seen on many college campuses. These programs can be developed using pedagogies from various creative writing classroom and workshop settings and can be facilitated by graduate students or even advanced undergraduates who have, or can quickly develop, sufficient knowledge to work with the community through a service learning curriculum. Whatever the case, however, facilitators should be prepared to support a sharing-based model that attends to the needs of the community participants.

Marginalized Populations and Expressive Writing

Creative writing pedagogy for at-risk youth, as well as prison programs, strives to continuously maintain the humanity and dignity of its participants, arguing for workshop facilitators to *accompany* rather than instruct youth to upend hierarchal authority (Appleman 25; Sepúlveda 551). In her discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline, Deborah Appleman advocates for the "humanizing effects of the creative process," calling for critical introspection on pedagogical processes when teaching creative writing to any population (28). A pedagogical response comes from Enrique Sepúlveda, who, in his narrative of teaching the high-school-aged children of Mexican immigrants

in Northern California, views his pedagogy of acompañamiento as a way "to talk back to the larger society and educational establishment" by "engag[ing] with the Other in ways that promote a deeper bonding and critical dialogue between equal subjects" (552, 558). Sepúlveda encourages instructors to craft pedagogies that accommodate this idea of "accompanying" students, since acts of reflection, thinking, and writing about experiences can prompt participant and facilitator self-transformation, in which exchange and modes of relation become the norm (560). A pedagogy of accompanying and respecting participants serves expressive writing strategies, which encourage participants to share their experiences through writing in a nonjudgmental and non-evaluative setting.

This idea of sharing has been promoted by psychologists since the mid-twentieth century, as these professionals have acknowledged the benefits of writing in group therapy sessions, noting how writing groups "circumvented repressive mechanisms," encouraged talking and sharing, and promoted self-esteem (Lauer and Goldman 250-51). Borrowing from psychoanalysis, or the "talking cure," teachers of creative writing developed psychoanalytic pedagogy, which advocates that "writing can be therapeutic and, therefore, more meaningful for the student in the long term" (Harris 182). Through numerous experiments conducted on the health benefits of narrative, James W. Pennebaker found that narrativizing traumatic experiences improves emotional and physical health through "translating experiences into language" (8). Many youth living in group homes have experienced trauma: the death or injury of a loved one, forms of physical and emotional violence, or other factors that have caused temporary, or sometimes permanent, displacement. In a study on at-risk urban adolescent youth, Wendy Kliewer et al. advocate for expressive writing, which contributes to the process of emotion regulation, desensitizing writers to traumatic, difficult, and often violent events (694). Over 90% of the students who participated in the study experienced being a victim of violence at least five times in their lives, and over half of the students had witnessed a violent act at least nine times (700). As Pennebaker notes, "it is critical […] to confront anxieties and problems by creating a story to explain and understand past and current life concerns" that establishes coherent order (11). Once an experience is narrativized, it becomes a simple, straightforward story, requiring less mental energy with each retelling. In sharing such stories, the burden of "secret keeping" is lifted, and can result in cognitive and physiological benefits for the writer (12-15).

Creative interventions can foster a sense of control for these youth, who need alternative paths to express their experiences and emotions in a way that is not explicitly verbal. Rather than exerting a controlling influence, writing group facilitators should employ the option of choice to "creat[e] a sense of rapport, create a safe and supportive environment for expression, validat[e] students' feelings, model good emotional regulation skills, and shar[e] their own writing in a way students [can] relate to" (Edgar-Bailey and Kress 162; Kliewer et al. 697). According to Meredith Edgar-Bailey and Victoria E. Kress, creative writing can "enhance […] language and communication" and

"self-esteem and self-worth," helping youth process emotions and foster "a sense of liberation from an emotionally repressive environment" (163). When students are able to develop and establish a voice when they write, they gain agency, feeling like they have power over what they write (Harris 179). For example, Kliewer et al.'s study showed that students with frequent exposure to violence benefitted the most from these short-term expressive writing interventions as an alternative mechanism for processing emotion other than aggression (702).

To help individuals work through difficult experiences independently, Pennebaker designed a model for a four-day program with a schedule of writing intensively for 20 minutes a day over the course of several days in *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal.* During the first day, the writer writes about the traumatic event with as much emotional depth as possible, thinking about how the event is affecting their life. For the second and third days, the prompt asks the writer to push those thoughts and feelings further, with new non-repeating content written every time. The writer should then compare what they have written across the three days. The fourth day is contemplative, prompting the writer to ask questions about the experience (Pennebaker and Evans 33-40). While this model is tailored for an individual working alone, a similar process can be used in a group setting.

Below I have outlined some additional creative writing activities that may be helpful in community outreach writing programs that are part of a service learning curriculum. These examples were implemented in the group that I co-facilitated at a Central Pennsylvania group adolescent home as part of my MFA coursework. During every meeting, which occurred weekly from 7-8pm, myself and two co-facilitators (two were fiction writers, while I studied poetry) met, on average, with four to six participants, all of whom were living at the group home at the time. We sat around a table in the home's common room, with a staff member close by to monitor the writing group. We began the meeting with introductions, as the group typically had one or two new participants each week. All participants had volunteered to be there; other residents were in the house, helping to clean up dinner or socializing. We planned for two or three writing activities per meeting, with a different co-facilitator leading each activity. First, we introduced the guidelines for the writing activity, then typically allowed 10-20 minutes for the participants to complete the activity. After that time, participants elected to share their work with their peers in a nonjudgmental (i.e., no critique) setting. The meeting concluded with us informing participants and the staff member about the next meeting time and encouraging participants to expand on their writing activities if they desired to do so. By the end of the three months of weekly meetings, with about 10-12 meetings having taken place, participants created a "chapbook" of their work during the final session to share with the group, other peers in the home, and their families. The three examples described below were some of most successful and memorable writing activities.

1. Participants were asked to write a short story closely or loosely based on an event in their lives. This narrativization served as a way to process the event by creating a clear story (Edgar-Bailey and Kress, 164).

2. Participants used poetic forms, such as elegies, acrostic poems, and villanelles, to express emotion (Edgar-Bailey and Kress, 165-66). Elegies can be used to commemorate a lost or loved one, while acrostic poems serve as an easy tool for using a name to express thoughts about that individual. I asked participants to write an acrostic of their own or someone else's name. One participant wrote an acrostic elegy to commemorate the recent loss of a family member, with each letter of the family member's name enumerating one of their qualities. The villanelle also proved useful for participants, who were given a fill-in-the-blank worksheet I designed to help them craft their villanelles. The obsessive, repetitive motion of the villanelle allowed participants to discuss difficult subjects in their lives they had been mulling over, such as a gun violence, domestic disputes, and sudden deaths and departures.

3. Participants engaged in epistolary writing, in which the letter was used as closure for "unfinished business" (Edgar-Bailey and Kress, 169). When asked to write in this form, participants often addressed an immediate family member, using the letter as an avenue to discuss the reasons why they were in the group home.

While not included as required reading by the community outreach course that I was enrolled in, another valuable resource I located after the course's conclusion and would have found immensely useful, especially because I was working with teenagers, is Richard Gold's *Pongo Teen Writing Method,* which educates mentors who want to develop community programs. Gold offers an enormous amount of practical and reflective advice for new mentors, much of which relates to being informed, being emotionally prepared for facilitating such groups, and fostering flexibility in non-academic settings. For example, the group I co-facilitated oftentimes had to be willing to reschedule with the group home due to scheduling conflicts or be prepared for small (2-3 participants) to large (10-12 participants) writing groups. As Gold states in his book, because many workshop leaders are students or faculty from graduate creative writing programs, they are not necessarily trained psychologists or social workers. This potential lack of training among facilitators further demonstrates the importance of reading and discussing pedagogical approaches before establishing outreach programs. Furthermore, faculty and students should collaborate with other disciplines to create robust outreach programming opportunities.

ADVOCACY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

These approaches advocate for promoting future alliances between group homes and facilitating organizations. Interdisciplinary cooperation is the future of academia. When forging community programs, faculty and students should reach out to other disciplines that frequently work in the community and make social justice a core of their practice, such as social work and welfare, psychology, and women and gender studies. At times, graduate creative writing programs can appear isolationist, either within English or other departments, so they should strive to bring positive social change to both their home academic institutions and in the surrounding community, being recognized as dedicated to social issues.

There is no "one size fits all" model for community outreach and service learning. Programs, by catering to their locality's needs, can form longstanding partnerships with local organizations to address at-risk populations. Forging ties with the community should be, as Sepúlveda notes, "a process that begins with authentic relationships and spaces for community formation, where life experiences, perspectives, and analysis for those on the margins are critical starting points to individual and social transformation" (558). Outreach opportunities should be commonplace rather than marketed as special features in graduate creative writing programs. By building an interdisciplinary, collaborative academic curriculum with localized service learning opportunities, programs can provide meaningful experiences for students as part of their coursework.

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Service Learning in Graduate Creative Writing Programs   *8*