Building Literary Community
Through Online Readings

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ABSTRACT

When in-person events were cancelled and stay-at-home orders began in the spring of 2020, campus student reading series and open mics were also cancelled. This presentation details one MFA student's response to quarantine: the creation of a community-building weekly reading series for one MFA program informed by principles of community organizing, social justice, and educational psychology. Each reading featured three creative writing MFA students sharing their work, along with a student-led craft talk, a drag show, and community-building activities between presentations. Every event was a carefully-constructed performance: of knowledge (in the craft talk), of writing (in the readings), of community (in the activities), and of one MFA program's identity. At heart, this proposal fits within the Social Action conference track, but also addresses Diversity and Inclusion and well as the Digital and Multimodal.

Participants will reflect on the following questions: Beyond the page and the classroom, how are students in my creative writing program engaging with the world and each other? How can my program use technology to facilitate community-building? and How do structures of power and oppression shape my program's literary events? (And what can I do about it?)

Three broadly applicable event-organizing concepts will be discussed: creating a culture of support, empowering participants with ownership, and building practices of intentional inclusivity with regards to race, gender, orientation, caretaker status, and age. This presentation shares strategies for building a social culture of unconditional positive regard (Runco) within creative writing programs in order to balance the status quo of critique and power often espoused in classroom workshops (Adsit). It will also explore the ways in which technology can shape the embodied performance of writing, for better and for worse, including consideration of issues of equity in screen-sharing, closed captioning, muting, chat, and laptop cameras (Roth, Murphy). Finally, the presenter will discuss the principles of social justice-driven community organizing that informed the planning and execution of this event; such

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principles can be applied to reading series and events in any situation (Beckwith).

By intentionally planning diverse programs, reaching out to key members, and attempting to draw in all the different groups of the MFA program, students created a community space that provided one program with a sense of stability in unstable times. By sharing the story of this short project and reflecting on its successes and setbacks, the presenter will provide participants with an opportunity to evaluate the practices of inclusion and culture being performed in their own campus or community events.