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# Building a Community Literacy Network to Address Literacy Inequities: An Emergent Strategy Approach

*Jeffrey Austin, Ann Blakeslee, Cathy Fleischer, and Christine Modey*

## *Abstract*

As a consortium of individuals, programs, and agencies that embrace the power of collaboration, the Washtenaw County Literacy Network works to shift conversations and practices surrounding literacy and literacy inequities. Using an emergent strategy lens, the authors describe the partnerships at the center of the network and the collaborative work that has emerged from these partnerships. The authors also analyze the adaptations recent events have generated in terms of the relationships and interactions that center the work, and they explore ways to rethink the idea of assessment for community literacy initiatives. Ultimately, the authors posit that emergent strategy helps networks like the WCLN navigate change in thoughtful and sustainable ways.

## *Keywords*

emergent strategy, literacy networks, literacy inequities, collaboration, partnerships, social justice

## *Introduction: Five Scenarios*

Fifteen middle and high school teachers—who are part of a county-wide Disciplinary Literacies team—spend a morning visiting classes on a university campus, then come together to talk with faculty about college writing. As the secondary teachers ask the college faculty—who are Writing Across the Curriculum Fellows—what they expect in terms of college readiness surrounding writing, one professor responds, “First, tell us more about you and the challenges you face. We need to learn from you.”

Twelve writing consultants—from high school, university, and community-based writing centers—gather together at one such community writing center, 826michigan, for the second in a series of *Dialogues* focused on “what counts as writing.” Listening hard to each other, they share experiences and then thoughts on ways to help convey their values and beliefs to others. “Who else needs to know this?” they ask, as they decide on next steps to educate others.

Hundreds of children, teens, and adults flock to three branches of the Ypsilanti District Library to listen to local authors, try out writing activities, and share their own experiences with writing. Underneath signs proclaiming *Everyone's a Writer*, writers talk to other writers, whatever their ages and experiences, as volunteers from the community, faculty members and university writing consultants, and teachers and writing consultants from area high schools lead activities and cheer on the writers.

Thirty writing tutors meet for a morning of learning with each other. Soon-to-be seventh and eighth graders eager to become writing consultants emerge from an hour of talking with experienced high school consultants. As the experience comes to a close, students and teachers stand in a circle to share an “aha” moment from the day. Says one middle grader, “I really liked learning about funds of knowledge. Let me explain what that means.” Gape-mouthed adults along with the students—of all ages—nod their heads in agreement.

Two secondary students—with enthusiasm and just a little trepidation—travel to a community center in a neighboring town to help lead a Family Fun Night with university faculty and volunteers. Children—with enthusiasm and just a little trepidation—come inside to try out different writing activities, alongside their parents, aunts or uncles, grandparents, and other interested adults. Everyone’s voices fill the air as they all come together to share their writing at the end of the evening.

These five scenarios offer a window into some of the early activities of an emergent community literacy network—the Washtenaw County Literacy Network (WCLN)—that is being constructed through collaborative outreach across southeastern Michigan. The current network, emerging even as we, the authors of this article, write these words, includes a consortium of middle school, high school, and university writing centers (Washtenaw County Writing Centers Project); two groups devoted to community literacy (826michigan and YpsiWrites); a county-wide intermediate school district (Washtenaw ISD); a National Writing Project site (Eastern Michigan Writing Project); and a local library system with its three branches (Ypsilanti District Library). Numerous other partner groups contribute to and help form the network: an organization that provides free literacy support to adults (Washtenaw Literacy), an organization that runs an urban farm to support the local food system (Growing Hope), an organization that provides mentoring to at-risk youth (Mentor2Youth), and numerous others. (For a fuller view of this emergent network, see Figure 1 and the section describing the network below.)

In developing the WCLN, we, in collaboration with community literacy organizations and other community partners, have considered how to shift conversations and practices surrounding literacy in a diverse county with inequitable and uneven educational outcomes. The purpose of the network is to provide connection, mutual support, and reinforcement among local entities whose work not only supports

school literacies, but also provides opportunities for students, teachers, parents, and community members to engage in meaningful writing activities and to engage in conversations about the importance and uses of writing and literacy for personal empowerment, education, and civic participation. The hope has been that, in some small ways, the Network might address literacy inequities through attentive listening and intentional engagement with, and not for, both our partner groups and the participants in these initiatives.

What it means to create and maintain this kind of network is something we think and talk about often. As four white authors who hold positions as secondary and university educators, we are aware of our privilege and the potential that privilege has for harm, especially when working with individuals, groups, and communities that are not similarly positioned. In contexts where asymmetries in power may well be present, we recognize and acknowledge the sustained attention required to work against social hierarchies that continually reinscribe differences in power between white high school and university faculty and communities of color, between speakers of “standardized English” and those who speak nonprivileged dialects, between “service providers” and “service recipients.” As we connect with individuals, organizations, and communities in the hope of creating mutually beneficial partnerships, we endeavor to remain acutely aware of our own positionality and the tension inherent in the task of creating equitable working relationships in an educational ecosystem characterized by inequitable structures and outcomes.

The willingness to be reflexive about our identities and how they position us in community spaces is critical to the ability of the network to meet its mission. Without doing the prerequisite self-work, there is a danger of reproducing the same oppressive power structures inside the network that we are working against outside of it. The “twin pandemics” of COVID-19 and structural racism have laid bare the systemic inequities that make our advocacy and activism urgent. We hope that, like us, other white educators have felt the call to reflect, self-examine, and meet the historical moment. Our students’ lives depend on it. The need for reflexivity and action are echoed, we believe, in the words of Nell Duke and Ernest Morrell (2020) when they argue:

As is the case in policing, there are many well-intentioned educators—and some educators who go beyond good intentions to enact practices that research has found work toward equitable education and push back against educational oppression.

We foreground what “pushing back” means, looks like, and feels like in a networked community literacy context where good intentions are not enough. Within collectives of students, teachers, school administrators, community members, and non-profit organizations, we already have seen a shift in how we are doing our work. We find ourselves pushing to the surface what it means to purposefully decenter ourselves and to center the voices of students and others whose voices are often marginalized in educational space; to give up power so those with less acknowledged power can have more influence in the work; and to resist the white saviorism or colonialism that can damage collaborations between those with different levels of privilege. We also know

that these relationships are only viable so long as we are willing to live the values expressed in this article in all aspects of our lives.

As we work with others to help move our community toward justice, we know, as the authors of this article, that we are not perfect and neither is our network; we've made mistakes and imagine that we will make more. This work is imperfect too. Despite the messiness and imperfection of the network, we continue to build durable relationships by being accountable and making our actions more aligned to justice each day. Thus, while the goal of this article is to describe this literacy network, we also understand that there are countless approaches and frameworks for both analyzing this work and navigating change. Many of them are rooted in structures of supremacy and hierarchy, which we are actively resisting. Thus, here we read our network through a lens of emergent strategy, a relational approach to social change we learned about through the writings of adrienne maree brown, a doula, women's rights activist, and Black feminist from Detroit. In the spirit of Christen Smith, a member of the Cite Black Women Collective, we believe, "We must reconfigure the politics of knowledge production by engaging in a radical praxis of citation that acknowledges and honors Black women's transnational intellectual production" (para.2). Smith reminds us that, given our positionality as authors of this article and as leaders within the network, decentering ourselves and centering marginalized voices is required. In this spirit, we use brown's work in adaptation, interdependence, and small group facilitation to analyze and reflect on the formation and development of this network, providing specific examples of how we see brown's ideas in the relationships and stories of network participants, especially amid the social shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the historical pandemic of police violence that killed Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others. We then consider how ideas for assessment drawn from emergent strategy may provide some frameworks for better understanding the health of the network and others like it and the movement of such networks toward the goal of collaboratively democratizing literacy practices and increasing educational equity.

## Emergent Strategy and the Washtenaw County Literacy Network (WCLN)

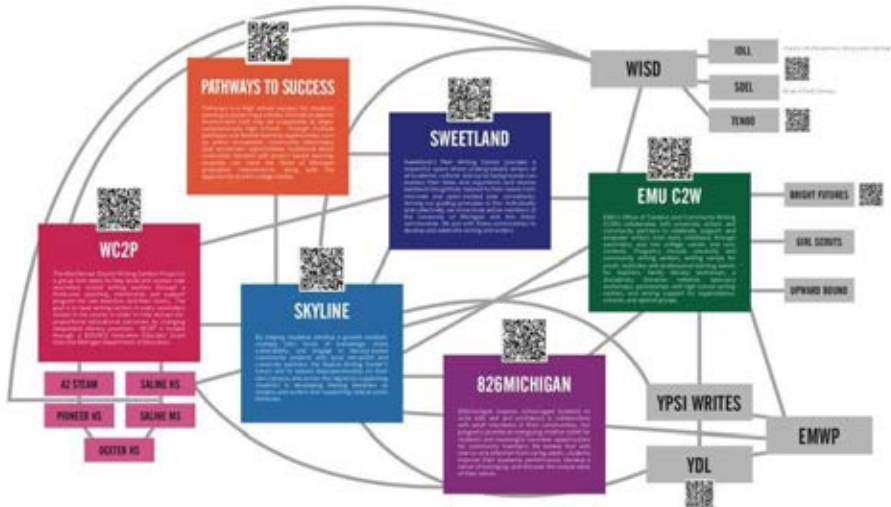


Figure 1: The Washtenaw County Literacy Network

Figure 1 shows the Washtenaw Community Literacy Network (WCLN) as it existed in fall 2019 and early 2020, prior to both COVID-19 and the police violence that killed Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Brown's emergent strategy characterizes networks as dynamic and adaptive, which certainly has been and continues to be the case for the WCLN, especially as the events of 2020 have unfolded. As noted already, being in a decentralized community network is messy and imperfect, but despite this, the WCLN continues to build relationships, be accountable, and strive to align its actions more to justice, acknowledging mistakes and then both working to repair those mistakes and working, within and with the network, to transform the root causes that may have allowed them to happen. This too is imperfect and requires trust, which needs to be built and rebuilt in each interaction. Additionally, the generative and evolving partnerships in the network have assisted with working within and through the inherent complexity, particularly throughout the twin pandemics.

The WCLN is a confluence of individuals, programs, and agencies that have eschewed institutional boundaries and embraced the power of collaboration to support literacy across a county. We would characterize it as an evolving grassroots network rooted in informal relationships and a do-it-ourselves ethos, and that, we recognize, requires a different strategy and approach than managing a hierarchical organization with clear central leadership. Instead, the WCLN relies on small, informal relationships and interactions between and among network members to achieve its ends. Indeed, the WCLN has been built small relationship by small relationship, often two or three people coming together to work on an initiative or project and slowly fold-

ing others into that project or expanding it to a different part of the network. The vignettes at the start of this essay demonstrate a variety of kairotic moments, as do the examples that follow of how nodes in the network have pivoted in response to COVID-19 and to the acts of police violence and institutionalized racism. While kairotic moments may happen by chance, being ready and able to seize them does not. Seizing kairotic moments leading to change requires remarkable presence and sustained, trusting relationships. brown's emergent strategy framework is one we found aligns with the WCLN's mission of transforming intent into organized impact to democratize literacy in communities.

brown's *Emergent Strategy*, published in 2017, is an outgrowth of her work as an organizer and facilitator in various activist organizations and networks that center the work of people of color, particularly queer and trans Black women, including Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity, The Ruckus Society, and Allied Media Projects, among others. In the introduction to her book, brown notes that the notion of emergent strategy is one that she borrows from Nick Obolensky, the author of *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty*. *Emergent Strategy* is also heavily informed by the work in understanding organizational systems done by Margaret Wheatley and the speculative fiction of Octavia Butler; brown is the co-editor of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. brown's approach is also deeply influenced by the work and mentorship of the late longtime Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs, to whom she dedicates the book. The humanistic vision brown lays out in the introduction is one that calls each of us to "align our behavior, our structures, and our movements with our visions of justice and liberation, and give those of us co-creating the future more options for working with each other and embodying the things we fight for: dignity, collective power, love, generative conflict, and community" (brown 6). Identifying herself as a "queer, Black, multiracial lover of life" (29), brown nevertheless calls her readers of a wide variety of identities into "collaborative ideation"—imagining a new future that offers freedom, justice, and joy for everyone. brown deliberately invites her readers into the work: "The more people that collaborate on that ideation, the more people will be liberated by the resulting world(s)" (7). In this spirit, the authors of this paper take up brown's invitation, to see how her ideas about emergent strategy allow us to theorize, enact, and assess a transformative literacy network.

brown describes emergent strategy as "relational, adaptive, fractal, interdependent, decentralized, and transformative" (56). Emergent strategy, according to brown, is centrally about building meaningful, sustainable relationships rooted in love and mutual understanding. brown emphasizes that emergent strategy is about being in healthy relationships with our work, our world, and our team to "grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (24). Emergent strategy is very much about a way of being and working in the world. It also is about the intention to embody in small interactions the larger aspirations of the institution, the group, or the network; it reminds us that attuning to others through interpersonal relationships allows nimble responses when conditions, such as COVID-19 and police violence, demand them (brown 71).

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## *The WCLN*

brown's analogies, such as fractals, provide helpful explanatory frameworks that begin to capture the complexity of a literacy network like the WCLN. According to brown, for example, "Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop" (51). They also express relationships between small and large, which are depicted in Figure 1, above. The entities in the large boxes are those that functioned as initiators, anchors, and organizers as the network was being established. As such, these engaged in "binary partnerships," as described by Deans in his contribution to this volume (92). Such partnerships are often mutually beneficial, and, like Deans, we also see merit in their configuration into a network, whose resilience and adaptability exceeds that of any single partnership due to the distribution of responsibility. In the WCLN, the initiators and anchors include a university outreach office (Eastern Michigan University's Office of Campus & Community Writing); a literacy organization (826michigan, which is part of the national 826 initiative); a community writing center (YpsiWrites, which is a collaboration between EMU's C<sup>2</sup>W, 826michigan, and the Ypsilanti District Library); a university writing center (University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing); a high school writing center (Ann Arbor Skyline High School); an alternative high school (Pathways, which collaborated with Sweetland and Skyline to support Pathways students); and a grant-funded project (the Washtenaw County Writing Center Project). All of these entities have functioned in the WCLN, even in the more recent times of crisis, as hubs for relationship-building and network expansion.

The mid-size boxes in the network rendering can be characterized best as collaborators—e.g., entities that work closely with the organizers and anchors. For example, the Ypsilanti District Library (YDL) had been, prior to COVID-19, sites for drop-in tutoring and workshops for YpsiWrites. Another collaborator, the Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), an entity that encompasses all the school districts in the county, works with EMU's C<sup>2</sup>W as well as with Ann Arbor Skyline High School and the Washtenaw County Writing Centers Project. The WISD also has its own connections in the network: Inquiry into Disciplinary Literacy and Learning (IDLL), a secondary-level disciplinary literacies' group; Study of Early Literacy (SOEL), a group of elementary teachers interested in early literacy; and Ten80, a middle and secondary-level STEM initiative. EMU's C<sup>2</sup>W and YpsiWrites have connections with these programs as well. For example, YpsiWrites has provided writing workshops for the Ten80 initiative, and the C<sup>2</sup>W faculty associate helps organize and facilitate the IDLL group. The Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP), a program within C<sup>2</sup>W and a site for the National Writing Project, provides teacher professional learning opportunities, student writing camps, and family literacy workshops.

The smallest boxes in Figure 1 include schools, groups, and community organizations that participate in programs offered by the other entities. YpsiWrites, for example, is partnering with a growing number of community organizations in Ypsilanti to provide literacy support for youth, teens, and adults. These include the Girl Scouts



of Southeast Michigan, Washtenaw Literacy, Upward Bound, Bright Futures, Mentor2Youth, A2Ethics, and numerous other organizations.

Finally, also shown in the network rendering are schools participating in the Washtenaw County Writing Centers Project. Every one of these partnerships emerged from “a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (3) that brown says create complex systems and patterns. brown also emphasizes that these interactions are always intentional: “What we pay attention to grows” (brown 19). For example, it was through a request by the Ypsilanti District Library for coaching of its TEDx speakers that the seeds for YpsiWrites were originally sown. Interactions with 826michigan staff generated ideas for the *Dialogues* discussed in the opening vignettes for writing tutors across schools and contexts. A brief conversation after a meeting at a community center gave rise to two grant proposals for programs that would support at-risk youth in career and educational pursuits. Neither of these was funded due to the granting organizations reallocating their funding to relief projects connected to COVID; however, the conversations cultivated new partnerships, for example between EMU’s C<sup>2</sup>W, the non-profit organization Mentor2Youth, and St. Joseph Mercy Hospital.

The lines connecting the entities in the WCLN network demonstrate their interdependence. No entity is or could be autonomous. brown talks about people coming together to accomplish more than they would accomplish individually, and the WCLN provides a living example of this. Over a short span of time, and even through crisis, it has expanded and gained momentum. YpsiWrites, for example, which is less than a year old, has multiple partners, more than sixty volunteers, and extensive community support. When the transition was made to offering virtual support during COVID, more than thirty volunteers offered to assist with the new initiatives. The Washtenaw County Writing Centers Project, in its second year, added four new middle and secondary schools interested in developing writing centers. A recent pivot to create the Washtenaw County Writing Center for Secondary Students (WCWC) further expands this initiative, responding to the reality that Washtenaw County, like most counties, has no monolithic literacy narrative. Ann Arbor Skyline’s Writing Center, in collaboration with the University of Michigan Sweetland Center for Writing and EMU’s C<sup>2</sup>W, continues to seek ways to normalize high expectations for all writers and to engage stakeholders in productive dialogues about equity and inclusion. All of these entities work with, for, and on behalf of each other in a distributed and decentralized, but interconnected manner. The network is thus also nonlinear and iterative, additional characteristics brown addresses. Each entity has its own mission and purpose, staff (volunteer and/or paid), and leadership, but each also values the network’s shared vision for equity, transformative justice, and literacy.

brown’s theory also stresses resilience, the creation of additional possibilities, and adaptability. Resilience, we believe, is achieved through the bonds and connections these entities form with each other; the lines in our network are solid and thick for a reason. But as in all relationships, this requires effort and intentionality, which in this case has been facilitated by each entity’s willingness to engage in a truly reciprocal exchange. Adaptiveness and flexibility are at the heart of this reciprocity—as are,

arguably, self-awareness and reflection. The network is continuously evolving, and this certainly has been the case since March 2020 when the world shifted in significant ways.

### *The Evolution of the WCLN in the Face of Change and Disruption*

The significant shifts that occurred in March 2020, starting with COVID-19 and closely followed by the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, threw the issues of equity that already marked our community literacy work into sharp relief. When the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were issued in Michigan, for example, we watched many of our school partners struggle with helping their students through issues of food instability, equal access to technology and Internet connectivity, and family crises. We saw teacher partners shift to working at home, tasked with creating both digital and non-digital instruction for the variety of students they teach, all the while having to share computers, workspaces, and Internet access with other members of their families. We saw our libraries and community writing spaces close down for unforeseen lengths of time (they remain closed as of this writing). We, along with other members of our network, faced our own individual struggles. We saw our brave students organizing for social justice and marching in the streets even while COVID-19 cases were rising; their protests and efforts are ongoing today. In this environment, we knew that we could still be of use, even if, at first, we were immobilized by our own shock at the swift changes in circumstance. As we acclimated (as best we could), we wondered: How could we sustain a community literacy network—and still a new one at that—predicated on face-to-face interactions among our community partners, when the whole notion of community, and everyone’s experiences as members of communities, were undergoing such radical change and disruption?

As we considered what to do—as individuals, educators, and participants in established partnerships in the network—we kept in mind adrienne maree brown’s principle of *adaptation*. “Intentional adaptation,” brown writes, “is at the heart of emergent strategy” (69). Such adaptation can be seen in the responses we made, both to COVID-19 and to the demonstrations and social movements that followed the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. These adaptations also demonstrate another hallmark of emergent strategy mentioned previously: *resilience*. Resilience, brown notes, is the capacity of a system to constantly “evolve while maintaining core practices” (9). In the case of the Washtenaw County Literacy Network, these core practices have included sustaining relationships and supporting teachers, writers, and their families. brown cites her mentor, Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs’ belief that times of crisis provide opportunities for those who are attentive and adaptable (44, 72). The ability to shift the activity of the network in response to crises while still maintaining the purpose and mission of the network is reflected in these words of scientist Margaret Wheatley: “Vision is an invisible field that binds us together, emerging from relationships and chaos and information” (qtd. in brown 27).

While we cannot report anything conclusive since we are composing this article while still in the midst of the disruption caused by these events, we can share some

of the pivots that were made in response to changing conditions. We define pivots in this context as “collective real-time adaptations”—akin to brown’s metaphors of flocks of starlings, schools of fish, and swarms of bees (71)—to address questions and needs. Whether the pivots we share become longer-term adaptations within the network remains to be seen, although we suspect that some, if not all of them will.

The pivots also illustrate the significance for the WCLN of the small, informal relationships and interactions between and among network members, with two or three people coming together to work on a project and slowly folding others into that project or expanding it to a different part of the network. When schools closed in response to the COVID stay-at-home orders, for example, two network members—826michigan and the Washtenaw Intermediate School District—were asked to help school districts by creating materials to support teachers and students. Seizing the opportunity for innovation, the two groups shared resources and ideas, considering each group’s strengths as well as underlying values about writing and literacy. This kairotic moment led to these groups, along with EMU’s Office of Campus & Community Writing, developing a survey for teachers, inviting them to tell us what we could best do to support them and their students during this time. The groups then worked together to create two outreach projects focused on providing timely literacy support: a series of videos for families, helping them understand ways to support writing at home, and mini virtual EdCamps, helping teachers connect with thought partners about specific issues of teaching writing online. By making these connections, the network adapted, expanded, and created new possibilities (brown 129).

Another pivot during COVID almost perfectly illustrates how a change in one part of the network can stimulate other parts of the network, much as when a flock of birds shifts direction in response to one bird’s action (Pickett qtd. in brown 67). Mentor2Youth, whose outreach and programs that depended on in-person interactions had been halted by stay-at-home orders, saw the virtual adaptation of a proposed initiative as an opportunity to reboot its programming. In this case, the needs of one partner in the network sparked responses and new collaborations among other partners, thus strengthening ties and expanding the network. Additionally, responding to community needs and making adaptations requires trust; trusting relationships are durable and can survive changing and challenging conditions. Therefore, trust is critical to building the meaningful relationships required to sustain the network and achieve its vision, even, and perhaps especially, during times of disruption and crisis. For brown, being in trusting relationships requires group members to reduce their egos and reimagine where and how decisions are made. Indeed, emergent strategy reminds us that the funds of knowledge (Moll et al.) of every group member, another framework we have found helpful, are vital to the strength and growth of the network: Every individual, program, and agency provides something different and something vital to our efforts to democratize literacy.

Another example of such action during COVID occurred when the library that housed YpsiWrites closed and social distancing prohibited in-person tutoring. The YpsiWrites coordinators and volunteers quickly shifted to virtual tutoring so that teens and adults could continue to obtain writing support, either by submitting their

writing for online feedback or by requesting a real-time consultation with a tutor (see [www.ypsiwrites.com](http://www.ypsiwrites.com)). Writers were also offered support through a collection of writing prompts, from journaling to make sense of this time to writing about nature; a list of curated writing resources; and activities, including a zine challenge, to supplant the scheduled workshops that had to be cancelled.

Adaptations like these illustrate the importance of sustained trusting relationships and the ways in which crisis can create opportunity. YpsiWrites volunteers rose to the occasion, responding in ways that reflected their own areas of expertise and comfort. Some became virtual consultants, others created writing prompts and materials, and some tested and provided feedback on activities. Although the loss of physical space and possibilities for in-person programming could have resulted in a complete shutdown of YpsiWrites, or certainly a significant loss of momentum, it instead created an opportunity to engage in creative problem solving and to innovate new ways to achieve organizational goals.

Creative problem solving also took place in the pivot that occurred with the Washtenaw County Writing Centers Project, which was grant funded. Leading up to March 2020, this project was helping four middle and secondary schools start new writing centers while also supporting five schools that had participated in the previous year's cohort. The stay-at-home order led to major events being canceled, including a workshop at the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing, which left fledgling programs without mentorship and support. As resilient and adaptable as other parts of the WCLN have been, these new writing centers became reminders of precarity. More established ones were able to carry on, but some of the newer, less rooted ones were put on hold, leaving students without an important resource at a time of need. These shifts also led to a reconfiguring of grant money and priorities. While this sounds dire, brown reminds us that, no matter what happens, "there is an opportunity to move with intention—toward growth, relationship, regeneration" (71).

The receding of one possibility sparked new adaptations in the network. In this case, thinking was furthered around a youth-driven, county-wide writing center. The idea of the Washtenaw County Writing Center for Secondary Students (WCWC) emerged with a mission of amplifying student voices; providing identity-affirming, justice-seeking, and equity-driven literacy support and events; and encouraging, mentoring, and supporting youth leaders and activists working for change. This vision was of an inclusive, youth-led space. brown argues that any structure that has those with marginalized identities performing actions without any role in leading or planning is a warning that our community-based work isn't as strong as we think (brown 65), and now, more than ever, a strong, youth-driven space centered on the needs, interests, and voices of youth is critical.

Throughout *Emergent Strategy*, brown references the science fiction writing of Octavia Butler regarding adaptation and reimagination, which, along with trust, which we addressed above, are critical factors for success and connection in emergent networks. While the work of the WCLN might not be the stuff of science fiction, the fractal relationships and grassroots organizing—and re-organizing—are

helping achieve the network's vision of reimagining literacy across our county and certainly have aided in sustaining this vision during a time of significant disruption (brown 19). What remains stable and constant are the overarching vision of and hope for equity and transformative justice. This vision of literacy in Washtenaw County is more collective and compelling than the injustice of the present. brown presciently contends, "I suspect this is what many of you are up to, practicing futures together, practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world" (19).

### *Assessment*

All of these ideas and possibilities surrounding emergent strategy lead us toward new thinking about how we assess the health of a network like the WCLN. While we certainly could focus on numbers—the number of partners, of individual programs, of students who attend a program, of volunteers who participate at particular sites—those numbers alone cannot adequately capture the story of the network and its goals, nor its strengths and its needs. In fact, a focus on numbers might lead us to false understandings of success: i.e., if we attract ten people to a program, is that successful? Does that number really help us understand the impact of the program on those attending? What else should we consider? As we think critically and deeply about this work, we wonder what other means of assessment might capture the essence of an emergent and evolving network in all its complexity.

One way into rethinking assessment practices emerges from our focus on one of brown's mantras: "What you pay attention to grows." What are we paying attention to? And what aren't we paying attention to? For us, this implies a shift in understanding: from a focus on using assessment as a way of proving something to using assessment as a way of paying attention to something. That shift in language seems vital for an emergent network with its integrated component parts. Indeed, our use of brown's framework invites us to pay attention to the network in new ways previously unavailable to us. We might, for example, pay attention to the ways in which the network sustains itself, thinking about the existing relationships. However, we might also pay attention to ways in which we develop and extend the network—to grow relationships with new people and programs. An ultimate goal might be to create, even to grow, change around literacy in the geographical area of the network, as we are seeking to do now with the WCWC. When we pay attention, we begin to see the integral components, which in turn help us see that the sustenance of an emergent network relies on strength and redundancy, with redundancy referring to multiple fail-safe measures: the bonds between nodes in the network must remain strong, and, when one connection fails or one node disappears, another connection or node must be formed or reinforced to sustain the activity of the system.

What might this "paying attention" approach to assessment look like in practice? A network might take a pause quarterly or even once a year to encourage its members to reflect and then come together in a retreat or other relaxed setting to talk about their individual insights and develop a shared understanding of the health of the net-

work as a whole and its capacity for growth and change—considering the “next most elegant step” forward together (brown 220). Or different parts of the network might offer, as YpsiWrites has done, Town Hall meetings where volunteers come together to share their thoughts and ideas for moving forward. The health of our network might also be assessed by paying attention to how it represents the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the communities it serves. brown argues that networks are healthiest when members of “impacted communities” have the opportunity to lead (63). The Skyline Writing Center, for example, actively recruits, admits, and trains a diverse, inclusive tutoring staff in an effort to center students of color, multilingual students, LGBTQ+ students, students experiencing material poverty, neurodivergent students, and students at the intersections of several of these identities in formal and informal leadership positions within the network. This will also be a priority as the Washtenaw County Writing Center for Secondary Students is formed and as students are recruited to serve as tutors, leaders, and board members.

In each of these approaches to assessment, we might consider some of brown’s key areas that are particularly relevant to a community literacy network: assessment of fractals, adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, and assessment for creating more possibility. What an assessment model that addresses all of these areas looks like depends very much upon the kinds of questions being asked. And the answers to these questions give us so much more information than just numbers. As we ask these questions, and more, we can hopefully expand the story of how the WCLN is beginning to respond to literacy inequities in the local community, based on observations and on the reflections of participants. Along the same lines, stories of leadership within the network—such as those of high school peer tutors taking leadership roles in planning or presenting programming and in advocacy and social justice initiatives—help to demonstrate the strength of the network in deepening the number of relationships in the network and thereby increasing its resilience.

## *Conclusion*

Throughout *Emergent Strategy*, brown reminds organizers that a vision for equity, inclusion, and democracy needs to be present before a network can truly effect change in a community. brown suggests that building fundamentally sound relationships rooted in mutual trust rather than performative “spectacle” is an important starting point (61). Our Washtenaw County Literacy Network is committed to building such relationships, and, in so doing, ensuring long-term sustainability even as the network undergoes constant and sometimes significant change, as COVID-19 and the acts of police violence have led to. Our efforts in this and our shared vision create stability in emergence, and even in uncertainty. brown also argues that reducing perceived hierarchy between organizational leadership and community partners is critical for an inclusive network to have long-term success. Thus, we are also working to ensure that those in the communities served by the network have engagement, ownership, and leadership in it. Equity work is never done, and we acknowledge that we still have

much to learn and do to ensure that the WCLN fulfills its collective vision for democratizing literacy.

Finally, many of the feelings, thoughts, hopes, and fears that all of us have experienced during the pandemic and recent social protests responding to the police violence will likely inform the Washtenaw County Literacy Network in ways that are yet unknown. However, with emergent strategy, we hope to be able to continue pivoting to the “most elegant next step” (brown 220). Emergent strategy allows us to navigate change across individuals, institutions, and communities thoughtfully and sustainably; it allows us to organize for the long haul, not just the short sprint, by helping us to be in the “right relationships” with ourselves, our work, and one another.

We conclude these reflections with a quote from Sonia Renee Taylor, a poet, author, activist, and leader—someone who might be a kindred spirit to adrienne marie brown, whose ideas have been so helpful to us in describing and advancing the mission of the WCLN in these times. Taylor says:

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given an opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature. (@soniareneetaylor)

The evolution of the WCLN during the uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the social unrest responding to present and historic anti-Black police violence provided opportunities to develop new approaches in our network, resulting in what, we suspect, will be a permanently altered and new network “garment,” committed as ever to the goal of increasing literacy equity and social justice in schools and our communities.

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