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Neighborhood Writing: Developing Drop-In Writing Consultations in Philadelphia Public Libraries

Dana M. Walker, Patrick Manning, and John Kehayias

Abstract

In this project profile we discuss a drop-in writing project initiated by the University of Pennsylvania's Critical Writing Program in partnership with the Free Library of Philadelphia. We explain our drop-in writing project and rationale for a model embedded in the neighborhoods in which we live. Aware of our own constraints and opportunities living in a diverse urban area, we examine how an approach of practicing in place has allowed us to gain some success, but the nature of this flexible approach has also created a series of challenges.

Keywords

community writing; library partnerships; rhetoric of respect; university-community outreach programs; adult literacy

Introduction

Founded in 2003, the Critical Writing Program (CWP) of the University of Pennsylvania has been involved in a number of on-going community writing projects in Philadelphia. Building on this commitment, CWP faculty implemented a community writing project to offer one-on-one drop-in writing sessions for Philadelphians. The project's aim has been to create a space for community members to work on their writing within their own neighborhoods. Motivated to work in our community, faculty at CWP partnered with branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) as well as some of Philadelphia's regional public libraries.

In 2018, CWP director Valerie Ross conceived of a community writing project that could be based in the local public libraries and had the advantage of being replicable across different places and for different populations. One of CWP's faculty members, Dana Walker, took lead of the new initiative, coordinating a team of faculty members, connecting with local libraries, and establishing the first meeting with a branch librarian from the Free Library of Philadelphia. Since then, the project has grown in size and number of people involved. Presently, our faculty volunteers spend two to three hours a week in a FLP branch working with writers on the project, idea, or need that brought them to their neighborhood library. After one and a half years, ten faculty, about a quarter of our instructional staff, have been active in the project. We have started programs in five distinct library branches in the city and two sur-

rounding suburbs and are currently staffing approximately twelve hours of neighborhood writing sessions each week.

In this project profile, we begin by explaining our drop-in writing project and rationale for a model embedded in the neighborhood. We then describe the ways in which the project has shifted and adapted, ultimately being built by the clients who have been using it. Throughout the development and implementation of the project, we have been sensitive to the constantly negotiated boundaries between the university and community, the publicly-funded spaces of the library that are both inclusionary and exclusionary, and our own changing and often challenged expectations of what writing problems and needs we would encounter. As such, we remain cognizant of the scholarship that notes the potential of well-meaning community-engaged work to go awry (Brizee and Wells). We do not presume to solve such tensions, but draw on writing studies literature and community literacy projects rooted in place (e.g. Doggart et al.; Rousculp) as a way to think about community writing projects that might best work at these interstices. Aware of our own constraints and opportunities living in a diverse urban area, we examine how a kind of in-between yet place-based approach has allowed us to achieve some success, but the nature of this adaptable, flexible model has also created a series of challenges.

Community Writing Library Project

Penn's Critical Writing Program has been involved in community writing projects since its founding. Our Community Writing Library Project emerged from that larger commitment, with our writing program director and instructional faculty looking at different ways to work in the community. Our approach was akin to the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Community Writing Assistance (CWA) program, especially in their early iterations where volunteers staffed a "writing help" table in the public library system (Doggart et al.). Not as large as CWA, nor with external funding, the Penn program has been more focused on creating small, distributed sites of writing assistance.

When we initiated the project, we knew two things. First, we would be operating as unpaid volunteers, and second, we would be aiming to create a drop-in model that could be replicated by others. From the outset, then, it was important that the design of the program was economical, sustainable, and replicable by our own faculty and perhaps other writing faculty across the region. Given these three goals, we determined that the Free Library of Philadelphia would be an optimal partner in this project.

We were determined to produce an economical model that did not require external funding or paid staff. We knew that the FLP system, in turn, has an architecture of literacy that was capable of providing in-place support for this budget-minded approach. In the Philadelphia region, the library system is a relatively well-known, recognized, and trusted public space. Many of the branches are sites for community programming as much as they are for collections. And, like many public libraries in the U.S., the FLP branches bring together communities of interest (Willingham). For

example, while we are providing writing consultation at a branch, there may be other groups meeting for a crochet club, chair yoga, or cooking classes. Providing an additional project to the library branches' calendar helped us attract interested writers without the need to find a space or develop extensive project advertising.

Our project also has low overhead, allowing for a minimal upfront cost to set up the programs. To initiate a writing drop-in program, faculty have reached out to the librarians at their local branch. The librarians have been welcoming, seeing this as fulfilling a need in the community, providing an additional free service in a public library system that has scarce funding. We also decided to focus on operating a drop-in service rather than put our main effort into developing workshops or lectures to deliver to community members. In part, this was a response to the need to keep the project economical and sustainable. All of our volunteers are full-time writing instructors or administrators who have teaching responsibilities that would make prepping workshops or lectures difficult. We were also aware that imposing a curriculum on our neighbors could be problematic. We were negotiating an in-between space between ourselves as writing experts at a university and ourselves as neighbors and writers. We did not know nor could we anticipate the diverse writing needs in our various communities. Though our specific project is not in the writing center itself, we were guided by what Nichols and Williams call "writing center values," especially an ideal of collaborative agenda or goal-setting with our writing clients. We are not constrained to a semester or class timeline and "can start our work with writers where they are, not where a course imagines they will be" (Nichols and Williams 90).

Moreover, demographics and discussions with neighborhood leaders and local librarians demonstrated that there was a need for writing support. Philadelphia has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. Anecdotally, librarians told us in our initial planning meetings that job seekers often came to them for help. These realities emphasized the need for additional services in Philadelphia, with writing assistance being one that is often overlooked but underlies many needs, like navigating social services, applying for schools, or securing employment.

Being embedded in and adaptive to a neighborhood and the diverse writing needs in our communities also meant we had to think about how to meet those needs as they emerged, a reflection of the community information model of many libraries. Library scholars have long pointed out the role of public libraries as institutions for community engagement (Goulding). Researchers have found that libraries, especially post-Internet, are repositioning themselves as physical locations of community and assets for diverse interaction (Audunson; Scott). Our project was similarly situated in place; faculty determined, then, that it was important to work in the neighborhoods where they lived. Because the FLP is an expansive and well-used library system with over fifty local branches situated throughout the city of Philadelphia, it was well-positioned to help our writing project accomplish some of our goals.

This embedded approach, where faculty members initiated programs in communities they were already a part of, allowed for a certain distance between the university and the neighborhood. The University of Pennsylvania is in University City, a West Philadelphia neighborhood, but most of our drop-in locations are in South Philadel-

phia. While University City is a diverse area, the overall education level is much higher than Philadelphia as a whole: less than 50% of Philadelphians over the age of 25 have some education beyond high school, while 75% of University City residents do (“The State of University City”). The movement from university to neighborhood has been a focal point of recent research, where those like Duggart et al. emphasize the importance of “minding the gap” between these spaces. In our project, we tried to respond to this difference through this embedded model, volunteering where we live. In other words, we did not go to a community: We were in our community.

Another benefit of this embedded model is that it has helped us navigate some of the tensions between university and neighborhood. This is perhaps exemplified in the reactions of writers who make use of our writing sessions. Many who seek our services value the university imprint as evidence of the sessions’—and, indeed, the faculty volunteers’—legitimacy. This can lead to a complex discussion about expertise, where the writer will insist on their own deficit when encountering a “real” writer from the university. However, more often than not—and, indeed, much to our surprise—many people who utilize the drop-in writing session do so without realizing it is staffed by university writing instructors. Instead, for these writers, it is the library itself that provides legitimacy to the program. Many times, patrons of the library will assume we are library staff and ask non-writing related questions: how to get a library card, how to check out a book, and what programs are upcoming. Given the diversity of responses to our position vis-a-vis the institutional spaces we represent and inhabit, our writing project has tried to operate not as one or the other, but in the in-between, interstitial position of neighbor.

Writing in Place

Despite knowing the neighborhoods well, we could not anticipate the diverse writing projects in our communities. In this, we joined others who have had questions and concerns about what community literacy located in place could look like. Nearly half of our clients are looking for job-search writing skills, commonly resumes, application forms, or cover letters. Less anticipated by the critical writing faculty, but also common, are Philadelphians who have been working on creative writing projects including novels and short stories. We expected, but have had fewer clients, who come to the writing drop-in service for help on student papers. Finally, we have had a handful of clients who are coming just to write or to talk about writing—and sometimes, really, just to talk.

All these projects have given us insight into the rich writing lives that our neighbors are living. As we reflected on these different writing encounters, we have found Rousculp’s framework of a “rhetoric of respect” useful in understanding our own work. Rousculp defines a rhetoric of respect as “draw[ing] attention to how we use language in relation with others: how we name and classify, how we collaborate, how we problem-solve” (25). Drawing on ecocomposition theory, Rousculp emphasizes the importance of place in developing and understanding her analytic framework.

For Rousculp, this place-based rhetoric of respect describes the responsive and flexible operations often required in community writing work.

Because we work at diverse locations across the city, our tactics need to be responsive to the needs of different library patrons and neighborhood expectations. Our model is constructed collaboratively, through a rhetoric of respect that allows each session to be developed by the writer and the needs, desires, and expectations that writer brings to the session. We enact this *in place* and are, therefore, attuned specifically to the way that neighborhood differences impact how each session is constructed. This has led to each location developing idiosyncratic differences, or personalities.

The authors all live and volunteer in South Philadelphia, yet at different branch locations. The Fumo Family Library is located on a main thoroughfare in the city, within blocks of a subway stop. Led by a branch librarian who has been a champion of our program, many of Fumo's patrons live in the surrounding neighborhood. The Charles Santore Library is located in a quieter, more residential area, home especially to young families and professionals. The Whitman Library is the newest addition to our writing project; it is located on a main avenue of South Philadelphia and easily accessible by public transit. Most of its patrons live in the neighborhood, and there is a small yet active contingent of young people who frequent the library.

Across all of our experiences, the branch librarians have become vocal advocates and partners of the program. In each branch, the librarians let patrons know about the project and encourage people to use the service. Our partnership with the branch librarians has been critical to any claim to success this project can make, and we have greatly appreciated their frank insights and conversations about what has been working and what needed to be amended to best collaborate with the library patrons.

The writing drop-in program at the Whitman Library is staffed by Patrick Manning. The Whitman Library has a large dedicated children's area on the west side of the building and a shared adult and teen section on the east side. The writing sessions at Whitman occur in the adult/teen section. In this section, there are rectangular tables nestled between the bookshelves with four chairs each, and there is one area with more comfortable seating. When multiple writers attend, Patrick typically moves from table to table to work with the different writers, so there isn't always one set location where sessions occur.

The Whitman Branch sees a diverse population of writers and sees writers working on resumes, essays, journalism, application materials, and even a self-help book. And while attendance can fluctuate, there have been two dedicated writers who have attended every session and formed a *de facto* writing group. One writer spends afternoons at the library after school and another comes to the library as part of her home-schooling curriculum. At a shared table, the two work on different creative writing projects. One writer has been working on an epic poem about the past and present of American racism; another writer has hundreds of pages of fan fiction set in a video game universe. Together, these two writers ask for writing prompts and share their writing with each other. Periodically, Patrick checks in on their work but gives them space to think and write without constantly reading over their shoulders. This

organic writing group has been visible in the library, and it has served as an advertisement for the writing project, encouraging other writers to inquire about the writing sessions.

One of the writers who approached upon seeing this writing group was a high school student applying to an SAT-prep course. The writer needed to write a personal statement, a genre she hadn't written before. With Patrick, she went over the expectations of the genre, and she decided to begin with her personal experience in a refugee camp. She asked—unsure and concerned—if it was all right to discuss this aspect of her life in a personal statement. This question was asked with a deep complexity. Not only: is the refugee camp experience genre-appropriate; but also: will it hurt my chances at getting into the program? Will it be overly problematic? Overly pathetic? Here, it is possible to see Rousculp's rhetoric of respect enacted. In this circumstance, such a framework describes the importance of an open dialogue about what the writer was comfortable with sharing and to what purpose.

In a different part of South Philadelphia, the Fumo Branch has developed its own distinct personality as well. It serves a different population, located as it is along a main thoroughfare and at a convenient public transit stop. At Fumo, two faculty (including Dana Walker) have been working with a range of writers. The Fumo branch is small, with about eight tables in the teen/adult section that are available for people to sit and work. Because of the library's size, we always have a visible place there. Depending on the number of clients, the writing consultant will usually rotate between tables—starting a project with one writer, then moving to the next while the other works independently, then looping back to check in.

At this branch, we have seen writing projects that we were anticipating such as resumes and cover letters. Indeed, about half our clients are doing some kind of career-related writing. Most frequently, these encounters have been one-offs. Someone comes to get feedback on their resume, and we never see them again. For example, in one session Dana worked with a woman on her resume and cover letters. Going through a mid-career transition, the majority of the session was spent talking about audience and how to portray previous experiences in a way that could match the employer's needs. At the end of the session, the writer laughed and said that she hoped she would never have to come back again, adding that if she did it would mean she hadn't gotten a job.

Other clients have often arrived with projects that we couldn't have anticipated. We have residents who are working on short stories and novels, writing school papers, or struggling with how to cite sources. We have also worked with retirees who just want to improve their writing as a goal in itself. One client has started writing a journal in his spiral notebook and when he comes to the session he often asks for a prompt and writes for about thirty minutes. When asked what he wants to write, he says that he just wants "to practice and get better." As with our colleagues at other branches, we are working to define each session in collaboration with the writer and what would best help each reach their goals. Many of those who seek our services are, unlike students, working without the pressure of a deadline. They can come back at any time if they are finding the service useful.

Just a few blocks north, at the Santore Branch, located in a residential part of the city, the Community Writing Library Project has developed in some ways similarly to our other branches, and in other ways, unique to the particular location and clientele. This is a smaller branch, with one large central room with books and tables where people work and groups meet. This is where John Kehayias sits at a table with a sign informing people of the drop-in service. While this branch has also primarily seen one-off sessions for resume updates and cover letters, as well as the occasional creative writer, one client has been attending the two-hour weekly sessions to work on English literacy. This has involved providing writing prompts for both in-person sessions and for practice at home, as well as responding to a variety of materials the client brings in. In this and some other branches, we are continually trying to assess what role we should play for language learners. While some of our faculty have experience in teaching English as a second language, our shared expertise is in teaching writing—distinct areas of expertise. Typically, multilingual clients are not seeking instruction in English, but rather assistance with a writing project, such as a cover letter.

In all branches, we have encountered writing interactions that we had not predicted. As writers, and instructors of writing, we know—in fact we teach—the importance of writing. But even we did not truly examine the community-building role of writing. In our case, this has not necessarily been in a large-scale community action or engagement. Rather, it has been more in building “community of relationships” (Morse). For some of our clients, writing serves as a means of connection, a basis for conversation and discussion. Perhaps never having had a writing community before, our drop-in clients can use the service to engage in a meaningful discussion of their work.

In addition, we have noted how we as faculty have become *embedded* in our own neighborhood libraries, which has led us to become more deeply involved in our communities. This has occurred in accidental, random ways through the building of a community of relationships. For example, our faculty have seen writing partners at children’s soccer games and at local bars and restaurants. These connections are brief, to be sure, but they do suggest how writing builds neighborhood intersections both outside of standard institutions *and* beyond the practice of writing itself.

Conclusion: Limitations and Future Directions

The strength of the project has been its ability to adapt and spread. Indeed, in many ways the project has been collaboratively designed by those who use it—the writers and our library partners. While this flexible architecture has enabled some success, we are hitting some of the limits of this approach.

For example, the decision to partner with the public library system has made this project feasible, both because of their infrastructure and because the librarians have been central to promoting the drop-in hours. Nonetheless, we are also aware that we are working with a small subsection of our neighbors as a result. Our hours are constrained by not only our own teaching and other responsibilities, but the hours of each branch. For some, the publicly-funded, neighborhood-based library system may

not feel like a comfortable place to seek writing support. Many might feel more secure seeking help within their community churches and social clubs. Additionally, we tend to work in public areas of the libraries, which may not be the best fit for everyone.

Also, we haven't struck the right balance in terms of utilization. At times we are at, and even over, capacity in terms of writers. At other times, we sit alone or with one other person. Attendance can also vary widely across branches, where one branch is regularly over-capacity while another is frequently under-utilized. As a result, we have begun exploring possibilities to introduce more neighbors to the drop-in writing project. For example, we have discussed the possibility of introducing workshops which might increase foot traffic and word-of-mouth, but also increases our own costs to prepare materials and workshops. In addition, we are looking into doing a better job of marketing the project. We may reach out to students in Penn's Wharton Business School to help us develop marketing materials for our community writing project. We have also explored putting up posters and visiting local churches, bodegas, pizza shops, and other places that offer an opportunity to get the word out about our writing project.

Finally, because we focused on an embedded approach, our project has been limited to the neighborhoods where faculty live. Although the neighborhood library branches where we work do serve a diverse community, our project is not reaching many of the city's neighborhoods, particularly those in North Philadelphia. In addition, this embedded approach has limited the staffing options. Most writing drop-in sessions are staffed by only one CWP faculty member. This means that if a volunteer is ill or otherwise unable to attend, then the writing drop-in session is cancelled. Likewise, if a volunteer decides to no longer continue with the project, then the library is left without the writing drop-in project altogether.

Because of this, we continue to grapple with the question of expansion. Whereas we had hoped to navigate the university-community divide by committing to an embedded model—where we worked in the neighborhoods where we lived—we now see the limitations of this model insofar as we do not have faculty who live in every neighborhood in the city. We need to think of how to serve more libraries across the city and how to do that with limited resources. Pursuing external funding may be an option, but figuring out personnel continues to be a challenge. We hope to find ways to meaningfully expand to other neighborhoods while preserving the benefits of the embedded approach.

As we navigate these changes and adjustments, we are aware that in many ways we cannot apply ready-made solutions given the unique experiences of each community and neighborhood. Thus far, our flexible, place-based approach has allowed us the ability to accommodate each new writing project a writer brings to the session. We are encouraged by these outcomes and look forward to continuing to work, revise, and develop this project as a place for writers to write in their own neighborhood.

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Author Bios

Dana Walker, who holds a PhD in Information Science, is a Lecturer in Critical Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. Her current research focuses on information literacy. At Penn she teaches undergraduate writing seminars in communications and psychology, with experience working with a range of students from different writing backgrounds and needs. She also enjoys exploring the varied cuisines of her South Philadelphia neighborhood.

Patrick Manning is a Lecturer in Critical Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his PhD at McMaster University in English and Cultural Studies. His current research examines the cultural geography of the US Rust Belt, and he is working on a collection of short stories that considers the relationship between place, class, and gender. He lives in South Philadelphia with his spouse and two sons.

John Kehayias received a BA in Physics and Mathematics from Columbia University and a PhD in Physics from the University of California, Santa Cruz. After working for five years as a postdoctoral researcher in theoretical physics in Japan and the US, he joined the faculty of the Critical Writing Program at the University of Pennsylvania in 2017.