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Issues in Community Literacy

Writing Group in an Emergency: Temporary Shelter

Alison Turner

Abstract

The author shares the challenges of facilitating a writing group in a temporary emergency shelter in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. She shows how within this constantly changing environment and its safety protocols, community literacy was as difficult to establish as it was vital to make available. Exploring some of the best practices in community literacy, including reciprocity (Miller et al.), fruitful forms of conflict (Westbrook), “meaningful acts of public rhetoric” (Mathieu and George), and flow (Feigenbaum), the author proposes that this challenging environment made possible new shapes for each of these concepts. This experience suggests that while best practices can guide creation of a writing group during an emergency, an emergency, in turn, can generate innovation with these best practices.

In June 2020, twelve writers and I pulled card tables away from their positions in front of a large TV showing a muted musical that no one was watching. We fit the tables into a choppy circle, between a stall that advertised *Nachos!* but whose garage door was rolled down, and a thick black curtain covering the entrance to stadium seating. We were in an event center, but we were not here to see a wrestling match or celebrate a high school graduation; instead, we wore masks and had to yell through them to hear each other. We were adapting to a global crisis that put us in strange settings with new purposes—and we were trying to write about, through, despite, or during that crisis.

In early April of 2020, the Denver Coliseum was transformed into a 24/7 emergency shelter for women and trans folx experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coliseum served this purpose until early August 2020, when, for logistical reasons, current guests were offered shelter in a variety of other locations and men experiencing homelessness moved in. The Coliseum was a collaborative effort between the City of Denver, several agencies serving women and trans folx experiencing homelessness before the pandemic, and at least two volunteer organizations. People’s “essential” needs were well taken care of in this shelter: three hot meals a day, showers, laundry, an indefatigable team of medical volunteers, and, against the odds, only rare cases of COVID-19. But what of a person’s other essential needs?

As a part-time, non-essential city employee, I was offered a redeployment position to help at the Coliseum for ten hours each week, where, within commendable

physical safety, I saw the human need for communion and creativity begin to sprout. I often passed by people writing in notebooks, their backs against one concrete wall or another, or arranging pages of handwritten text across card tables. Brightly colored pages torn out of coloring books grew over the concrete walls; a guest began a Bible study group on Wednesday evenings; another organized walks down to the river one night a week. And, after six weeks of deliberation, on Friday afternoons there was the Coliseum writing group.

In this essay, I share the story of the Coliseum writing group that began and ended during the COVID-19 pandemic. I celebrate this drop-in group as a space of community writing that created a form of shelter within an emergency shelter. I also explore the challenges that prevented this group from achieving the standards of reciprocity (Miller et al.), fruitful forms of conflict (Westbrook), “meaningful acts of public rhetoric” (Mathieu and George), and flow (Feigenbaum), that many practitioners of community literacy aim to create. I lead the following sections, with permission, with excerpts from a story written by one of the most prolific and passionate writers in the group, Gabriel.¹ An apocalyptic, impressionistic break-up story written from an “I” to a “you” about several forms of pandemics, Gabriel’s work evokes the feeling of emergency and the search for shelter that I explore. I use these excerpts in the order in which they appear in his piece.

I. Grasping for Reciprocity: “The communication was staticky as we tried to regain the knowledge of each other’s damage from the plague that rose across our lands.”

As a writer and a student of community writing, I knew that the tougher the situation, the more urgent the need for writing in community—but how would people responsible for other definitions of “urgent” and “need” perceive a writing group? Seeking partnership between myself as facilitator, guests as participants, and staff as supporters, I asked guests I saw writing if they would like a group, and most said that they would; getting direct answers from staff was more complicated. I valued and wanted to create what Elisabeth Miller, Anne Wheeler, and Stephanie White call the “circular work of reciprocity” between institution and community partner (175), but how could I join a reciprocal relationship with an amorphous conglomerate of organizations and different branches of the city, everything patched together in emergency fashion to hold water as quickly and efficiently as possible? How could I communicate to the people responsible for the immediate physical safety of 300 shelter guests that we needed to add space and time into the daily schedule for a writing group? The question in an emergency setting was not how can I “give...back to the community through renewed understandings of writing” (Miller et al. 175) so much as it was *would a writing group do anything that would increase the odds of someone contracting a deadly virus?* Would these organizations value the role of writing in an emergency?

Even before navigating the possibility of reciprocity, however, I faced the more immediate challenge of identifying whom among the scattered flow chart of organizations would grant permission and provide support for a writing group. The collaborative staffing of the Coliseum meant that each organization brought their own sta-

tus quo for how “shelter work” is most effective and what needed to be prioritized: I needed to determine not only who had the authority to grant permission, but also who would be open to the idea. While a colleague of mine already facilitating a group in the nearby men’s emergency shelter offered generous mentorship as I tried to establish this writing group, different organizations staffed each shelter, so seeking support for a Coliseum writing group required starting from scratch. I first tried an email to several City of Denver employees responsible for the shelter’s creation, an email that passed from person to person over weeks, no one believing themselves to be the approving authority. None of these decision makers had ever operated an emergency shelter during a global pandemic before. None of them had thought about how a writing group might fit into an emergency shelter during a global pandemic.

After several weeks, the email chain wrapped around one particular supervisor who the handful of city and shelter employees agreed might be the one to say “yes.” This staff member, a tireless woman responsible for large and small-scale operations in the Coliseum, in addition to her full time job at a day shelter, rarely answered emails and was the kind of person you couldn’t catch during a break because she was never on a break—but sometimes she was in the break room. Each time I walked into the break room determined to pitch the idea of a writing group, she’d be discussing new protocols for hazardous materials with medical staff or how to maintain trauma-informed care when kicking someone out because they were found using meth. Could I really interrupt with, “Excuse me, I was wondering if we could start a writing group?”

I *did* do this, several times, and finally, six weeks after the Coliseum opened, I got the green light. I was not an academic institution, and I did not have a community partner. After approval from staff, no one checked in on the group, asked for updates, or offered feedback. I was an individual whose community partner was initially the *possibility* of a writing group, a space carved out in place and time, in which I wondered, every Friday, whether anyone would help me fill it. After approval from staff, the reciprocal relationship was between myself and the writers, a group that was ever changing.

Facilitating a writing group that was not beholden to an institutional goal offered great freedom, but with this freedom came scattered focus. I printed flyers and taped them around the arena, sometimes next to “Masks Required” posters, sometimes under extinguished “Cocktail and Taco Special!” signs, vestiges of another time. I could see that the signs would be swallowed into the concrete walls and buried in the movement of security screenings at the entrance, the long, spreading and contracting lines for meals, laundry, and showers, and an art table full of haphazard materials and information. Instead of through flyers, the first meeting was rallied together by a writer I call Rhonda, who had spent all week tapping people for the group and reminding them to come. By the time we got the tables into their boxy circle, Rhonda waved a sign-up sheet and yelled, “Come on ladies, we need to show them with this writing class that we’re not just sitting around!” I had not prepared a *class*, nor did I know who *they* were or why they needed to see what Rhonda thought they did. Did all

twelve writers on that first day think the group was *for* something beyond the circles of a concrete arena during an emergency? If so, what?

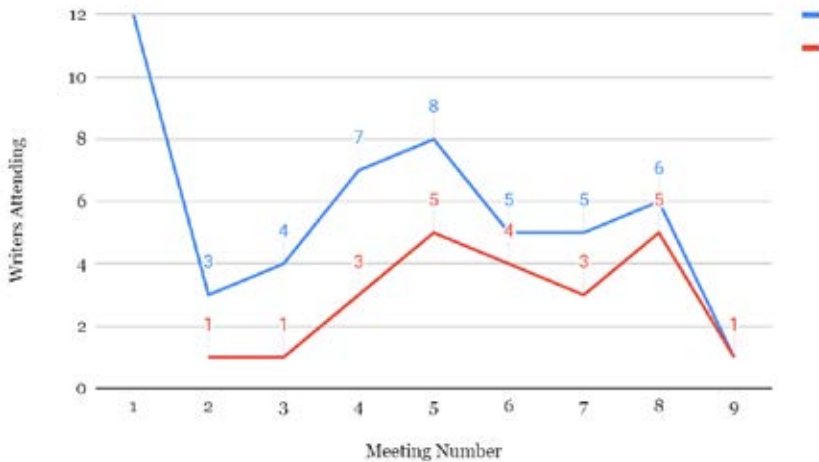
Reciprocity between myself and writers, without an institution in the middle to anchor us to a particular goal, required more explicit communication about what a writing *group* was than I had at first expected. There would be no certificate or credit for participating, because it was not a *class* or *program*: this was about the act of writing and possibly nothing more. After the first group, I added a sprawling extra statement to the flyers that previously provided only basic information about time and place: “This group is open to all writers regardless of experience and materials are provided. This space is for all writers to use for writing, thinking about writing, and reading the writing of others.” Reciprocity during an emergency was a relationship that had to change and bend every week, but whose overall aim was to provide time, space, and inspiration to write. It was not about developing a “circular work of reciprocity” (Miller et al. 175) with a community partner, but about becoming a part of the circle that functioned as shelter. Reciprocity in an emergency was not about a “renewed understanding of writing” (Miller et al. 175) but about the act of writing as a form of renewal.

II. Coliseum Contact Zone: “Swollen tendons, and erupting nerves from capture of an illusion that a plague can replace a spouse. I hereby declare war upon all in my path to the pursuit of happiness.”

On the Friday of the second group, Rhonda was no longer in the shelter and no one knew where she’d gone. Her social capital was much greater than mine, and the group was never as large as it was that first meeting. As the weeks went on, we had a steady mix of new and returning writers (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: Number of total writers (blue) and repeat writers (red) at the Coliseum writing group over the summer of 2020.

Coliseum Writing Group Attendance: Summer 2020



The challenges of facilitating a writing group whose members are constantly in motion meant that every Friday, anything could happen. Anjali Nerlekar and Jill Zasadny describe a similar experience facilitating a writing group in a transitional facility as one of “polyphonic” dialogue (42) that could become a “cacophony” spinning away from any agenda: “what about our schedule [?...]and they made us ask ourselves should anyone be in charge in quotation marks [sic]” (43). While polyphony and challenged agendas are wonderful in writing groups, this kind of motion makes it difficult to establish an identity based on what Nels Highberg, Beverly J. Moss, and Melissa Nicolas call “group rules” (2). How could an identity develop when the only constants were me and the space? Just as enacting reciprocity was compressed into an hour and between current writers, rather than spread over a semester with an institution, writing group identity was also created, enacted, and taken down in each meeting.

The “polyphony” of the Coliseum writing group came from writers ranging from those with notebooks full of poems and ideas, to a woman who produced a publishable rap about her father within three minutes then never came again, to people who, after a five-minute space of time to respond to a prompt, found one sentence and were not sure if it was the “right” one, to a woman I call Isa with long gray hair and a beanie resting on top of her head, who was legally blind and could not read words on the page. In addition to verbal invitations to people I saw throughout the week with a pen and paper, fifteen minutes before each group, a staff member announced via microphone to the 300-cot dormitory that “The writing group will begin in fifteen minutes!,” a call that occasionally inspired a few people to join. Most new writers came from the lap I did around the upstairs arena directly before each class, orally tapping on shoulders: “Just so you know, we’re having a writing group....” Some people came to escape and to reflect, to learn and to share; some came because they were too shy

to say no to me or the friend who dragged them there; some came to pass the time between lunch and dinner.

Alongside this weekly new iteration of group norms and culture around the writing table, writers negotiated the more consistent, but also more complex, norms of the Coliseum that surrounded us. Evelyn Westbrook's celebration of writing groups as an example of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone that "legitimizes the role of conflict and difference in literacy communities" (232) was unlikely to occur in our scattered hours together. Conflict, productive or otherwise, was more likely brought to the table than started around it. For example, once a writer began to cry while writing a fictional story inspired by a print of an R.C. Gorman painting. I was about to approach her to check in when she stood up, handed me a note, looked at the ground, and walked away. The note said the following:

"I am unable to concentrate because [another writer present] got in my face drunk yesterday. This is why I'm so upset. I came to try not to think about my abuse. And I tried...I'm sorry."

This note tore me in two directions: I wanted the space to be for everyone, both the writer who allegedly got drunk and rowdy the night before, and the writer who is vulnerable with her own addictions and is sensitive to triggers. For the next meeting, I designed activities to allow both of these writers to continue participation, but I never saw either of them again. How could we build our own group norms when we were one of so many circles, one site of collision from so many lifeboats looking for space to dock?

There may have been other moments of interpersonal triggering around our table that were blocked by my blind spots, but the table also made possible a unique form of togetherness. Writers whom I'd only seen alone in the hallways, alone at the meal tables, alone in a sea of 300 cots, laughed and joked with other writers around our boxy circle. And though these connections dissolved into the crowded and moving daily schedules directly after the group, and I continued to see those same writers alone throughout the days and weeks, different combinations of communion returned during the next group. Some guests carried a loneliness that appeared to run deep, a developed resilience to the constriction that occurs at the center of circles within circles; the people who returned to the writing group the most often seemed to be the hungriest for community. The group seemed to give permission for a temporary camaraderie that had nowhere else to grow when living in temporary, living in emergency.

III. "Meaningful Acts of Public Rhetoric": "Stay indoors as one disease spreads from skin to organs, to blood, to mind, to protect us from another that seeks to put us in a snow white sleep."

Halfway through the summer, I learned of a local newspaper collecting Denver pandemic experiences and perspectives. The call was for essays of 1,000 words or less, with an author's photo, considered on an ongoing basis, and I wondered if some of the writers in the Coliseum might be interested. When I contacted the editor, he

seemed excited about publishing work from the Coliseum, though he would not budge on the photo requirement, even after I explained that some people staying in shelters don't want to be identified.

When I pitched the publication opportunity to the writing group, only Gabriel brought back a submission. She handed me seven hand-written pages, front and back, which I typed and excerpt in this essay: the piece was over 1,600 words, muscular with pungent metaphors, and did not mention Denver. There were rats and wounds and puss, and I knew right away that it would be too gritty for a section in a local newspaper for which an author's photo was required. Gabriel's bird's-eye view soared above Denver, up high enough to see that any of us could get the virus at any minute, but only because before COVID, any of us could have gotten something else: hit by a bus, the jackpot, a section 8 voucher, an eviction notice, a first line for a new poem. Gabriel did not want to edit down to 1,000 words, anyway. And he definitely did not want to submit a photo.

When the writing group began, I dreamed of producing the kind of "meaningful acts of public rhetoric" that Paula Mathieu and Diana George discuss when sharing examples of "delivery systems" that serve as "advocacy for and by homeless people" (132). After each writing group, the way I viewed the world shifted, sometimes subtly and sometimes significantly. I wanted others living outside of the shelter to hear these writers, and, more than anything, I wanted these writers to feel heard. Mathieu and George write that the "aim" of advocacy for people experiencing homelessness "is simply to be heard, to let the public know that oppositional voices do exist" (138). But writers in the group had little interest in publishing their work, reaching wider audiences, or, for some, having any audience at all.

As with reciprocity and group norms, a form of "public rhetoric" developed that was not in the form I had expected, but that was particular to this emergency shelter. Rather than circulating to a public outside of the Coliseum, work created in the writing group found a "delivery system" within those circular walls. At the end of each session, I invited writers to make a more "finished" version of something they had written. While I had intended this to be a form of drafting, in which writers might consider word choice or organization, often it meant adding stickers or using colored pencils on the original piece. For those who agreed, I hung final pieces over closed vendor doors in two droops of clotheslines, attaching work with clothespins. The space started with one closed eye lid, then two, then a double layer on one side (see photo), and a double layer on the other. A few weeks in, writers were no longer peer pressured into hanging their work but eager to do so. One writer took a picture of her displayed rendition of Langston Hughes' "I, Too," in which writers wrote their own poem within Hughes' first and last lines, and showed it off to staff and guards.



Mathieu and George argue that the changes that can come from writing that advocates for people experiencing homelessness happen not only on the page, but also “in the writing’s circulation, in how it works in the world, fostering conversation, creating pressure, and even creating unexpected allies” (144). This gallery, though limited to an internal audience of the Coliseum, nevertheless formed new alliances. By attracting not only guests, but also staff and guards, the gallery reversed the movement of circulation: writing did not go out to an audience, an audience came to the writing. Viewing this work offered a pause for people whose job it was to be on guard, to enforce the rules, and to prioritize physical safety. In this gallery, they could see the imaginations, dreams, and aspirations within the bodies they protected. These clotheslines of writing became something to grab onto, a form of lifeline to keep whoever stopped to read from floating too far adrift in this emergency, offering a moment of emergence from the sea.

IV. Grasping for Flow: “The ideas run through the vents, pumped out through water pipes of becoming someone else as they try to escape their flaws of being inhuman.”

My vision for a writing group in the Coliseum before I got permission to facilitate one, and before I knew who would come or what they would write when they came, was to offer Coliseum guests a place that offered the possibility for flow. Paul Feigenbaum’s challenge to community literacy practitioners that we do our “best work” by creating flow, “the condition of being so resolutely focused on an activity that one loses sense of external time and space” (33), was, I thought, all the more urgent in the Coliseum’s emergency ecology. Feigenbaum suggests that practitioners encourage self determination, by which writers “feel a sense of purpose and connectedness to others” (34); enact wise mentorship, in which the facilitator might “maintain high expectations of all students..., and provide rigorous feedback” (34); and foster a listen-

ing stance, in which everyone “listens as robustly as they speak” (34). How could we enact what Feigenbaum calls the “principles” that help to create flow (34) when each Friday’s group created its own norms and needs that were constantly in relationship with an emergency?

I followed Feigenbaum’s principles like a North Star that only sometimes showed itself through the storm over the sea. Given the circumstances, any sense of “purpose” could be no greater than the length of each meeting, my ability to offer “rigorous feedback” was inhibited by the possibility that some writers wanted simply to write more so than to work on writing, and “robust” listening was constantly sabotaged by fans, masks, and distance. Perhaps most confounding, the safety rules that make possible shelter during a pandemic were designed against flow. There were consequences for removing a mask out of excitement, or for jumping up and hugging someone; and, as I knew from witnessing angry guests be asked to leave the Coliseum, sometimes for a few nights, sometimes for good, there were consequences for getting angry. We were set at sea without goals or requirements for the group, but we were also limited in how our bodies could express emotion. We had to keep one foot on shore while also, somehow, feel the pull of flow against the other foot.

Like the other components of community literacy, the Coliseum writing group found a form of flow that was particular to its own terrain. Flow in the Coliseum was possible only for brief moments, more so than entire meetings. Some writers were able to “los[e] sense of external time and space” (Feigenbaum 33) only for that resting moment between someone’s angry yells at a guard at the entrance and when the cleaning crew came by with their packs of chemicals, spraying tables and chairs. These small, disconnected moments made possible flow that was not smooth like running water, but a form of paddling against stagnation. Flow in the Coliseum was not about losing sense of time and place but about finding a rhythm within it.

V. Conclusion: “I will bid my thanks as one plague becomes stories, myth, but the other remains to scorch our very being Both created diabolically to trap us in a box with a question mark stamped upon its open jaws. So you see my state of mind is to apocalyptically prepare from one plague to another.”

Feigenbaum ends his thoughts on flow by challenging “engaged infrastructures,” such as the Coalition for Community Writing, or, I propose, a community writing group, that they “should never be a given” (37). Practitioners, he argues, “need to be ready to tear down what they have built if the benefits no longer outweigh the costs and if the infrastructure has become an end in itself rather than a means to promoting social change, community building, and flow” (37). Once again, the writing group in the Coliseum required an adaptation to this advice: this was a temporary emergency shelter, so from the first, we knew that the Coliseum writing group would be torn down from the outside.

When women and trans folx moved out of the Coliseum, guests were notified a week in advance—staff did not find out much sooner than that. The last meeting of the writing group was three days before the move. The chaos of change and uncertainty began to crack open anew, and the arena was thick with anxiety. Only Isa came

to our last meeting, this time before I could tap her shoulder. She seemed un-phased by the move. She seemed like she'd done this before.

The staff break rooms became cluttered with boxes holding the coffee urn, envelopes of masks, half-empty bottles of hand sanitizer, each box labelled with one of the three new locations across which guests would be divided. Men would move into the Coliseum one week after the women and trans folx moved out, and I considered leaving the gallery up to welcome them into their new home. But the Coliseum would be deep-cleaned, cleaning crews and security teams were being shuffled, and no one knew who would be working where: I pictured the gallery sucked into a shop vac. I had to rescue it.

I let down the lifelines of the gallery one clothing pin at a time. Some of the pieces were made by writers I hadn't seen in months, others had been put up the previous week. I didn't know where any of these writers would go next, or if I would see them again. I put the papers in an envelope and made a messy bundle of the line. I would keep all of it for later. We were still in an emergency and you never know what you might need, or when.

Note

1. This writer asked that I use the name Gabriel for this essay. Gabriel uses she/her, he/his, and they/their pronouns.

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Author Bio

Alison Turner is a recent PhD graduate in English and literary arts from the University of Denver. Her critical work appears in *Reconfigurations: A Journal for Poetics and Poetry / Literature and Culture*, *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*, and *American Archivist*. She is an emerging community-engaged scholar interested in archive-making as community literacy praxis and is a 2020–2021 Her-story/Coalition for Community Writing Fellow.