

Writing for a Reason

An inner-city literacy center encourages students to make their voices heard by writing what - and how - they think.

by Debra Viadero

The idea of going to a community center two afternoons a week to work on writing projects didn't appeal to Michael Mossesso. Writing in school had never been pleasant for him. In fact, a high school English teacher once told him his writing was "too scary and depressing."

But Mossesso, a gregarious 18-year-old growing up in one of this city's troubled North-side neighborhoods, knew the youth coordinator at the Community Literacy Center. Besides, he wanted a chance to "check out the females" who might show up. So he went.

Now, Mossesso says it was well worth the trip. He discovered that he liked to write after all - at least the way the center let him do it. "It's not like for an English teacher," he explains. "When we do our writing here, that's us that goes into it."

Mossesso also got a chance to make his voice heard by the mayor, city officials, and other people with the power to change the problems in his neighborhood. He learned that every issue has more than one side. And, along the way, he picked up valuable writing and thinking strategies.

Mossesso's experience encapsulates in large part what the Community Literacy Center is all about. Launched in 1989, the center is the product of an unusual partnership between researchers at Carnegie Mellon University and its National Center for the Study of Writing, and the Community House, a 75-year-old settlement house run by a local Presbyterian church.

In this red brick, six-story building, teenagers from the surrounding neighborhoods come together with college-student mentors to write and to talk about their writing. But it's not just the writing that is the focus here. It is what these teenagers do with what they write.

Over the eight weeks the teenagers spend on a typical project, writing is transformed from simple words on paper to a potentially powerful tool for social change. Mentors encourage their charges to write about issues that affect them: gangs and violence, police harassment, stress, teenage pregnancy, local school-suspension policies, and the like. Students gather information and seek out a variety of opinions on their chosen topic. Mossesso's group, for example, invited the police commissioner to come talk about his department's relations with teenagers.

At the end of all the information-gathering, writing, and talking, the teenagers showcase the results in community forums that attract local officials and news reporters.



Standing from left, Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center staff members Joyce Baskins, Lorraine Higgins, Donald E. Tucker, Linda Flower, and Wayne A. Peck

"A lot of grassroots community groups don't see education or literacy as where they're making their mark," says Linda Flower, a Carnegie Mellon professor of rhetoric who also serves as the co-director of the university's writing center. "We're trying to show them that there are much more effective ways to convince people and that education - and not just social service - can help."

"If we achieve anything," she adds, "it's to make the argument that education research gives people thinking strategies they can use to solve problems."

Write From the Heart

Flower's research undergirds the writing practice that goes on here. More than a decade ago, working with other researchers, she began studying how college students and professional writers write. She gave her students tape recorders and asked them to think aloud as they struggled with writing assignments. And she asked the pros to rank the strategies they used to get the job done.

Over the years, Flower identified a number of techniques that experienced writers use - techniques that weren't always obvious to novices. Many professionals, for example, rely on collaborative planning - the idea that writers can better plan their writing by talking it over with someone else. Another strategy is what Flower calls "rival hypothesis thinking." Like the rival hypotheses scholars use, this form of devil's advocacy forces writers to address contrary views and to envision their audience.

Flower spent four years teaching such techniques to Pennsylvania high school teachers through a center

project, and she uses them with her own students. But, she says, “my undergrads at C.M.U. were going to make it in the world regardless of whether they used rival-hypothesis thinking. I was looking for a place where my research could make a real difference.

As luck would have it, Wayne A. Peck, the minister who directs Community House, was looking to make a change, too. He had enrolled in Carnegie Mellon’s rhetorical-studies program, in part to find a new direction for the church’s settlement house.

“One day he said to me, ‘We could really do something with writing at Community House,’ Flower recalls. “He was so persuasive that writing could make a difference.”

What Peck, Flower, and, later, Community Literacy Center director Lorraine Higgins came to believe is that literacy is more than the ability to understand and produce conventional texts. It is a tool. And diverse communities develop their own literacies to suit their particular needs.

In practice, that means students don’t just learn one “right” way to write. And mentors don’t criticize students for grammatical errors if they use black English. In fact, they don’t judge the teenagers simply by what they write but by how their writing helped them achieve their ends.

The center’s approach comes with its share of controversy. Such writers as Lisa Delpit and E.D. Hirsch contend that inner-city children need a solid grounding in standard English and the conventional writing forms used in mainstream culture.

But students aren’t just expressing themselves on paper, say literacy center staff members. They’re writing for a reason. And their collaborative planning sessions force them to apply rigorous thinking to their writing, to think about their intended audiences and their goals, and to confront opposing viewpoints.

“We’re saying what we need is a new discourse,” Higgins says.

A Welcome Voice

Carnegie Mellon students who work at the literacy center get a grounding in these kinds of academic arguments before they arrive. They also learn to ask the young writers collaborative-planning questions to help direct their thinking. The mentors might ask, for example, “What’s your point here?” or “What if someone interprets this sentence this way?”

Even with preparation, the initial sessions between mentor and writer are sometimes awkward. “I get nervous, and I can’t find things to talk about,” says Mandy Kinne, a mentor whose rural Vermont upbringing seemed worlds

away from the life these North-side teenagers know. But eventually, Kinne says, she and her partner found a common ground in the writing project.

Rival-hypothesis thinking seems to be the most popular strategy among center students. They call it “rivaling.” Teenagers like Mossesso say rivaling exercises teach them strategies to make good decisions in all aspects of their lives. But beyond sharpening their rhetorical-thinking skills, rivaling also pushes students beyond what Flower calls the “rhetoric of complaint and blame.”

“Their writing sounds a lot more responsible to people when they acknowledge that there are other positions,” Higgins says, “and that, yes, we can address these as well.”

At the same time, the teenagers offer expertise missing from much of the local debate on community issues. They can argue in a well-reasoned way, for example, why joining a gang was a matter of survival for some of their peers. They can describe how they feel harassed by police officers. They can explain why it doesn’t make any sense to suspend a troublemaking student from school.

“It’s a way to let poor people speak for themselves,” Peck says.

In this former steel town, people are listening. A document the center produced on school-suspension policies has become required reading for the Pittsburgh school board. New police recruits will soon view the group’s videotape on police-teenager relations. And the principal at an area high school plans to incorporate some of the group’s writing techniques as a means for solving racial and socioeconomic conflicts there.

But it’s not clear how well the strategies the teenagers learn here serve them back in their traditional school settings. Mossesso says he now uses collaborative planning for school writing assignments. But Monique Wills, another center writer, hasn’t found it so easy. “If went to school and tried to write like I write here, I’m still not making the grades.”

Of course, there’s no empirical way to prove whether these writing sessions have made a long-term difference in the lives of these students. And the center’s researchers don’t claim that it does.

But Joyce Baskins, the youth coordinator whose friendship first brought Mossesso to the center, says she does see changes in the teenagers who come – some of whom have gone on to college.

“Just for a brief time, they come in and not only do they write and learn to do collaborative planning and learn how to rival,” she says, “they learn how to rival their lives.”