Community Literacy:
Can Writing Make a Difference?

by Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins
With commentary by Linda Flower

The following article is excerpted from Community Literacy by Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins (National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy Occasional Paper No. 34). In this excerpt, Wayne Peck; Lorraine Higgins and I were trying to articulate the generative and tension-filled vision of community literacy that has emerged in the Community Literacy Center's unusual community/university collaborative. Like many in our city, and no doubt in yours, we see the pressing need for a working, "intercultural discourse" – for literate practices and ways of talking, not defined by any single social group, which let members of our urban community cross some formidable barriers of race, class, gender, and economics and build more productive working relations. To the surprise of many urban planners, human service agencies, and grassroots community organizers, however, we argue that new ideas in education can help shape such a conversation. And if that claim doesn't make them skeptical, we go on to argue that writing, and learning to use writing for social action, can sit at the center of such an agenda.

In Community Literacy, this argument is presented as one of the cornerstones of the CLC's philosophy and operating plan. Let me share with you part of the case we build for how education and inquiry can help construct an intercultural discourse in which teens enter a policy discussion about suspension and in which college mentors enter the discourse of inner city teens.

-Linda Flower

The young and the old on Pittsburgh's North Side know it inside and out. The Community House is a six-story, red brick building standing in a city park at the intersection of four very diverse inner–city neighborhoods. As one of Pittsburgh's oldest settlement houses, for almost eight decades the Community House's classrooms, kitchens, offices, gym, and swimming pool have been neighborly places where people of various cultural traditions have constructed and shared a common life. Amid the relentless and sometimes bewildering changes that take place in the lives of urban residents, the Community House is a place of connection where grassroots initiatives like the Community Literacy Center (CLC) are conceived and launched.

Mark is a teenage writer at the Community Literacy Center, or, as he would say, a "rap artist waiting to be discovered." Captivated by the rhythm and rhyme of rap, Mark imagines and sings of a world in which teenagers play powerful roles and have valuable messages to tell. On the street and front stoops, Mark interprets his world and practices his craft with people who listen and respond. He is a bright and resourceful teenager who, like all too many African American males, is frequently suspended from school. In his raps and in his life, Mark flirts with the possibility of joining a gang and becoming a member of a group that at least values his art form.

Mark is a fifteen–year–old at a crossroads. He has important choices to make. He wants to be heard and taken seriously and to have a place to come to work on his dreams. The Community Literacy Center is an alternative forum for Mark's art and argument and a place to begin a broader conversation about the issues he cares most about. In a recent CLC project, for example, Mark and ten other teens used

writing to investigate the reasons for the increase in student suspension in the public schools. To present this "policy paper," Mark and his peers organized a "community conversation" with the mayor, the media, the school board president, principals, and community residents, in which Mark performed a rap written from a teen's perspective and his peers interpreted it for the audience. As the culmination of their eight-week project, the teens also presented a newsletter, "Whassup with Suspension," which has since become required reading for teachers and students in Mark's high school.

In a question/answer segment of the community conversation, Mark remarked to reporters that his college-age writing mentor at the CLC had helped him "find ways to get [his] message across without insultin' people" to the very people he thought never cared. But Mark is not the only one attempting to talk across boundaries. Mentors sign up for Carnegie Mellon's Community Literacy seminar because they too are ready to move out of their own comfort zone of academic practice and campus realities. Under the name of mentor they come as learners to support teenagers like Mark in this hybrid, a community discourse in the making that they, too, struggle to enter. Like the students, the CLC staff inhabit various labels. Community spokeswoman, project leader, African-American male role model, center director, researcher, college professor, graduate student – but the working role everyone shares, as a literacy leader working with writers, takes everyone out of their "home" discourse.

The Role of Education

When the CLC was launched five years ago as a community /university collaborative between the Community House and The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon, it defined community literacy as action and reflection – as literate acts that could yoke community action with intercultural education, strategic thinking and problem solving, and with observation-based research and theory building. But for many, the CLC's most controversial claim was that it was writing – the collaborative work of creating public, transactional texts – that could make a new intercultural conversation possible.
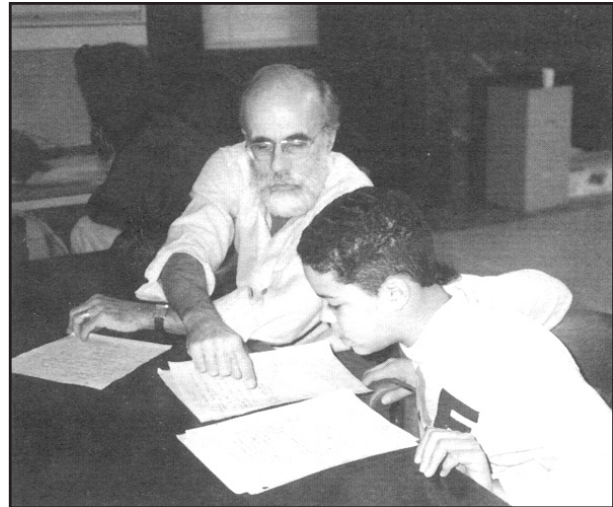
All photographs accompanying this article depict students and their university mentors at the CLC in Pittsburgh

A second working assumption of the CLC is this: Community literacy thrives in an atmosphere of problem solving and a culture of learning where strategies for planning, collaboration, argument, and reflection are explicitly discussed. However, some might ask, can education – or only experience – open doors to this new intercultural discourse? When a discourse is already well-established, there are various ways to enter it. The best by far is to be born into it, because the alternative is likely to be the slow, uncertain process of acculturation (Gee, 1989). But time is a luxury we may not have. Basic writers unprepared for academic discourse, for instance, often struggle through the uncertain process of imitation and slow initiation (Bartholomae,1988).

However, the discourse we are envisioning is made, not found. In constructing and entering an intercultural discourse, the slow clock of acculturation is not feasible, and the tacit, unreflective learning it builds may not be desirable. Lisa Delpit, an African-American educator talking about her experience as an ethnographer in Alaskan native communities, argues for making the tacit explicit:

> I have found it unquestionably easier -psychologically and pragmatically -when some kind soul has directly informed me about such matters as appropriate dress, interactional styles, embedded meanings, and taboo words or actions. I contend that it is much the same for anyone seeking to learn the rules of the culture of power. Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of

'immersion' to learn them, explicit presentations makes learning immeasurably easier *(emphasis added)*. (Delpit, 1988, p. 283)

However, just what knowledge should be put on the table? What should a mutual education for intercultural work do? From his research in minority education, John Ogbu affirms that many multicultural programs do indeed have the power to "foster pride in minority culture… develop new insights into their culture, reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and promote cultural understanding" (Ogbu, 1992, p. 6). However, he argues that understanding is not enough to change the status quo, to allow minorities to succeed in school. In the same spirit, we feel the rhetorical problem of working in the midst of difference calls for more assertive literate practices that go beyond the celebration of difference or beyond the examination of conflicting assumptions and beliefs.
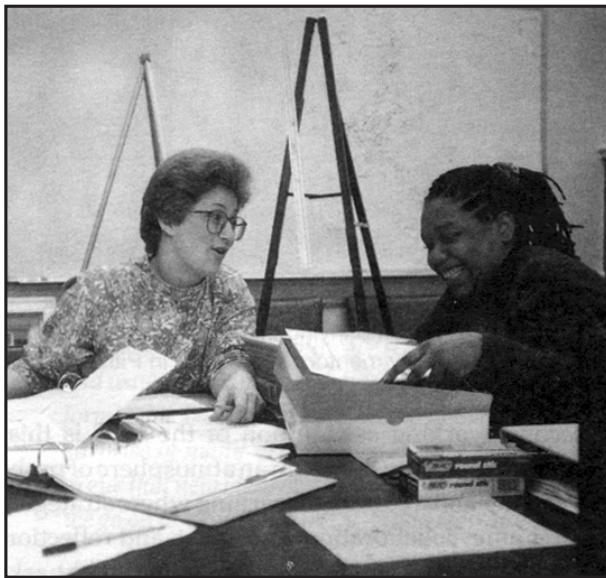
Cognitive rhetoric (the study of writers as thinkers) lets us define the problem this way: the writers at the Community Literacy Center are engaged (like Mark) in a process of *constructing* a negotiated *meaning,* doing so in the face of multiple, often conflicting goals, values, and ideas. As writers confront the hard issues of violence, risk, and respect and envision an audience of teens, teachers, school officials, media, neighborhood residents, politicians, and academics, these outer forces become inner voices shaping the writer's thoughts. Consider the different bodies of knowledge, the attitudes and values, the strategies for persuasion, the social expectations, and the rhetorical demands this event calls into play. Writing calls into being a metaphoric circle of inner *voices* and outer *forces* – voices that speak their advice and demands within the mind of an individual writer who must negotiate this press of possibilities. In an intercultural discourse- in which writers are attempting to listen to an even broader exchange of inner and outer voices, to explore more options and alternatives, to entertain more constraints, connect with more people – meaning making cannot rest with the expression of personal feeling; it can not be the mere reproduction of received wisdom. Meaning making becomes an act of *negotiation* in the face of conflict (Flower, 1994).

Learning to Negotiate A Discourse

This is why we place education at the center of community literacy's intercultural conversation. The process we want to foster is one in which writers construct a negotiated meaning, rising to greater reflective awareness of the multiple voices and sometimes conflicting forces their meaning needs to entertain. The understandings writers come to in text are a provisional resolution constructed in the middle of an internal conversation. As we will see in the struggle of Pierre, writers negotiate (arbitrate) the power relations among conflicting voices as well as negotiate (navigate) the best path among multiple conflicting goods. Such negotiation is not "giving in" or settling for less, but reaching for a more complex version of best. Against a backdrop of face-to-face negotiations of social and cultural difference, writers at the Center are also learning to conduct internal negotiations with voices in their own minds to construct new, more responsive meanings that support a desperately needed, working community conversation.

In community literacy, writing is a response to crisis, to conflict, or to a need for action. It calls for critical awareness, strategic thinking, and reflective learning – a style of learning that unlike the slow shaping of acculturation can rapidly reflect on itself, experiment, and adapt. Writers at the CLC, including the present authors, enter a community of learners where explicit strategies, such as collaborative planning and rivaling, are taught, tried, and talked about and where time out for reflection and self–evaluation is a regular part of the working agenda.

Mentoring Pierre

Pierre is fourteen, popular, quick-witted, assertive, African-American and attracted to the alluring talk and prestige of gangs. In working through the issue of "belonging" in his own mind, he also has a message for adults who fail to see what small neighborhood gangs mean and how they function in the life of inner-city teenagers. His writing mentor from Carnegie Mellon is a white, nineteen-year-old English major who is socially committed but "illiterate" in the discourse of the inner city and hungry for an education outside the classroom. She and the other mentors take an academic course in community literacy that combines an introduction to literacy research, with training in collaborative planning and problem-solving strategies, with an immersion in the CLC's hands-on practice of community literacy.

The pedagogical question is, how can cognitive rhetoric help orchestrate a mutual discourse of discovery between writers and mentors, while at the same time helping Pierre negotiate his personal representation of the issues of gangs? Many mentors come with some experience as tutors, editors, professional writers, or Big Brothers or Sisters – roles where authority and expertise are expected to flow from them to a tutee or child. However, the relationships at the CLC are structured differently around the practice of "collaborative planning" in which a planning partner helps the writer think through tentative ideas and develop more strategic, self-conscious plans for his or her own writing. Equally important, this social, out-loud thinking lets students reflect on their own processes and come to see themselves as thinkers and problem solvers (Flower, Wallace, Norris, & Burnett, 1994).

As the writer/planner in this pair, Pierre holds the authority here; his mentor is a partner and supporter. Pierre's text depends on *his* expertise – on the insight and experience that lets him speak for himself and teens in a public forum. The mentor supports Pierre as a thinker and writer, first by the serious listening that draws Pierre into developing his own jumble of thoughts about the prestige and pressure of gangs, and secondly by challenging him to respond to the real rhetorical problem before him. That means asking Pierre to frame his own *purpose,* to imagine his *audience* (of school board members, parents, reporters, and educational activists), and to examine alternative *textual conventions* (e.g., adding telling details in a story or using direct address to readers) that could help him turn his ideas and purpose into text. The following excerpt captures a personal and intellectual moment when planning becomes difficult. Pierre is working on the story of a fight in which leaving the scene seemed as problematic as staying. At this point, his mentor turns to asking "purpose" questions, trying to see what Pierre means when he says that "the reason people start gangs is power and control." Notice how the mentor draws Pierre into articulating his point, but at the same time challenges him to imagine what he wants this to mean for the reader – a challenge Pierre is not yet ready, on this day, to answer.

Pierre: A lot of gangs form in order to retaliate or express something. The main point though is for power and control. That is the real reason. Shouldn't I say having power and control is the reason?

Mentor: But see that's telling people they should go out and get power and control through gangs. Is that what you want to say?

Pierre: People have their own minds… People can figure it out. I'm just saying what I think.

Wrapped up in the experience and his own mixed feelings about it, Pierre is not yet ready to invite the voices of readers and their interpretations into his negotiation.

Collaborative planning stretches writers to deal with hard problems. Pierre's problem involves moving

from the story he wants to tell to understanding his key point and purpose in telling it. Planning strategies like these, however, are not learned as general rules; they develop as a form of "situated cognition"; they are best learned when they are *used* in a context that offers explicit instruction and modeling as well as a scaffold that helps learners experiment and reflect on the process (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Collaborative planning was designed to make thinking more "visible" by asking writers to talk out, think out their plans with a partner who combines a social support for thinking with a set of metacognitive prompts to make that thinking more critical and strategic (Flower, Wallace, Norris, & Burnett, 1994).
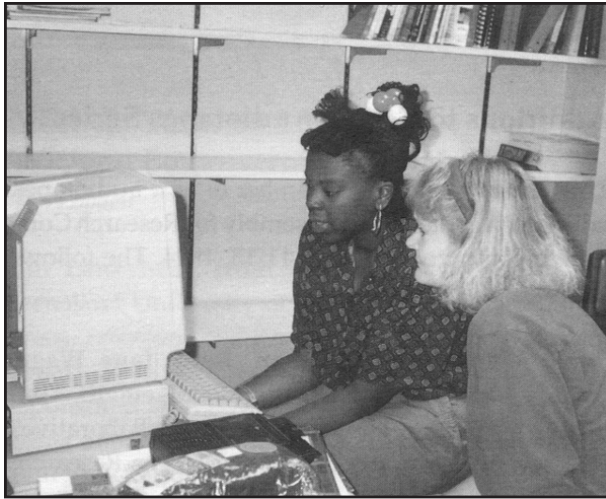
Collaborative planning honors the writer's emerging intentions. In group discussions at the big oval table, everyone learns to take the role of supporter, to listen and to elicit better thinking, and to take the role of planner whose ideas are requested and respected. But writers also need strategies for encouraging generative conflict, for challenging their own ideas and for imagining readers who see things differently. In our university research, this strategy went by the name "rival hypothesis thinking," but the CLC soon turned it to "rivaling" (Higgins, Mathison & Flower, 1992; Flower, Long, Fleming, & Wojahn, 1993). Despite the name, rivaling is not a mere adversarial strategy for advancing your position; it is instead an attempt to expand the writer's own internal monologues into dialogues that consider genuine alternatives, hypotheses, arguments, or positions someone else might bring to the idea in

question. Rivaling brings more voices to the table by asking writers themselves to generate alternative interpretations, to imagine and speak for the responses of others who belong at the table. This may strike some as overly academic. Why is such a strategy – usually identified with academic, scientific, and philosophic thinking – relevant here where analysis is trying to become action? Rivaling is not just an argument move or a way to prepare for what the "opposition" might raise, but a way to respond to open questions – to issues such as risk, respect and the structure of schools – that do not admit of easy or single answers. It responds with an inquiry designed to increase understanding by looking at the bigger picture and other images of reality.

Pierre has now finished his draft describing how a "group of friends" walking downtown turned into a "gang." On sighting a smaller group of Crips, they begin shouting the Bloods' "woo-wee" call that "let's people know who they are." As the uneven encounter turns into a fight a boy is slammed into the street, one hit with bottles and, as the fight moves into the downtown McDonald's, another is thrown through the plate glass window. For Pierre, the event and the act of writing about it are important, exciting, and confusing. He is glad to be done, proud to show the piece to a small group of us around his computer waiting to read. But how should we respond? It ends:

> People are no longer free to walk around in public… A lot of gangs form in order to retaliate against other gangs or out of a need for respect and identity. The main reason, however, is for power and control. If this is the reason why people start gangs, shouldn't it also be the solution?

There is a feeling of uncertainty among the mentors. On the one hand, they want to respect Pierre's authority as a writer explaining the real world teens live in and to understand the different cultural and age-related attitudes they bring to gangs. On the other, they want to speak to the human reality of Pierre's own apparently ambivalent relationship to these gangs. Pierre's mentor had been taking the role of a strong supporter, persisting for elaboration after Pierre thought he had written "enough" and validating Pierre's own sense of accomplishment. The atmosphere of collaboration, however, gives

others the license to broach difficult questions and ask for more. A teenager, seeing the text as part of their group document says, "Yes, but, what is your point?" For her, Pierre's story is not just an expressive act, but a part of the group's "Risk and Respect" newsletter, speaking for teens and to a problem. However, it should be clear that asking Pierre what to make of the story is also asking him to decide what it means to him. Another person in the small knot of readers begins to offer some rival interpretations people might make of this: Some will read it as saying gangs are good. Teens need power, and this gives it. Is that right? Once again, Pierre says, no, he is just telling what happened. But the rival stands, not as a criticism, but as a problem he as a writer might ignore but cannot deny.

At this point, Pierre may really not know all of what he does mean – much less what to do with the text. But the collaborative moment opened the door to personal discussions not only with Pierre but among other writers and mentors and to a continued negotiation with those rival readings. Pierre's final text reflects this on-going, internal dialogue and reflects a new level of strategic thinking for this teen writer.

> I *am telling this story to let other people know how gangs can take over a neighborhood or city with police not able to be there all the time.* I, *myself, didn't feel comfortable being around when this incident happened. What else could* I *do but run, and if* I *ran then the people* I *was with would look a me as a traitor.*

This is a tough call to make. This situation pushes young teenagers into joining gangs for fear of being an outcast. I *am not for joining gangs and I wouldn't advise it to anyone else. But why do* I *and others have to sit around and watch the scene being taken over?* (Johnson, *Risk and Respect,* Spring, 1993)

There are many ways to read the story of Pierre. In the excerpt above, he illustrates how strategies for rhetorical planning and for mentoring coming from the university support Pierre's development as a writer and as a voice in the community. However, intercultural education is a two- way street: at the CLC knowledge coming from the community makes the college student mentor a learner as well.

When mentors move from the campus to the inner city, full of theory , good will and uncertainty , they see how those mainstream literate practices (such as the academic essay that has supported their success in school), can be used, challenged, and transformed into more robust, hybrid kinds of literacy , into writing and performance that may mix policy statement, problem analysis, narrative, and rap into texts that invite more community voices into this discussion. Mentors also see their theoretical understanding of what it means to be literate, to be an educator, and to be a writer tested and qualified. As they enter discourse practices of this community in which they find they are "illiterate," mentors no longer see themselves as the lone possessors of literacy. No longer the expert tutor dispensing knowledge, their expertise as educators lies in supporting the intentions, insights, and needs of less experienced writers. In the midst of building a working relationship with writers like Mark and Pierre, they discover the power of an intercultural discourse in which they have as much to learn as they have to offer. In community literacy, the argument for education cuts both ways – we all have a lot to learn.

-L.F.

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[1]The design and staffing of the CLC reflect its intercultural agenda, which invites people to cross boundaries of race, age, class, and gender. Executive director Wayne Peck (Ph.D., M.Div.) brings 18 years experience in managing the Community House and a background in literacy theory. As director, Lorraine Higgins (Ph.D.) brings argument theory based on research in everyday contexts to the practical problems of structuring collaborative projects. Joyce Baskins brings 20 years of community activism to her advocacy for African-American youth. Donald Tucker brings experience as a jazz musician and construction foreman to engaging inner-city youth in designing community development videos. Elenore Long (Ph.D.) brings her research on literacy and social action to coordinating the CLC's college student mentoring program. Kevin McCartan brings know-how in grassroots, community development and his construction experience to CLC projects. Linda Flower (Ph.D.) is president of the CLC board and co-director, National Center for Study of Writing and Literacy (NCSWL) at Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon. She brings her research in cognitive rhetoric to CLC projects and to the task of supporting problem solving in a community/ university partnership. Peck, Higgins, and Long are affiliate researchers at NCSWL.