

REALIZING COMMUNITY: AN INQUIRY

Franki L. Williams
Carnegie Mellon University
Community Literacy
December 8, 1999

The staff and mentors of the Community Literacy Center are there to encourage and support teenagers as they discover what it is to become cognitive/ deliberative rhetoricians, cultural cross-walkers.^{1,2} Center programs are dependent on the availability of mentors from a local university who sign on for a single semester. In their brief and intense interactions, mentors and teens simultaneously acquire tools to help each other become cultural cross-walkers. It is a journey of discovery and development.

The mentors go into the program armed with a textbook, a syllabus, a program manual, three weeks of training and many preconceived notions about inner-city youth. The teens, on the other hand, seem to come with only a notion that this after school program might be a constructive way to spend time. Historically, the program works. The teens and mentors meet, begin to talk — to build relationships — begin to work together.

One tangible result of the 12-week experience is a resume for each teen that will reflect the teen's new sense of self as a young person who possesses viable skills, knowledge and a unique as well as valuable point of view. Another is the now traditional "Community Conversation" a public forum where plays, poems, and essays about the issues that touch teenager's lives are written, produced and performed by the young people for their parents, teachers, friends, and community leaders. Each performance provides a springboard to inter-generational as well as inter-cultural cross walking.

So, we know that "seeds" are planted at the beginning of the program in the teens and in the mentors. We also know that at the end of the program, both teens and mentors are seen to blossom. We want to know now: 1) when do the seeds germinate and why? If we can better understand the when and why, we might be better able to help the next young people learn sooner, faster, and more.

In kindergarten my classmates and I got to plant bean seeds. The seeds were big enough for our uncoordinated little fingers to handle, and once planted and watered, would grow fast enough to contain the curiosity of most of us. Glenn R., however, would not be contained. He kept digging up his seed to see what was happening. Of course, every time he did that it would kill his plant and he'd have to begin again. Finally, our teacher asked Glenn to bring an old jar or glass to class. She and Glenn carefully planted his latest seed in the dirt, right up next to the glass wall of the washed peanut-butter jar, where we all could see it grow. When we weren't looking at it, it sat in a cut-down oatmeal box to help protect the germinating seed from too much light.

And so it is with the seeds planted at the CLC. If we try to look at them too soon by digging them up, we will surely kill them. There are windows in the process, however, that allow us to peek in on the growth as it transpires. One of those windows is the bulletin board posts. Other are the "Where Am I On the Road to Work: Self Assessment," and the peanut-butter jar/ flowerpot created while we are all working on the teens' personal profiles. The readings help us to understand what we "see" as we observe ourselves and each other at work.

A personal aside — I hated doing the bulletin board posts. I felt so... exposed. But, having to write meant also having to think about and having to draw conclusions about what was happening in the program and in me. I did take a little comfort in knowing that I wasn't alone and that it was acceptable to complain, so long as I was willing to do it "in public."³ Liz articulated some of my issues in her midterm reflections: "I'm learning about this continual process of mentoring that is dynamic, not static, and two-way, not one... I love 'teaching,' but I'm learning how much of a two-way conversation it is, even in the classroom."⁴

Liz, again, pointed to a question raised in the *Community Literacy* paper⁵, "how will a mentor's passive good-will, based on the expectation of being asked to give help, fare in the face of a teenager's strategy of skepticism, invulnerability, and testing?" She answers, "In my own words, I'm afraid of a teen who would come with a defensive 'strategy' in place, and recognize my own insecurities in the situation (being masked by good-will). How can I make sure I confront this without putting myself on the defense – or worse, put them on the defense when they were only trying to interact?"⁶

Some variation on this question, its cause for self-reflection, and its sometimes startling and/or embarrassing but truthful answer are documented throughout the bulletin-board posts. Christine seemed genuinely surprised that her mentee was "getting" it, "I'm very happy with how much she is absorbing from the program. I'm surprised and pleased that she is learning and using the strategies that we are teaching."⁷

Later, Christine raised a number of excellent questions about her own assumptions and where they originated. I've quoted her extensively here, because she has defined with her observations and questions many of the problems that must be faced and overcome in intercultural cross-walking:

The media images we see of urban teens is that of aimless "street" kids who have little to no goals in life. We see images of teens who find the only way to gain money is through a "street economy," such as selling illegal drugs...Because of these images, I was surprised at the teens at the CLC. James and Marcus, for example, are in ROTC. Marlon and others want to become engineers. My own mentee, Kimberly, wishes to go to the University of Tennessee.

I began a preliminary inquiry with Kimberly on the goals of her classmates; I was interested in her perception of education and the educational aspirations of her peers. To my surprise, Kimberly stated that most of the teens from her school that she knew wanted to attend college (from the media's portrayal of urban teens, I thought that this wasn't really a goal of these students).

Then, I began to wonder; Kimberly is in ninth grade. Do the aspirations of these teenagers in terms of education change over the course of high school? Does the reality of their community and lack of money and lack of a good educational system force them to change their goals? Do many of these students see sports as a way to attend college, like Kimberly? And what are the perceptions of college students like myself (Caucasian, middle-class, and attending an expensive, elite college) in regards to the educational opportunities of students like Kimberly?

How does the media's portrayal of urban teens mesh with the teens that attend the CLC? Kimberly, it seems, sees little problem getting into

college. Do the other teens see difficulties? And, importantly, how is their identity linked with education and higher education, and how is it different than the way my identity (and the identity of college students such as myself) is linked with education?

I also have questions on what types of colleges these students picture themselves in. How many see Ivy League schools as a possibility? How many see community college as the only opportunity? How many wish to go to a school where sports is a large focus?⁸

Christine had so many good questions. Similar questions have sparked the research interest of others, such as Keith Gilyard⁹, who might have suggested that the street-kid/college-kid images are not necessarily mutually exclusive at the same time he advocated for opportunities for the “street-kid.” David Smith called into question the definition of illiteracy when it became apparent to him that a sizable population of “middle-Americans” were discovered to be functionally illiterate after steel-mills began to close. He also relates the story about his colleague finding that some people she tested, who described themselves as non-readers, were able to read as well as others who described themselves as readers, but the “non-readers” opinions of themselves was based on the pronouncements of some long ago teacher, who did not think the student performed competently.¹⁰ Because I’ve grown up Black and female in North America in the 20th century, I have lived the consequences of ignoring or trying to ignore those questions. So I was both stunned and delighted to read Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose perspective resonates with my own.

Freire talks about marginalized people. He says that all educational practice begins with/ implies a theoretical stance on the part of the educator which more or less explicitly interprets man in the world. He adds that the process of men’s orientation in the world involves above all, thought-language; that is the possibility of the act of knowing, through his praxis [skillful doing], by which man transforms reality.... In accepting the illiterate as a person who exists on the fringe of society, we are led to envision him as a sort of “sick man,” for whom literacy would be the “medicine” to cure him, enabling him to “return” to the “healthy” structure from which he had become separated. Educators would be benevolent counsellors, scouring the outskirts of the city for stubborn illiterates, runaways from the good life, to restore them to the forsaken bosom of happiness by giving them the gift of the word.... (T)he illiterate is no longer a person living on the fringe of society, a marginal man, but rather a representative of the dominated strata of society, in conscious or unconscious opposition to those who, in the same structure, treat him as a thing....¹¹

When Margo first cited Gilyard/Perkins¹², back in September, she referred to fashion as discourse and asserted that “Perkins effectively affirms that fashion and social identity have an influence on student development. Perkins describes a student as a ‘Cool Cat’ – one who through his neat appearance and verbal proficiency, can overcome negative odds and excel academically while crossing racially bound discourses.” By midterm, however, she realized that in her mentee, she had met a ‘Cool Cat,’ and that his abilities and identity are composed of much more than his material accoutrements.

The “dawning,” the moment when we began to understand that we knew less than we thought or that the teen’s knew a whole lot more than we thought, or something from the readings suddenly made perfect sense, came at different times for each of us. Many of those moments are captured in the posts. Some were overheard in passing conversations. For this inquiry, I asked all of the mentors and mentees to respond in writing to a survey about, “When did you first get it?”¹³

The teenagers most often said, when they were questioned more closely, they began to understand the purpose of their activities at the Community Literacy Center when they began to work on their resumes. One young man still had no idea why he was there 10 weeks into the program, except that he expected to earn \$50 for participating. The boy and girl who did not return my survey, separately told another mentor they thought the function of the mentors was to somehow “civilize” the mentees.

Peck, Flower and Higgins posit that young people: 1) are already fully formed human beings who 2) entertain fully formed (though perhaps not fully articulated) thoughts, and 3) capably contribute to the larger community when given adequate opportunity. The researchers also suggest that it is therefore the responsibility of “educators” to engage teens in such “literate” dialogue and support them as their thinking and learning matures. At the Literacy Center, we get to watch the beanstalk of our understanding grow.

¹ Peck, Flower and Higgins, “Community Literacy: “Learning to take literate action in the face of conflict, we believe, calls for critical awareness, strategic thinking, and reflective learning ~ a style of learning that unlike the tacit shaping of acculturation can rapidly reflect on itself, experiment and adapt.” p.215

“The CLC comes to writing from a third angle, that of rhetoric. The educational tradition of rhetoric envisions the writer standing in the midst of a conversation or argument in which writing is a tool (carrying its own social history) in the literate transaction between writer and readers. Cognitive rhetoric treats writing as both a strategic, social act and an individual thinking process that invites study, teaching and learning.”

² . Flower, Linda, Construction as a Metaphor for Meaning Making. The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing, “We are used to honoring literary texts (and literary readers) for their ability to construct complex even ambiguous meanings~. However, this same interactive sense of meaning also exists in the minds of writers ~ literary and normal writers, experienced and student. It is this individually created network of relations and tensions that a social cognitive theory of meaning making needs to explain.” p.86-87

³ Williams, F.L., bb+academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, November 6, 1999

I don~t “like” living out loud. Which is to say, I don~t like speaking out about things I haven~t finished thinking through. I don~t like being wrong, feeling wrong, or being thought of as wrong, and I am not generally willing to make mistakes in public. The redeeming feature of the CLC is its collegial atmosphere. The mentors and the mentees almost feel like family. We are learning how to do this thing together at the same time. It seems to be understood that we will from time to time make mistakes but as in learning to ride a bicycle or horse (I never learned either) you just get back on and keep moving.

⁴ Daniels, E. A., Midterm Reflections, bb+academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, October 25, 1999

⁵ Peck, W.C., Flower, L., and Higgins, L. (1995) Community Literacy, College Composition and Communication, 48(2), 205-6.

- ⁶ Daniels, E.A., bb+academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, September 15, 1999
- ⁷ Tarbet, C.A., bb+academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, October 17, 1999
- ⁸ Tarbet, C.A., bb+ academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, November 3, 1999
- ⁹ Gilyard, K., *Voices of the Self: A Study in Language Competence*, 1991
- ¹⁰ Smith, Davi M., *The Antropology of Literacy Acquisition in The Acquisition of Literacy: Ethnographic Perspectives*, 1986
- ¹¹ Freire, P., *The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom in Perspectives On Literacy*, eds. Kinten, Kroll, and Rose, 1988
- ¹² Hoffman, M., bb+ academic.english.mentoring_internship@andrew.cmu.edu, September 20, 1999
- ¹³ The five-question survey is attached as Appendix 1, and responses are recorded in Appendix 2. Two girls and one boy did not return completed surveys. One of the two girls was interviewed by telephone. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the teens.