



# Reflections

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RE-ASSESSING SUSTAINABILITY: LEVERAGING MARGINAL POWER FOR  
SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAMS  
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## Re-assessing Sustainability: Leveraging Marginal Power for Service-Learning Programs

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· In this essay, we describe our experiences building a high school  
· writing center at a struggling urban high school, Hartford Public High  
· School. While we firmly believe, as Ellen Cushman does, that university  
· /community partnerships like ours benefit from a sustained, long term  
· commitment from both partners, we also believe that our students  
· gained a new sense of writerly identities in the short time we worked at  
· Hartford. Like Mathieu, we believe that performance, and the tangible  
· results of that performance: recordings, publications, public broadcasts,  
· are a useful, though short-lived, means of putting students work in  
· the media spotlight. We argue that successful yet short-lived projects  
· like this one call for a new model of sustainability within the context of  
· service-learning projects and community literacy.

“It was scary at first. I wanted to cry. I would get nervous and my stomach would turn, but after you get up in the front [to read your poetry], everything stops. It’s you; it’s all about you. And everybody respects that.”

—*Iesha Rivera, Hartford Public High School student and poet*



In 2004, the University of Connecticut partnered with Hartford Public High School to create a much needed space for students to meet, think, and write called The Writing Room. During the time The Writing Room was operational, it helped to organize readings for student poets on an on-line poetry journal called *The Lumberyard* and garnered positive media attention as well as praise from Hartford teachers and students. However, for a variety of reasons, the Writing Room was open for business for only three years (2005-2008) and thus was not a long-lived or ultimately sustainable project. In this essay, we intend to argue that successful yet short-lived projects like this one call for a new model of sustainability within the context of service-learning projects and community literacy. As we embarked on this project, we leveraged what Paula Mathieu terms “strategic” resources we had at the University of Connecticut to build a strong and responsive relationship with Hartford. At the same time, we were open to the “tactical” opportunities that presented themselves, and thus we created a more flexible model of sustainability: one that put Hartford Public High School student needs at the center of our project.<sup>1</sup>

As service-learning programs and community literacy initiatives within our universities continue to grow, Ellen Cushman’s call for a sustained connection to our local communities becomes increasingly relevant. She asks us to think critically about the image of academia that we project into the community. Cushman argues that university professors often have a cavalier attitude toward their community; they regularly create a “hit and quit it” situation and are then “gone in the morning” (40). A more responsible service-learning approach asks professors to take a more active, engaged role in the project:

If the researcher contributes, listens, hears, validates findings, and shares writing over the summer, between the semesters, and during the school year, then the community members have the reliable presence of a university representative in whom they can potentially place their trust and with whom they can genuinely collaborate. (58)



Cushman's call for a true investment in the community is one that shaped our efforts in Hartford.<sup>2</sup> We worked hard to create on-going conversations with teachers, productive relationships with the students, and a strong connection to the community of Hartford. However, despite our efforts to create a responsible, long-term relationship with Hartford Public, as students – both undergraduate and graduate – there was no real guarantee that our plans and our mission would continue after we graduated. Cushman's essay anticipates this situation, for when she needed to replace herself when leaving a position, there was no guarantee that her successor would continue her efforts to build strong relationships with community members (Cushman 61). Moreover, Hartford Public itself was at risk of losing its accreditation from the State of Connecticut, and when that did occur, the Writing Room lost its space, its high school faculty, and its momentum. Our essay makes the case that outreach programs have value even when these attempts to create sustainable relationships are tenuous; indeed, these programs gain their meaning through the positive effects on the community despite, or even because of, the painful realities of urban communities.

In her recent text *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu provides a theoretical grounding for a tactical approach. According to Mathieu:

Adopting a tactical orientation in a university setting means letting go of comfortable claims of certainty and accepting the contingent and vexed nature of our actions. *A tactical orientation needs to be grounded in hope, not cast in naïve or passive terms, but hope as a critical, active, dialectical engagement* between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures – a dialogue composed of many voices. (xv, our emphasis)

Mathieu's emphasis on a "tactical," more rhetorically-based relationship, suggests that Cushman's definitions of sustainability, specifically "creating long term, well resourced, stable collaborations" (Cushman 41), may not be the ultimate, or only, goal for a successful service-



learning project. Instead, Mathieu’s “tactics of hope” recognizes the “vexed nature” of community-university collaboration and the enormous difficulties that come from creating a traditionally sustainable program. In this essay, we will illustrate that an attitude grounded in hope allows practitioners to focus on the true potential for the community-based writing projects in the face of immense obstacles, challenges, and even failures.

### **Initial Planning: Our Vision and Hartford’s Reality**

When Laurie Cella assumed the role as Co-Director at the University of Connecticut Writing Center, it became one of her central goals to train tutors in a more systematic way, and so in 2001 she developed a requirement for a Tutor Practicum class. In 2004, Laurie incorporated a service-learning project into her Practicum syllabus, and each student in the class developed an outreach program for the Writing Center based on his/her specific interests. One student, Nina Rivera, developed a detailed proposal to create a writing center at her alma mater, Hartford Public High School, and she was determined to make this writing center a reality. Nina chose to interview her former teachers to discover whether the faculty felt there was need for extra writing support at Hartford High.

Using a class developed and taught by a graduate student WPA to build an outreach program might seem suspect as a strategy. As a rule, GWPAs have less status in the university system; they are more transient as they complete their degrees and leave for parts unknown; and thus they are less able to develop the kind of sustained relationship with the community that Cushman describes. In her article “Revising Administrative Models and Questioning the Value of Appointing Graduate Student WPAs,” Sheryl I. Fountaine argues persuasively that putting graduate students into WPA positions is exploitative and that GAs [Graduate Assistants] who believe that WPA positions make them more marketable represent an attitude that is “extremely damaging for the profession” (86). While it is true that GAs are often overworked and underpaid, Laurie’s experiences



as a graduate WPA allowed her a measure of creativity and intellectual freedom not afforded to the GA in the standard teaching assignment.

As a GWPA, Laurie's institutional invisibility allowed her to obtain resources and freedom not accorded professors in the department. For example, at the project's outset, Laurie asked for and received a \$2,500 from the Vice Provost at the University of Connecticut as a stipend for the Hartford High teacher coordinating The Writing Room, funds that disappeared soon after Laurie left her position. Ultimately, the resources at Laurie's disposal —tutors, funding, the credit attached to the Tutor training practicum, transportation via university cars, and access to grant writing workshops and potential donors —represented The Writing Room's strongest tie to the university, and as such, the most "strategic" resources at their disposal.

Having the opportunity to create a vision for a program and then to see that vision enacted became a pivotal experience in Nina's college education. Taking her plan from page to life meant networking with faculty at UCONN and teachers in Hartford at a level Nina had not done before. For example, Nina became a student director of the Writing Room program, which gave her the opportunity to function as a leader for her peers and continue her work as logistical coordinator of the project. All these experiences combined to make Nina's service-learning project one of the best educational experiences of her undergraduate career. Putting an undergraduate at the helm of this project was risky, and raised immediate questions about the longevity of the program, but we leveraged Nina's strong ties to Hartford and her intense commitment against the reality that she would not be around to run the program long term. Nina's strength as a coordinator was both strategic and tactical, for she traded her status as a university student against the level of respect and "street cred" that she had as a high-powered Hartford High alumni.



## **A Renewed Respect for the Writing Community at Hartford**

As we began asking questions at Hartford, teachers attested to the difficulty of providing personalized attention for students to develop as writers. Ed Clark, a teacher at Hartford Public for thirty-six years, responded enthusiastically to Nina's idea of creating a Writing Room, and offered to act as an informal liaison between the University of Connecticut and Hartford Public High. He encouraged teachers to teach beyond and around the Connecticut Aptitude Tests that seemed to be strangling the life out of writing in the classrooms. Our continual meetings with Ed Clarke over his beverage of choice, Diet Pepsi, led into a real engagement with Hartford High's curriculum; we learned more about the challenge Hartford teachers faced every day and we worked to adapt our tutoring methods to address those challenges. Ed Clarke described Hartford's difficulties with the CAPT test: in 2004, only 17.1% of Hartford sophomores met the state-wide goals in writing, and only 9.8% of sophomores achieved the state goals in reading ([captreports.com/index](http://captreports.com/index)). These low scores caused serious concern regarding Hartford's looming accreditation, and so teachers and administrators were in a real panic over how to solve these problems.

The more we worked with Hartford High teachers, the more time we spent in their classrooms. For example, one veteran teacher, John Griffin, invited us to co-teach his Leadership class for a short time. In her seminal essay "Launching a High School Writing Center," Peggy Silva highlights the importance of working closely with teachers and their assignments: "In order to serve the needs of all constituencies within our high school, I have to be very attuned to the work happening in our classrooms" (3). We tried to make sure that our writing assistance remained focused on academic assignments; we knew that to keep our funding, we had to make ourselves useful and relevant to Hartford High's curriculum. But rather than tie ourselves strictly to the classroom, or become a CAPT test remediation center, we wanted to reach as many students as possible and really create an exciting atmosphere for writing. This dilemma – how to appease administrators, and yet create an atmosphere that brought



excitement and joy back into the writing process – became the central dilemma for The Writing Room.

Our friendship with Ed Clark and the teachers at Hartford Public as well as our discussions about curriculum reflected an engagement that Eli Goldblatt calls “deep alignment”: “a shared understanding of students’ needs that would encourage common approaches and sequential course work across the 2-year/4-year college divide” (84). This definition of “deep alignment” can be usefully applied to the teaching strategies employed by urban high school teachers and university writing instructors. We believed that learning about the Hartford High community was an integral step toward making our program meaningful to the students. Goldblatt believes that these informal friendships and visits over coffee reflect the most relevant aspects of outreach: “No matter where we teach, writing instructors and college teachers must ask fundamental questions now about what exactly we are teaching and why, how our teaching does or does not mesh with the teaching in partner institutions, and what our labor practices have on the learning of students who move through the system we maintain” (85). Our interactions with faculty and staff at Hartford helped us to think more critically about the purpose(s) of the Writing Room. In the face of many logistical challenges, a renewed commitment to the pedagogy at work in Hartford helped sustain our commitment to the program, and to the students themselves.

### **“Street Training”: (or) The Public Turn in Tutor Training**

In Spring 2005, Laurie made the Hartford project the central out-reach option for the Tutor Practicum class at UConn. Four tutors decided to mentor interested Hartford High students recommended to us by the Honors coordinator at Hartford. Thus, the UConn tutors and Hartford High students embarked on the process of becoming tutors at the same time. Admittedly, we had high hopes for the project: we wanted to develop a new space for writing, create a set of confident, well-read peer tutors, and establish a strong tie between UConn and Hartford.





All of our idealism was made possible because of an expanded vision of what the Tutor Practicum class could accomplish. Laurie's vision for the Practicum emphasized the importance of a writerly community, fostered by peer workshops, and a mandatory trip to a local or national conference. These trips fostered a sense of common purpose, for the tutors learned to support and encourage each other as they prepared their presentations. More importantly, however, they went to dinner, socialized with tutors from various parts of the country, and stayed up late enjoying each other's company. Since the conference trips were instrumental in creating a meaningful sense of community with the Writing Center, we decided to plan a conference trip that would include HPHS tutors.

On a day-to-day level, mentoring Hartford High tutors presented a real challenge for the UConn tutors. They quickly realized that the readings Laurie assigned in the Tutor Practicum class didn't translate easily to the high school experience. To complicate matters, the Hartford high tutors were committed to a number of activities after school, and so they couldn't always come to The Writing Room when we were open. Thus, a sustained conversation on tutoring training was difficult to create. However, as the spring semester wore on, our four Hartford High tutors began to tentatively build relationships with us.

In order to cement this emerging relationship, we invited two highly motivated Hartford High students—both burgeoning writing tutors—with us to the North East Writing Centers Conference in Brooklyn, New York in April 2005. Anna Vu and Gabrielle Wilmont, our two Hartford High representatives, were excited about the trip to New York, but they were very shy and quiet as we made our way to New York. It was clear that they had very little experience traveling without their families, and so the UConn tutors took on the more social roles of mentors and friends that weekend.

One particular session stands out as an important lesson in audience awareness. Anna and Gabrielle attended a session run by a deaf



undergraduate tutor who described her successful attempts to convince her university to designate American Sign Language as a foreign language. Both students were quietly amazed by this student's dedication to her cause and they commented on how passionate she was in making her vision a reality. They saw her overcome the challenges that presenting through a translator posed and they were impressed by her ability to include jokes and exude confidence in her rhetorical ability. As they watched this presentation, both high school students witnessed a presenter anticipate the audience response and even take pleasure in her moment in the spotlight. Overall, the trip felt like a success; the tutors from both UConn and Hartford High had shared stories, meals, and enjoyed each other's company, but more importantly, the young Hartford tutors had watched someone not much older than they were manipulate an audience with confidence.

### **“Street Tutoring”: Working at the Point of Need**

In her recent text *Noise from the Center*, Beth Boquet makes the case that Writing Centers can leverage their marginal location within university structures to create a sea-change in the way administrators and faculty view student writing. Her reflections on sustainability and writing centers points to the powerful potential of a successful writing tutorial:

We too need to think about sustainability. But I also know that part of what sustains me is the idea that I might re-invent a moment with a student. And that enough of these moments might mean that I have eventually re-invented the idea of a writing center on my campus. And enough of those moments might mean that I, along with others, have re-invented the way such work gets valued beyond my campus. (75)

Like Boquet, we believe that each moment we “re-invented” with a student at Hartford Public had the ability to change that student, and it was our goal to accumulate as many engaged tutoring moments as we



could, given our lack of resources and support. The progress we made with one student, Efrain Rodriguez, became a model for what this kind of “reinvention” might accomplish. However, the creation of a writing community at HPHS began with a simple notion: let’s bring pizza. Soon, students were following us down the hallways to the Career Center. Our welcoming atmosphere - food, drinks, and college tutors willing to talk rap or romance - reinforced our flexible pedagogy. We would help any writer at any stage of the writing process: with CAPT prep, homework, or impromptu poetry. Without official funding from the school system, our methodology became as flexible as the students needed it to be. Thus, a group of basketball players often came by to eat pizza and write poetry before basketball practice, and one of the players, Efrain Rodriquez, quickly became a Writing Room regular.

Efrain was struggling in his classes and getting into trouble both in and out of school. Despite these troubles, Efrain began coming to the Writing Room frequently to write poems, stories, and to visit with the tutors. The tutors let Efrain set the agenda for every session, and we watched as Efrain gradually grew more confident as a writer. For example, he was one of a few students who entered a state-wide poetry contest, and he proofread his poem carefully, debating the need for a period at the end of a line. When The Writing Room was featured in *The Hartford Courant*, the article featured a photo of Efrain working with a UConn tutor. This positive media attention generated a positive buzz all over the Hartford campus, and our numbers seemed to skyrocket overnight. Suddenly, all of the basketball team wanted to come by, so the basketball coach asked us to extend our hours to accommodate their practice schedule. More teachers were also stopping by to learn about The Writing Room. Most importantly, though, students saw Efrain, a popular basketball player, working happily with a tutor on his poetry. That photo did more to authorize our writing community than any publicity material we had created.



Efrain was so proud that he showed us his copy of the article the day it appeared in the newspaper. Laurie was dismayed to see that Efrain had scribbled notes on his only copy, but on a closer inspection we realized that Efrain had revised the article to suit his own image of himself. The title “Metro Hartford” was crossed out and “Sports” was re-inscribed over the top of the page. The caption, which describes Efrain’s tutoring session, was extended to include this sentence: “Also, Efrain Rodreguez, 16, on right, plays like Michael Jordan.” Efrain re-inscribed that tutoring moment in order to put it into his own positive terms. While he was glad to be featured in the Metro Section, Efrain dreamed of basketball stardom and so he revised the newspaper text to suit his sense of who he was and who he wanted to be. For us, this moment signals a meaningful moment of engagement with literacy. We could see that Efrain was proud of his new identity as a writer because he brought his copy of the newspaper to show us his photo. However, this micro-level revision of the newspaper’s text demonstrates another, more important sense of agency; Efrain demonstrated that the larger forces in his life represented by the school and *The Hartford Courant* should not have the power to shape and control his public image. He wanted to have the last word on his potential, and for that rhetorical maneuver, we were proud of him.

In this moment, Efrain demonstrates how powerful writing center tutorials can be. The tutors “reinvented” writing for him so that he was engaged in the drama of the writing process. Moreover, Efrain’s excitement spread to the basketball team, and so writing became more popular at Hartford Public. Thus, the Writing Room and its role was “reinvented” overnight. Finally, the article itself is an example of how we must reinvent writing centers beyond our academic borders. The photo of Efrain working with a tutor and smiling as he gestures toward his essay works to reinvent the image of writing centers to the surrounding areas of Hartford, CT.

This newspaper article highlighted for us the importance of tangible results for both students and the surrounding community, so we began to design more projects that would offer tangible products like zines, books,



and CDs of student work. For example, the UConn tutors had developed a ‘zine with English teacher Megan Chenette’s class. Hartford students included photos of their friends and family, poems to their boyfriends and girlfriends and drawings of their prom dresses and friends, while UConn tutors wrote poems and drew pictures. The UConn tutors compiled everything so that students would get copies. We quickly realized that students were hungry for a chance to release their creative energies and do so in a space free of commentary and judgment from their teachers. Working closely with Ken Cormier, we developed a series of field trips to UConn so that Hartford Public students could read and record their poetry for *The Lumberyard*.

The field trips added a sense of purpose and excitement to the Writing Room, and students clamored to come with us to UConn. We took them on a tour of campus and visited a variety of college classrooms. On one trip, Dr. Jeffrey Green Ogbar, author of *The Hip Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, welcomed the Hartford students into his summer class, “The History of Hip-Hop.” It was a surreal experience to sit in a class of nearly all white, middle-class students while an African American professor showed slides and videos of key figures in the Hip Hop industry. We were especially glad to have Efrain sitting in on this class since he talked non-stop about Hip Hop and spent many hours searching the internet with the UConn tutors, looking up rap music lyrics and including these lyrics in his essays and poems. Dr. Ogbar chose to discuss Mos Def’s lyrics that day and he projected lyrics on the screen so that his students could begin a close analysis of the lyrics. Laurie saw Efrain’s eyes light up: here was one classroom where the answers came easily and the subject was the love of his life. His hand shot up and he answered question after question that Dr. Ogbar asked. This moment highlights yet another way that Efrain was able to “reinvent” himself as a student. Efrain would not be able to leverage his knowledge of hip hop into anything of academic value at Hartford High, but here, in this classroom, he could translate his newfound confidence into active participation and academic curiosity.



## Poetry as Public Rhetoric in Hartford

In order to build on this new writerly confidence in our Writing Room regulars, we spent time developing assignments or writing prompts that were open-ended and fluid. The best example of this came halfway through the spring semester in 2005, when Spike Lee came to give a speech at the Mark Twain House in Hartford entitled “America through My Lens.” In his speech, Lee argued that young African-American men are bombarded with images of thug life, that hip-hop and rap music glamorizes “thug appeal” rather than family life, and that rap doesn’t offer any real solid role models for African Americans. That day *The Hartford Courant* ran a review of Lee’s speech and we brought copies into The Writing Room just to see what students thought. As an African-American role model and, we would argue, a public intellectual, Lee was making thoughtful comments about the communities in which our students lived, and yet he was attacking the very music that gave our students joy. In the process of writing poetry, our students often looked up rap songs, quoted their favorites musicians, and looked to music as the essence of expression in their own neighborhoods. We were excited to see that students respond passionately against Spike Lee’s views of rap, and so we asked them to write letters to *The Hartford Courant* to express their indignation. The impromptu “assignment” kept our writers occupied for at least a week and a number of students sent their letters to the newspaper. *The Hartford Courant* accepted Hartford student Devon Torres’s letter entitled “Rap’s Influence Depends on the Listeners,” and the day it was published, May 14, 2005, was a Red Letter Day for The Writing Room. Of course we were excited and proud that Devon’s letter was articulate and persuasive, arguing that it is short-sighted to blame rap for problems that have existed for years, that we should take a closer look at the crime that is endemic to poor neighborhood rather than the music that oftentimes has a positive message. More importantly, Devon’s letter was a useful way to demonstrate that The Writing Room, despite its fluid nature, could produce tangible evidence of critical thinking and thoughtful writing. This letter made Devon instantly famous at Hartford



Public High. Thus, we began to see that a more public venue for the HPHS students would provide the tangible results we needed to develop a stable presence, and allow students to make their voices and opinions heard in the surrounding community.

Now we knew that students craved a public outlet, and we saw a growing interest in slam poetry, since a popular after-school creative writing club was gathering momentum. One teacher, Megan Chenette, was incorporating this type of poetry into her classroom. After hearing great things about Megan from our students, Nina and Laurie arranged a meeting with her at a local coffee shop and began a conversation about how Megan was using poetry to reach her students. Megan began to invite us into her classroom on a regular basis, and she shared her “I Am From” assignment with us, an assignment that asks students to create an autobiographical poem based on where they grew up. In order to make their words more visible, Megan asks each student to create a drawing of their poem on a small piece of fabric, and then she sewed these pieces together as a quilt that she displays in her classroom. Ken Cormier’s work editing *The Lumberyard Journal*, a radio show and website that showcases poets reading from their work proved most useful for showcasing these “I Am From” poems. So, while shy students like Efrain participated in the Hip Hop discussion in Dr. Ogbar’s class, more courageous Hartford High poets took to the microphone.

A sampling of these poems and student comments on writing will help highlight the importance of expression, especially in an assessment-driven learning environment. For example, Erica Hall’s poem “Dreams” suggests that her words will bubble up and out, despite her classroom life: “I am from/pages that make the imagination run wild/stories and pictures floating in my head/staring out the window during class” (“Dreams”). Hall’s poem juxtaposes the boredom of the classroom with the energy and power of her own poetry. Iesha Rivera’s “I am From” poem points to the importance of the growing writing community at Hartford: “I am from a crazy place/I do something wrong but show no



disgrace/I know I'm wrong/I wanna do right/But my decision will not be made overnight/When I'm all alone/To myself I realize/I need the help" ("I Am From"). Even in their poetry, the students reflected their new sense of community; they needed to write and they needed each other to read, respond, and reflect on what they wrote. One Writing Room regular, Tina Beekman, explained that writing was her favorite way to express her emotions: "I write because it expresses the way I feel. I don't sit down and talk to people about how I feel. I'd rather just sit down and write what I feel. I like the outcome of it. I like everything about it. It's cool." In an atmosphere where carrying school books and "acting smart" was a liability, Beekman viewed her writing as an important outlet that provided her with confidence and even pleasure.

As we watched our students read their poems for the microphones in the WHUS radio studio, we noticed a real transformation in their presence and delivery. They were suddenly focused in a new physical way on the sound and cadence of their words. In their 2005 CCC article, Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor and Otuteye make a convincing case for performance as an integral aspect of modern literacy. They argue that "performance is a dynamic form of literate expression that is both fun and deeply serious. Immediate and face-to-face, performance encourages active participation and collaboration, and thus models many of the qualities we value most in real-time new-media writing, while at the same time it brings renewed attention to talk and scripted forms of oral communication" (226-7). The day of the field trip, we saw the students begin to own their work in a way that they hadn't before. The experience of reading into the microphone made the performance element of their poetry physically real for them. Indeed, the act of reading their words to an interested, respectful audience challenged their notion of a static literacy.<sup>3</sup>

### **Toward a more Flexible Definition of Sustainability**

We set up The Writing Room as a collaborative effort on the part of the teachers, the principal, the career counselors, the UConn Writing Center,





and the university administration. Our primary goals were to develop a space for writing that would be sustainable for the long term, and so we wrote grants, made partnerships with teachers and parents, and generated a sense of energy and excitement around writing. We were careful not to make promises, but we hoped to make a real difference. In the end, the Hartford Public High was too much in flux - interim principals, high teacher turn-over, and an at-risk accreditation - to offer a stable nexus for writing that would last. Without the support from the school itself, it became more and more difficult to coordinate efforts from UConn. However, our successes with the Lumberyard – the readings, recordings, media attention, and student-generated responses to the community around them—serve to illustrate that there was a sense of change for the students, if only for the short term.

Following Paula Mathieu’s lead, we believe a hopeful approach to building community partnerships allows us to create the most responsible partnership possible with the larger community. For us, the students’ needs came first, from undergraduate proposals, to graduate student visions of a tutor practicum class, and finally, to student voices on the radio – all poised to leverage their marginal stability toward a more flexible and responsive writing presence in Hartford.

Eli Goldblatt celebrates Louise Wetherbee Phelps’s suggestion that the connections we build with stake holders beyond the university have almost limitless potential for changing the way we imagine education. Goldblatt views these relationships as the backbone of any successful enterprise:

[Phelps provides] a particularly exciting way to formulate [John] Dewey’s educational philosophy. It blurs the distinction among writing courses within, across, and beyond college curricula because the focus is on the back-and-forth flow of reflection and experience, wherever it may be found. This image conjures for me an image of radiating concentric circles in a pond on a rainy day – each individual



act of engagement in a classroom or outside one sends out widening rings of consciousness and critique that intersect one another and reach further across the entire plane of human engagement. (22)

This image of radiating concentric circles is an apt one to describe the Hartford Public outreach program. Each time we sat down to discuss the possibilities for writing with the teachers, each coffee break where we brainstormed more effective tutoring approaches, and, most importantly, each time we sat down with a Hartford Public writer, we were drawing a wider, more engaged circle of “consciousness and critique.” At UConn, we started by asking what was possible, and used that utopian vision as a guide, despite a real sense that our time and our resources would be limited. Michael James, a Hartford Public Writing Room regular, uses poetry to describe the importance of these idealistic visions amid the pessimism of his struggling urban high school: “They think it’s stupid/ to be smart/like our ancestors didn’t lose their lives/over the right to be educated/Without dreams/I am a fish out of water.” We need to ask what we might be sacrificing by not attempting a more “tactical” project, or responding to a short-lived, but vibrant energy within any at-risk community. Working in the trenches of an educational climate strangled by outcome-related approaches and constant assessment pressure, this can be difficult to do. However, it is certainly not impossible, and as teachers who work with young writers on a daily basis, we must think beyond stability toward a more flexible definition of outreach in order to better serve our students and our communities.



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### Endnotes

- 1 We began developing a satellite writing center with the understanding that centers developed by high school teachers and administrators often have a better chance for survival. Thus, we worked hard to create strong ties with the curriculum and the high school administration. Richard Kent's book (and website) *Creating a Student Staffed Writing Center, Grades 6-12* is just one example of the active scholarship in the high school writing center field. We relied on advice from these scholars as we embarked on our collaboration (Personal correspondence with Robert Barnett, Peggy Silva, and Dawn Fels).
- 2 Nina Rivera, one of the co-founders of The Writing Room, was an alumni of Hartford Public, and so she introduced Laurie Cella and Melissa Rinaldo to teachers, staff, and students like her brother, who was then a senior. It helped our ethos that Nina had been a stellar student and that she was intensely committed to developing more writing resources for her alma mater. But we didn't completely ride Nina's coattails; Laurie and Melissa interviewed teachers, distributed surveys, and contacted key scholars who had developed successful secondary writing centers to obtain their advice. Moreover, because this outreach project called for increasing amounts of time and resources, Laurie negotiated to create a ½ Graduate Writing



Program Administrator dedicated primarily to The Writing Room. When Hartford Public was reformed into four distinct schools, that GWPA was transformed into a general Outreach coordinator.

- 3 Following Mathieu's emphasis on the media as a means to turn public opinion regarding at-risk or unlikely writers, we were excited when the local NPR affiliate asked to interview Megan Chenette and Hartford High poets. The interview was broadcast at Hartford Public, further solidifying a sense of a growing writing community at the school.



## Rap's Influence Depends On The Listener

From [courant.com](http://courant.com)

May 14, 2005

Spike Lee speaks about rap being a negative influence on African Americans.

I know, as we all know, rap does have a great influence on the country in good and bad ways. Some people are inspired to be rappers to get away from things they know will bring them down. Then there are others who want to be rappers and are just in it for the girls and money.

Believe it or not, there are people out there who rap with passion and understand the history of rap's origins. The point is that you can't blame rap for all the negative things that take place, even though rap can make matters worse.

We must understand that such ideas as pimps having hos and lots of money existed before rap. You should actually blame the parents who support this behavior by buying their children rap-inspired clothes and jewelry. Parents are trying to act like friends to their children rather than being parents and dictating what their children can and can't do.

Today we have teenagers who wear the stuff they see on music videos, and some are inspired to behave the same. I hear students who say, "I want to be like Lil John" or, "I want to be like 50 Cent."

Spike Lee talks about 50 Cent being a prime example of this problem.



Some African Americans are being corrupted by the music they hear on the radio and the music they buy. They hear the story of 50 Cent being shot nine times and think it's not just amazing but cool. They ask themselves, "What if I can be like that and get the same reaction?"

Students try to imitate some group, when in reality they have no clue of what they're trying to represent. I have heard kids say they represent G-Unit or Terror Squad. There is history behind the names of these groups, and for teenagers to even think that they have the right to represent a group they really have no relationship with is just ridiculous

Society, however, also influences the way Africa Americans act today. There are bad neighborhoods that influence teenagers in positive and negative ways. Many people who live in a neighborhood that has violence and crime on every corner instinctively want to get away from that environment. Others get drawn into the trouble around them

There are rappers who have a positive influence on African Americans such as Kanye West, who raps about religion rather than drugs, sex and money. One of the latest songs Kanye West has released is "Jesus Walks." His lyrics move people to better themselves and show that there is a more positive way to live. The lyrics "Rappers rap about anything except for Jesus" are more positive than what is seen and heard on TV. Kanye West points out that rappers constantly talk about negative aspects of life. Instead of this they should talk about the positives.

Decisions are made by individuals, and their environment influences who they want to be. Kanye West uses music to have a positive effect on society.

Don't blame the rappers for all the problems; consider the factors of the society and the environment where individuals live.

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