



Reflections

A Journal of Writing,
Service Learning,
and Community Literacy

NEW CITY COMMUNITY PRESS

RECONNECTING YOUTH—A HIGH-SCHOOL PROGRAM THAT REACHES
COLLEGE WRITING
AUTHOR: ROBERT J. BONK
SOURCE: *REFLECTIONS*, FEATURED ARTICLES ONLINE (JAN., 2011).

In today's fast-paced world, educational programs increasingly try to expedite curricula so that students can reach full potential for their future careers. Economic challenges especially pressure institutions to ensure the relevance of courses, as well as ladders achievable in four (or slightly more) years of study. All of us can relate to these pressures. Nonetheless, students need to understand their role as citizens in a multicultural environment; courses that connect students with their communities provide such an avenue for balancing all these competing challenges. In fact, we emphasize the interconnectedness of "the gown and the town" at Widener University, a metropolitan institution located in a disadvantaged city.

Students at Widener University learn through many modes: didactic lectures, experiential projects, cooperative programs, off-site internships, and community interactions. Increasingly, many of our students opt for courses that we designate as "academic service-learning" for their combination of curricular goals with community engagement. Several courses that I teach in the broad area of professional writing include a service component. Why not have students write newspaper articles, prepare advertising copy, or script educational videos for non-profit groups who otherwise lack funding for such community pieces?

One of my courses that particularly relates to civic engagement is "Feature Writing." In this course, students receive guided practice in writing nonfiction stories for the periodical press. Unlike hard-news stories on a traffic accident or council meeting, these feature stories highlight the personal elements of a situation. Students begin critiquing published stories in newspapers and magazines but progress to planning and composing their own stories

using basic to advanced structures. Along the way, students compile a professional portfolio. Clearly, feature writing by its very nature lends itself to reflection on community issues and societal conditions.

In this short collection, I present three stories written by undergraduate students in my class on writing feature stories for newspapers and magazines during the Spring 2009 semester. As a final course project, students were teamed with area non-profit institutions as varied as a child-development center, an educational-enrichment program, and a domestic-abuse agency. Three students (now alumni) who excelled at this academic service-learning project, not only in writing but also in reflection, have their stories spotlighted here. Each of these students—Jill Intveld, Stephanie Mancuso, and Kevin Rider—explored different angles on the “Reconnecting Youth” program at our nearby Chester High School; such programs are invaluable for reaching at-risk students. Rather than revealing the angles, I’ll simply let Jill, Stephanie, and Kevin speak for themselves. I couldn’t say it better myself.

4 Aug 2009

5 May 2010 (revised)

There's No Place Like the Reconnecting Youth Program

By Jill Intveld

As the school bell rings, signifying the end of another long school day, the average Chester High School student rushes out the main entrance and heads home. A select few, however, do the exact opposite. Instead, these students stay at the school to get much more than a little after-school help. The Chester Education Foundation works hands-on with the Chester community to help educate both children and adults of the area. With many programs and groups, the Chester Education Foundation has helped community members and will continue to help for years to come. One of the many programs the Chester Education Foundation hosts is the Reconnecting Youth Program.

The Reconnecting Youth Program is an after-school program that helps “at-risk” students stay on top of their studies and focus on their goals. Students head to the library promptly after class to sign in, and then groups join in their designated classrooms. The female students meet with a female coach, and the male students meet with a male coach. As the hustle and bustle of dismissal comes to a dull lull, the discussion of life begins within each of the classroom groups. Five coaches work for the Reconnecting Youth Program. They all have different backgrounds, full-time jobs, and stories. But one vision they will forever share—hope for the youth of Chester High, including the desire to push these students to succeed. To be a coach, a person must be able to form and maintain a special relationship with adolescents. For many of the coaches, their full-time job does consist of working with adolescents, and they have had some sort of prior experience working with youth. Regardless of their preferred way of classroom management and style, the coaches all are recognized for their continuous dedication and support of these

students. As a part-time job, the coaches sit with the students Monday through Friday from 2:30 to 5 pm to support and talk to them. Debbie Clark, who has been coaching for 10 months, explains that she finds enjoyment in steering the children on the right track.

Sterling Gibson, also a coach, states that he coaches because “no one can tell how these youths’ lives will go, but one thing is for sure, the odds increase their success if they have some help.” Since the Reconnecting Youth Program has started, coaches have been able to see a change within their students. Attendance has increased, as well as have grades and classroom participation. The students of Chester High who are enrolled in the Reconnecting Youth Program are academically motivated and driven to improve.

Keeping children focused is a challenge in itself. Gibson explains that, to see change, the coaches have to provide the students with something they cannot avoid: “The kids can’t stand against being bombarded with heavy cannons of love, constant fire of passion, and a persistent barrage of tenderness and understanding that we give as coaches.” By giving back to their community, the coaches find working with the students rewarding. Sherril Thomas, a coach who has been working with the Chester Upland district for over 15 years, says that “this is the most motivated group“ with which she has worked. Gibson explains that the rewards of a coach are similar to the rewards of a farmer.

“As a farmer, a person plants seeds and nourishes them in order to watch them grow. As a coach, I plant seeds and nourish them to watch the youths’ dreams come true and watch their destiny come to fruition.” Although this after-school program is held at the high school, the information being taught is not all literature and arithmetic. Indeed, some tutoring does take place, but the coaches try to focus on life skills instead. For example, Thomas teaches her students to “set positive goals and to not sway away from

them, believe that you can achieve them.” Gibson teaches the kids that “it is not what goes into you that says who you are, it is what comes out of you—because that is what is in your heart.” Clark simply teaches “hope” to her students. While Debbie Clark, Sterling Gibson, and Sherril Thomas are all different people, they all agree that continuing to coach these students is something that they will definitely fulfill. At times, it is hard for people to stay above water. But coaches like Clark, Gibson, and Thomas offer a supportive life boat at arm’s reach for the Chester community’s youth. Although these three run their classroom differently, they all positively answered the hardest question of all: ‘If you could tell your students one thing, what would it be?’ Thomas said that she would want to tell her students to “stick to your goals and to make the right choices.” Clark would want to tell her students to “never stop dreaming and to reach for the stars; nothing is impossible.”

Gibson, focusing on confidence, related his answer back to an old-time favorite. “Do you know the moral of the story of The Wizard of Oz?” he questioned. “The Wizard did not give Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Lion, or the Scarecrow anything that they did not already have. Neither do the coaches. We are just showing them what they have in their personal repertoire, how to use it effectively, and when to use it most effectively.” Much like the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow, the students of the Reconnecting Youth Program are filled with warm hearts, courage, and intelligence. Similar to Dorothy, they have a home right at their very own high school, thanks to the coaches of the Reconnecting Youth Program.

Reconnecting Youth Provides Success to Students

By Stephanie Mancuso

Outside, it is another day of April showers. The sky is filled with nothing but motionless gray clouds spilling rain that smacks against the sidewalk leading into Chester High School. Two heavy double-doors block the hustle and bustle of students clearing the hallway as the shrill of the bell signals that school is over for the day. In front of the closed library doors, a crowd of tired students with their backpacks hanging over their shoulders, in their school uniforms of khaki pants and collared shirts, awaits to start the other part of their school day. A man and a woman walk down the hall with grins from ear to ear and pride in their eyes. All of the waiting students' faces change from tired eyes to a look of admiration and hope.

A chorus of "Hey, Ms. Green; Hello, Mr. Knox" is heard as the two adults welcome with open arms each one of the 100 students separately as they walk through the library doors and sign into the after-school program. "Hey, Theresa, I heard you got that job you applied for! I'm so proud of you," Elaine Green-Upton exclaims to one of the students and gives her a warm hug. Richard Knox stands in the middle of a crowd of students who are all waiting to tell him their recent accomplishments. The library is filled with nothing but excitement and energy. This is an amazing sight because, before these students became a part of the after-school program, they may not have been able to make these exciting accomplishments.

The after-school program, called Reconnecting Youth, is made possible through the Chester Education Foundation. These students have forgotten all about the miserable

rainy weather outside; inside this library, the sun silently rises because it is filled with a dedicated group of students and mentors who are excited to learn and teach each other. Their enthusiasm brightens the room and surpasses the weather on the other side of the walls.

This program would not be possible without the students from Chester High School who have gotten involved to achieve their highest goals and ambitions, as well as the coaches who give up their afternoons to show these students that anything is possible. However, standing behind both the students and the coaches are two people who are responsible for the growth of every person involved in Reconnecting Youth: Elaine Green-Upton and Richard Knox.

“We do it for the kids. It is a great feeling when we see them start to succeed,” explains Green of why she is involved with Reconnecting Youth. She has been working with the Chester Education Foundation for nearly 19 years and has enjoyed every single minute of helping people succeed.

The Reconnecting Youth Program helps students at Chester High who have had troubles in the past in school. These students are at risk of dropping out, failing, behavior issues, or drug use. They are referred to the program by the truancy department of school counselors. The program provides a home-away-from-home for some students where they have a friend in both Green and Knox. During the after-school program, coaches instill confidence in these students to stay off the streets and to do well in school. Lessons such as mood and stress management and how to accomplish goals are discussed through open communication and respect on all sides.

“I care about every one of these students. Mr. Knox and I call them up at 6 in the morning if we have to just to make sure they are getting to school. If I am driving in my car at night and I see one of them walking own the street, I will pull over and find out what they are doing out on a school night. They get in the car, and I take them home because I want them to succeed in life and I know that they can,” Green explains about her dedication to the students.

Knox, an ordained pastor, has also worked with children for over 20 years. He founded the Hidden Treasures Mentoring program in 2000 and has dedicated his time to helping students succeed. As for what he has learned from helping students, Knox explains, “It takes an unbridled passion to help these children succeed. Most children are just looking for someone to believe in them. My biggest reward from the program is the love and admiration of the children.”

Green and Knox go out of their ways to prepare a hot meal at least two days out of the week to bring to the students involved in Reconnecting Youth. Most of the meals are recipes out of their own kitchens because they want the students to feel as comfortable as possible. That way, they will feel at home when at the after-school program and keep their attendance high.

What the students are receiving from these programs is the biggest reward of all. They are learning to have a positive outlook on life and a high-school experience that they can look back on with no regrets. That is a lifelong reward that they can carry with them forever. Whom do they have to thank? Green and Knox, as well as the other coaches, have helped them along the way.

The library is starting to quiet down because the after-school students have gone off to their classrooms to learn the day's lessons, whether it be mood management or how to deal with peer pressure. Each student walks out of the library knowing, that they have at least two people on their side, and who believe in them as much as the students are learning to believe in themselves. "I love each and every child and believe that they can do and be anything that they want to be," Knox explains. Success is something that every person can attain. However, confidence can only be felt if someone is dedicated enough to get through the rough times and pressure. Sometimes it takes a little encouragement to build the confidence needed to get to that successful place. That's exactly where Green and Knox step in for the students at the Reconnecting Youth program.

Reconnecting Youth Supports Students Goals for Future

By Kevin Rider

Omar Brown walks down the halls of Chester High School with a gleaming smile on his face. As all of the rest of the students are rushing down the hallways like a stampede of buffalo only to get through those heavy worn-out doors and out of the school, Omar is taking his time. That is because Omar is just one of 100 proud and dedicated students at Chester High who participate in the after-school program called Reconnecting Youth.

Brown, a bright-eyed junior, is an articulate student at Chester High who is determined day in and day out to meet the strenuous goals he has set for his future. The Reconnecting Youth program provides Brown and other motivated students the push that they need to realize that they can achieve anything they want to as long as they deeply believe in themselves.

Reconnecting Youth is a program developed by the Chester Education Foundation. This program aims to guide students who may be having a difficult time in school or at home, to overcome their tough obstacles and prevail in school. The students who are involved have either volunteered themselves or have been recommended to the program.

“Reconnecting Youth puts the fun in learning and the learning in fun,” Brown explained of the program. Not only is he involved with Reconnecting Youth, but he is also a member of the Chester High School basketball team, where he plays point guard. Reconnecting Youth has helped to give Brown a foundation of hope in achieving his goal of going to college and getting a excellent education to lead him to a successful career.

One of the aspects of Reconnecting Youth that Brown looks forward to the most is that the program provides a safe and trouble-free place for him and his friends to go and hang out. “If you stay away from trouble, you won’t get in trouble. But if you are looking for trouble it will find you,” explains Brown of what he has learned. This is one reason why many students get involved with Reconnecting Youth.

The after-school program also provides positive social activity for the students because it gives them a place to get to know each other in a learning atmosphere. They get to know each other through lessons taught by their mentors about achieving goals and stress management. During these lessons, students go around and help each other by giving advice to how they can improve their attitudes towards themselves, peers, and family.

Another student who participates in the Reconnecting Youth program is a junior who is so excited about her future because she has realized that there are so many different things that she wants to accomplish, thanks to the program. Erica Edwards signed herself up for the program because she knew that, by being surrounded by the positive people at Reconnecting Youth, she would become a better student. Edwards sits at a table in the overly crowded library deeply concentrating on her homework because she is gearing up for an exciting future. “There is a lot...that I want to do...nursing, design clothes, be an actress. Just so much stuff to do,” she explains excitedly. One of the most important things that Reconnecting Youth has taught her is that you have to set short term and long term goals for yourself. These short term and long term goals allow you to have a tangible mark set that you will reach these goals sometime in the near future, with a little sweat and hard work.

For now, both Brown and Edwards are enjoying their high school days and working hard to get their grades to the highest they can be. College is in the future for both students, and Reconnecting Youth has helped them to realize that they can get there as long as they try. Brown and Edwards are only two of the dedicated students at Chester High out of the many who have set goals and have every expectation of achieving them. Reconnecting Youth is working with these students one at a time so that they realize that they can be everything they wish to be.