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## When the Community Writes: Re-envisioning the SLCC DiverseCity Writing Series

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This article describes the development of a community writing and publishing program, the DiverseCity Writing Series, from 1998 to 2005. Starting as a one-time workshop between a community college English service-learning course and a local women's advocacy organization, the DiverseCity Writing Series has grown into a year-round partnership between the SLCC Community Writing Center and multiple organizations throughout the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. This mutually beneficial collaboration for the college and the community has been achieved through critical inquiry regarding issues of ownership and discourse as well as the dedication of community members and organizational partners.

*The uses of language are what teachers of literacy teach (or should teach), which means that how we teach is at least as important as what we teach-maybe, in fact, more important."*

—Jay Robinson, "Literacy and Lived Lives"

Since opening in the fall of 2001, the Salt Lake Community College's Community Writing Center has re-conceptualized the potential of writing centers and writing programs to move beyond the academy's walls and to interact with their surrounding communities. The Community Writing Center is informed by a pedagogy that re-envisioning the relationships between literacy and society and attempts to acknowledge and support a range of literate practices and events. It is a site where the multiple needs for literate actions can find their beginnings, journeys, and fruition.

Previously housed in a low-income, multi-use community development project, and now located off-campus in a two-room space adjacent to the Main City Library in downtown Salt Lake City, the Community Writing Center welcomes all city residents to participate in its programs. Originally founded to provide one-on-one writing assistance to the public—just as campus writing centers do for students across the country—the Community Writing Center (CWC) has evolved over the past four years into five distinct programs:

- *The Center*: “A place to write,” with technological, textual and learning resources, space to compose and receive feedback, and room to meet about writing. The CWC is located in downtown Salt Lake City and open to all greater Salt Lake metropolitan residents 16 years old and older.
- *Writing Coaching*: Free one-on-one assistance on any writing task from start to finish: resumes, poetry, letters, articles. Located at the CWC, in libraries and community centers around the valley, and on-line.
- *Writing Workshops*: Workshops for the public and for local organizations, on topics ranging from grant-writing to poetry, journaling to press releases.
- *Writing Partners*: Long-term collaborations with local organizations to develop sustainable change through writing.
- *DiverseCity Writing Series*: A multi-group, cross-valley writing and publication project to build bridges over social chasms such as economic disparity and racial intolerance.

The Community Writing Center is staffed by six part-time Writing Assistants, who are most often also students from the community college and nearby colleges and universities; I have been the director since its inception.<sup>1</sup> So far, the CWC has worked with over 1200 individuals and 80 community organizations through these collaborative and adaptable programs that partner the community college in learning relationships that Thomas Deans might refer to as “writing *with* the community.” Situated outside the kinds of course curriculum requirements and constraints that influence service-learning partnerships, and free of the research requirements necessary within many university-community collaborations, the CWC has responded in an organic way to the diverse writing and literacy needs and requests of Salt Lake City’s adults. Stephen Ruffus, SLCC English Department Chair, observes, “There is a dif-

ferent pedagogical context at the CWC, separate from the rhythms inherent in a classroom setting. Akin to a jazz improvisation, the participants in CWC programs draw on themselves, on the project itself, and riff into new and exciting literacy events, helping themselves to deal with dominant discourses.”

The CWC’s development, from the beginning, drew heavily upon the work of Wayne C. Peck, Linda Flower and Lorraine Higgins at the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh, especially their explorations of “community literacy” as “a search for an alternative discourse.” Intending to create a hybrid space, drawn from campus writing centers, CLC research, and the community college mission to meet a broad range of community-identified writing needs in Salt Lake City, the Community Writing Center identified its mission as follows:

Because writing effectively is a means to improving people’s lives, the mission of the SLCC Community Writing Center is to support the writing goals of out-of-school adults. We fulfill this mission by initiating and developing short- and long-term writing programs and by collaborating with working alliances to identify ways that our resources can serve the community. The CWC also provides training and opportunities for college students and the general public to contribute to our mission.

In Fall 2004, this mission statement was revised to read:

The SLCC Community Writing Center promotes the improvement of writing abilities for personal, economic and social goals. To achieve this mission, the CWC sponsors innovative outreach programs and collaborates with community partners to identify the best use of its educational resources.

One of the Community Writing Center’s programs, the DiverseCity Writing Series, demonstrates how skilled uses of language bridge differences and foreground discourse practices that too often go unrecognized as the fabric of community building. Initiated before the CWC actually opened its doors, the DiverseCity Writing Series is the CWC’s longest-standing program. Over the past six years, it has evolved from a single-partner short-term community

writing project into a year-round, multi-group collaborative community writing and publishing project.

**Figure 1 THE DIVERSECITY WRITING SERIES TIMELINE**

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2003	2005
Bridges Newsletter							
		DiverseCity Writing Series					
		Single Partner					
					DiverseCity Writing Series (Multi-Group)		

The DiverseCity Writing Series started in the fall of 2000, as a ‘sequel’ of sorts to the *Bridges* newsletter—a service-learning partnership between the SLCC English Department and Artspace, Inc., a non-profit arts and neighborhood developer (See *Figure 1*). The *Bridges* newsletter was produced by SLCC students in an English Special Topics course that I taught in which they researched and wrote about the people and histories of an essentially abandoned neighborhood in downtown Salt Lake City that Artspace was in the process of re-building. The non-profit had approached the college to develop a narrative record of the neighborhood to supplement its own community-building efforts. Each semester, for three years, English students went into the community to gather stories, and students from the College’s printing apprenticeship program produced the newsletter which was distributed to residents and organizations in the community. The on-going project received an outstanding service-learning award from the Utah Campus Compact and provided a tangible resource for Artspace in its fundraising efforts.

While the *Bridges* newsletter evolved, the Community Writing Center also continued to develop. As SLCC faculty worked to establish the initial programming that the CWC would provide to the community, we examined the rapidly changing demographics of Salt Lake City. Predominantly a settlement for members of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (Mormons) for over a century, the population of the Salt Lake valley had increased (mostly due to immigration from other states and countries) at three times the national average: 25% between 1990 and 2000. While Mormons still make up a significant portion of city residents (approximately 35%) and the com-

munity remains predominantly Caucasian, the diversity of the metropolitan area is increasing faster than it had for decades; in fact, the Hispanic community has doubled over the last ten years. This dramatic change has brought with it growing pains similar to those many Mountain West states are facing. Most notable are challenges about who belongs in the community—and to whom the community belongs—leading to conflict and isolation.

Spinning off of the *Bridges* newsletter's purpose to interview residents and share the stories of the community—in essence, writing *for* or *about* the community—the DiverseCity Writing Series moved the college into writing *with* the community (Deans). In this new version of community building, the words and writing would be those of the people who lived in the community, rather than enlisting students to interview residents and interpret and present their stories. In some ways, the new project moved towards what Jay Robinson describes as “the empowerment of individuals to speak freely in such voices as they have about matters that concern them, matters of importance, so that conversation may be nourished” (*Conversations* 284). The initial purpose was to move from the student-interpretations of community presented in the *Bridges* newsletter, to self-presentation of those voices by the people in the community. Many higher education-community partnerships have been started with similar intentions, such as the one described in “Unsheltered Lives” by Carol Winkleman, who facilitated a writing project with a battered women's support group. This intention appears to lead to many such projects focusing on “life stories” or narrative writing, which, interestingly, in many institutions has been mostly removed from academic writing curricula.

The initial proposal for the pilot DWS, submitted to the College's administration for financial support, included the following language:

The DiverseCity Writing Series aims to provide individuals with opportunities to express themselves and to be understood by their communities. People who have been silenced by cultural, institutional or historical forces need a safe, encouraging, and educational environment in which to create their stories. When people write about their lives, and are valued for doing so, confidence and personal insight grow. Analysis of the surrounding community

can lead to increased interest in, and dedication to, participating in that community. Also, when those stories are shared, we will raise awareness-and hopefully understanding-of the myriad of people in this community who make Salt Lake their home. (Rousculp)

Although two students were involved with the project (English majors earning credit through the college's Co-operative Education program), the DiverseCity Writing Series was established outside the typical service-learning course paradigm. Together, the two students and I met three times with the staff of a local low-income women's advocacy organization, Justice, Economic Dignity and Independence for Women (JEDI), to explore the possibilities for a writing partnership between the organization and the college. We agreed on a proposal that would establish an eight-week writing workshop for six to eight of JEDI's clients and/or staff. The participants would write in response to informal writing assignments that explored themes of self and community. At the end of the project, the CWC would produce a 'zine of their writing and sponsor a reading held for their families, friends and the general public.

Over the next year and a half, the DWS program partnered the college with three additional community organizations: 1) The Road Home homeless shelter, 2) the Liberty Senior Center and 3) the Cancer Wellness House. Each eight-week workshop focused on assignments with themes of self and community and culminated in 'zine publications and public readings. During this same period of time, the Community Writing Center had opened its space downtown. After the fourth round of the DWS, students who staffed the CWC felt that the program had reached a type of stasis and began to brainstorm ways to revise it. Sara Gunderson, a CWC Writing Assistant from Salt Lake Community College, researched alternatives and learned about two model programs: Write around Portland, in Oregon; and the Neighborhood Writing Alliance, in Chicago. Both had multiple groups that met regularly and came together for anthologized publication and communal presentation. The Write around Portland program partnered with non-profits, while the Neighborhood Writing Alliance facilitated public writing groups in community locations such as libraries. We thought that the DiverseCity Writing Series might be able to evolve into something similar. As I was by then directing the Community Writing Center and was occupied with its multiple programs, Gunderson took on the task of expanding the DiverseCity Writing



Series as a part of her work as a CWC Writing Assistant. Working about ten hours a week together, Gunderson and I spent the next six months revising it into a multi-group year-round writing program.

The expansion of the DiverseCity Writing Series started with five writing groups—three associated with local organizations (an adult literacy center, a senior center, and a teen arts program), and two “public” groups (one meeting at the Community Writing Center and the other at a city library). Volunteers from the community were trained by the CWC to mentor the groups using collaborative, non-directive approaches. To recruit volunteers, we utilized local newspapers, radio stations and community service websites. A typical volunteer donates approximately four hours a month to the DiverseCity Writing Series and remains with the program for 18 months (*Figure 2*).

**During the past two and a half years, the DiverseCity Writing Series has published five anthologies of community writing, staged five public readings (each attended by nearly 100 community members), and expanded to eight writing groups.**

**Figure 2.**  
**ROLES OF COMMUNITY, STUDENTS AND FACULTY IN DWS EVOLUTION**

	Bridges Newsletter	DiverseCity Writing Series (Single Partner)	DiverseCity Writing Series (Multi-Group)
Community	Subjects	Writers	Writers and Volunteer Group Mentors
Students	Writers (Service Learning)	Assist writers and DWS facilitator (Co-op Education and CWC Writing Assistants)	DWS program coordinator (CWC Writing Assistant)
Faculty (myself)	Course Instructor (Service Learning)	DWS Facilitator	CWC Director

The groups met every other week and at the end of six months, participants submitted their writing to an anthologized publication; each submitter was guaranteed to have at least one piece of writing published. As with the previ-

ous version of the DWS, these submissions were left unedited by the DiverseCity Writing Series coordinator; the words of the community were to

**No longer are the DiverseCity Writing Series groups the province of the community college; rather they constitute a matrix of dynamic partnerships between the Community Writing Center and the writers and volunteers who mentor them.**

be presented as is, not interpreted by another party. With funding from an SLCC grants program, the anthology, designed and laid out by myself and Gunderson, was printed professionally and distributed to workshop participants, city and county libraries, and area community centers. (To offset some of the

publishing expenses, copies of the anthology are sold at the public reading events and on consignment at bookstores.) To celebrate the publication, all participants were invited to share their work in a public reading held at a local art gallery.

During the past two and a half years, the DiverseCity Writing Series has published five anthologies of community writing, staged five public readings (each attended by nearly 100 community members), and expanded to eight writing groups including the Liberty Senior Center, the Literacy Action Center, the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgendered Community Center of Utah, Centro Civico Mexicano, an Adult Day Treatment Center, and an environmental writing public group at the local REI retailer. It has received four small grants from private and governmental foundations and a fair share of positive publicity from the local media.

With these revisions in place—multiple writing groups, varied distinctions of diversity, and workshops led by mentors from the community instead of students and faculty from the college—we felt we had taken a step beyond Deans’ construction of writing *with* the community into a new model of a higher education-community partnership. Currently, the DWS appears to be emerging as its own set of multiple discourse communities, supported, but not constructed, by an educational institution. Each writing group is developing its own identity and style of interaction, while at the same time remaining a part of the matrix of groups within the larger program. Some have organized open houses to showcase their writing groups to their communities; others have established open mic evenings; and still others have created their own



“mini-’zines” on a particular theme. No longer are the DiverseCity Writing Series groups the province of the community college; rather they constitute a matrix of dynamic partnerships between the Community Writing Center and the writers and volunteers who mentor them, a sum of multiple distinct participants.

### **Revising Towards Sustainability**

For the DiverseCity Writing Series to reach sustainability, extensive commitment from Salt Lake Community College and community partners (collaborating organizations and individual participants alike) has been required, which, as I argue below, has evolved through critical revision into fully shared ownership of the program by the community and the college. At the same time, the DiverseCity Writing Series, as a part of the Community Writing Center, has met the needs of the community college as well, thus securing its continued funding.

### **Finding Mutually Beneficial Relationships**

With the emergence of service-learning and other community-based educational approaches, working beyond the institutional walls is becoming more and more pervasive at colleges and universities across the nation. According to the American Association for Community Colleges, in 2004 600 out of the 1200 community colleges offered service-learning already within their curriculum and at least 35-40% of the rest were considering it. These programs often emerge from community “service commitment to the local community” (Serow and Calleson 5). This ‘service commitment’ was a key rationale for the Community Writing Center’s development. As Dr. Helen Cox, SLCC Associate Academic Vice President noted, “[The college had] a desire to serve presently un-served diverse populations.” SLCC is similar to most community colleges across the nation, whose missions include the creation of access, educational opportunity, centers of adult education, and community outreach.

While community colleges have a longstanding tradition of responding to community needs through non-credit and/or certificate courses, four-year colleges and universities also provide multiple learning opportunities to the public through lectures, life-long learning programs, and other specialized instructional programs, including a dramatic increase in service-learning. At

many institutions, faculty awards, recognition, and requirements for tenure now include service components. In 2004, Campus Compact noted at least thirteen four-year college/university model programs focusing on writing outreach. A significant portion of these outreach programs are based in a service-learning model, which is understandable, given that most four-year colleges and universities have student-centered missions that require innovations to tie directly into their students' learning experiences.

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Regardless of the motivation to move outside of the institutional walls, one hurdle that colleges and universities often face when working with the community is the negative perception from past experiences. Sometimes, an institution's research goals can unintentionally override

the mutually-beneficial relationships that colleges and universities can have with their surrounding communities, thus alienating the community partner who may end up feeling objectified by the partnership. As Ellen Cushman notes in her article "Sustainable Service-Learning," "Mistrust of university researchers is not uncommon in the communities where universities are located" (40). Cushman skillfully argues for a model of sustainable university-community partnerships that requires service-learning professors to view the "community site as a place where their research, teaching, and service contribute to a community's self-defined needs and students' learning" (40). However, community colleges can draw upon a model different from that of the university. In fact, one advantage that community college faculty may have in working with the community is that research and publication are not typically requirements for tenure. By following collaborative methods, and expecting fully-shared commitment and responsibility from its partners in reaching mutually-determined educational goals, higher education institutions can undo previous experiences (Peck, Flower and Higgins; Judkins and LaHurd). When a partner organization realizes that a proposed collaboration is not a pretext to research, barriers can drop and positive experiences go a long way to spreading the word to other community organizations and individuals.

Another factor that influences the community's perception of the higher educational institution is the extent to which the college is committed to the partnership—particularly by providing resources for its continuance. However, a college (specifically its administration and/or boards of trustees and regents) must be able to see clearly how the institution benefits from a community partnership in order to commit its resources for more than an interesting new trial run. Tapping into the institution's publicly promoted values and mission, and drawing overt attention to the ways the community project helps the college fulfill that mission can be a strong argument for continued support.

At Salt Lake Community College, the Community Writing Center has received support from all levels of administration. In addition to community-minded college leaders, I believe this support has been partly due to our vigilance in showing how the Community Writing Center, and especially the DiverseCity Writing Series, directly promotes SLCC's mission, values and goals, which include:

- Community: We value community involvement and economic development
- Creativity: We value creativity, innovation and responsible risk-taking.
- Diversity: We value personal, cultural and ethnic diversity.

In addition, we have drawn constant attention to three of the college's six goals—A Learning College, Diversity, and A Partner in the Community—throughout the development of the Community Writing Center and the DiverseCity Writing Series. Seemingly, our efforts to do this have resonated with the college leaders. What started five-and-a-half years ago with a one-time \$500 matching contribution from the School of Humanities for the Utah Humanities Council grant request that started the DiverseCity Writing Series has evolved into a annual six-figure hard-funded budget. The college also proudly “claims” the Community Writing Center; on the “Community Services Education” page of the SLCC website, along with two other community-focused programs, it reads: “SLCC's award-winning Community Writing Center brings together new and experienced writers, blending diverse voices in community publications, readings and discussion groups.”

While the institutional support for the CWC and the DiverseCity Writing Series have continued to grow, commitment from the community partners has been equally important. For this to be achieved, it was necessary that the DiverseCity Writing Series be jointly owned by both the college and the community; it needed to move into a completely shared partnership, not one offered to the people by the college. As I describe in the paragraphs that follow, we made significant revisions to the DiverseCity Writing Series between the single-group and multi-group versions—based on close analysis of the first version—that attempted to balance the agency of the college and the community. It appears, based on the continuation of the program and its steady growth, that we have come a significant way towards reaching this goal.

### **Interrogating Ownership**

While the first version of the DiverseCity Writing Series intended to move ownership of the community-based writing from students to the community itself, upon reflection, the Community Writing Center retained significant agency over the process and presentation of the writing. In the first version, the CWC proposed for the partner's acceptance that the writing in the workshops—designed to “help” the participants “find their voices”—would “explore self and community” through a series of informal writing assignments. One reason this approach was taken was that we had to do so in order to receive a small grant from the Utah Humanities Council (the local National Endowment for the Humanities branch), which required that a “scholar” lead community members through their learning experiences. As can be seen in a passage from that grant proposal, the CWC is clearly the active agent in the collaboration: “In this partnership, [the CWC will] provide opportunities and assistance for the individual writer to create written records of life stories, personal and political opinions, and self/community reflection.” In addition to the grant requirements, this was the first time I had stepped fully outside of the discourses of the classroom environment into writing with the community, and the structure provided by the workshop approach was a more accessible bridge to the writing than the completely open forum into which the DWS has evolved.

Even so, as the first DiverseCity Writing Series writing workshop progressed, it appeared that the participants were taking the “assignments” into their own hands for their own purposes. With the typical motivating factors of compli-

ance that influence students (grades, credit, career goals) removed, the participants changed the dynamics of the teacher-learner relationship, attending sporadically and selectively responding to the writing prompts. I was concerned that the project was doomed to failure, but at the end, the project evaluation indicated, “Although the project seemed tenuous at times during our eight-week workshop, the resulting ’zine and public reading exceeded all expectations. Seven writers contributed eleven pieces of writing to the ’zine and over 50 people attended the public reading at a local café.” Some of the writers jumped at the chance to write about themselves: two women combined all of the writing prompts into extended memoirs and self-analyses. However, others went in their own directions: one woman wrote an elegy for her recently deceased mother; another included a manifesto of sorts about the state of women in poverty. In the three other partnerships in the first version of the DWS, the CWC still provided writing prompts to elicit writing about the relationship between self and community, but encouraged the participants to use them only as starting points as was useful for them; “personal story” began to expand into fiction, parody, essay and verse.

Upon reflection, Sara Gunderson and I agreed that the thematic focus of the writing workshops in the first version of the DiverseCity Writing Series was assuming too much agency in the partnerships. As we re-envisioned an expanded DWS, we considered expanding the themes, or soliciting project-wide themes from the multiple writing groups, like “power” or “freedom” in order to unite the participants in purpose and discussion. However, in the end we decided that the individual participants, and the writing communities that would emerge from them, should determine both genres and topics.

Another way we discovered that the Community Writing Center assumed too much agency in the first version of the DiverseCity Writing Series was in the presentation of the publications. I, and the students assisting me, tended to ‘interpret’ the writings in the ’zine publications in the introductions that we wrote for them. As Todd DeStigter notes in his article, “Good Deeds: An Ethnographer’s Reflections on Usefulness,” “Any cross-cultural ‘translation’...includes potentially oppressive self-representation: that is, usurping the ownership of another person’s experience and putting it into our own terms” (36). These introductions, which we thought of as ‘frames’ for the participants’ writing, unintentionally interpreted the community’s voices,

just as service learning students had done with the stories in the *Bridges* newsletter. For example, in the publication from The Road Home workshop, the Introduction begins “In this, the second DiverseCity Writing Series publication, writers from The Road Home describe what it’s like to be a member of a homeless community, and also what it takes to remain an individual in this most transient of populations.” While this may seem benign, and even though we were vigilant about keeping the writing “as is,” leaving misspellings and creative grammar choices intact, this introduction categorized the writing contained within the publication into two specific foci, and perhaps diverted attention from a reader’s ability to perceive the wider range of topics and contributions that were present within it.

In the second version of the DiverseCity Writing Series, in which the publications anthologized writing from the multiple groups, we still included an introduction, but stayed away from interpreting or categorizing. The Introduction that Gunderson wrote to the first collective anthology demonstrates this:

A couple of times while compiling this anthology, I called my brother in Tucson and said, “Okay, I have to read this to you - it’s so good.” Other times, I stopped colleagues of mine and asked if I could read them an excerpt from a particularly provocative piece. There is some excellent work in **Sine Cera**, and that’s cool because it’s all written by people from our community - people we stand in line with at the grocery store, people we sit next to on the bus.

And hopefully what this shows is that anyone can write. So many people believe that the only good writers are published writers, and that just isn’t true. Yes, some of the authors in this anthology have been previously published, but the majority of them have not. In fact, for some, the work found here is their first ever writing endeavor.

With this in mind, we titled the anthology **Sine Cera** (SInay-Kera). The term is Latin and means “without wax”. And as the story goes, “sine cera” was used to describe a sculpture created without flaws, thus not needing wax to fill-in fissures or chips. It



is believed that “sine cera” is the Latin root of the word sincere. A sincere sculpture. A sincere effort. And so, we adopted this term to be the name of the DiverseCity Writing Series Anthology.

Anyone can write. That’s what the DiverseCity Writing Series shows. And with writing comes power. Power to move your reader, power to express yourself. Power to take small black symbols and incite rage, lust, or nostalgia. Power to heal

So, read on and enjoy. And maybe sometime, if you feel like it, pick up a pen and try scribbling something down. Who knows, it might even be good.

It is possible that the participants in the first version of the DiverseCity Writing Series could have written the introductions to their ’zines themselves. But, at the end of each eight week workshop, the writers were so busy finishing up their own pieces for the ’zine and preparing for the public reading, that there was no desire to focus on a piece of collaborative writing. This was not surprising to us, given the resistance that students in writing classes often express about collaborative writing projects. Outside of the classroom space, the DiverseCity Writing Series participants took what they wanted from these workshops, rather than engaging in collaborative writing to analyze and present their writing. Based on the development of the writing groups during the second version of the DiverseCity

Writing Series, it seems that community writers—in order to collaboratively write—need a motivating factor that emerges from within the group, rather than one of “empowerment” as defined by an educational institution. Recently, some of the groups, in what we loosely call the “third version” of the DiverseCity Writing Series, have determined their own themes of writing for a period of time and compiled their own mini-’zines that they have collaboratively designed and produced outside of the DWS program.

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Another issue that we confronted in the revision of the DiverseCity Writing

Series, was that the partnerships always focused on a disenfranchised group, an “other.” We analyzed the groups with whom we had partnered, and noticed that through the selection of “oppressed” or “othered” populations (low-income women, the elderly, the homeless, the ill), that we were, in fact, making a determination of what diversity meant, and, again unintentionally, falling into the kinds of exploitive relationship that higher education-community collaborations can engender. This revealed itself, again, in the introductions to the ‘zines, as can be seen in the Liberty Senior Center publication:

In many other cultures, stories from elders are sought out for guidance, comfort and life lessons. In our country, senior citizens are often ignored, much less listened to for the wisdom in their stories. Sometimes they are dismissed as unwise or thoughtless, their opinions irrelevant to our harried lives. However, it takes less than a short second to realize these stories come from mindful and experienced people, stories that flow from the thoughts and memories, and sometimes painful hands, of our senior writers.

On the surface, this type of presentation appears to be merely respectful of a population that is often dismissed in our culture. However, as bell hooks eloquently presents in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And, then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you as I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. (151)<sup>2</sup>

To avoid this dynamic, we decided to construct a combination of the programs that we’d researched by including some writing groups associated with local organizations that supported “othered” communities, such as the Literacy Action Center (a non-profit dedicated to helping adults learn to read) and the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgender Community Center of Utah; yet we also established public groups open to anyone, located both at



the CWC and at one of the city's libraries. We decided that a truly diverse program was one that honored the complex subtleties of a community, rather than relying on culturally-determined identity politics to select who would be invited to participate. In fact, the program has since evolved to include what might be considered a "privileged" demographic—environmentalists—with the establishment of a sustained environmental writing group that meets at the local R.E.I. retailer.

### **Following the Community's Lead**

One other revision to the DiverseCity Writing Series as it moved from the first to the second versions was that the volunteer group mentors were expected share their writing with the writers in equal ways. In the first version, none of the participants in the DWS groups had expected me or the student assistants to share our writing with them as they were with us, with one exception: The Road Home homeless shelter writing group, which was made up of current and previous shelter residents along with shelter staff members (social workers and case managers). The staff members participating in the workshop all had similar education to me—Master's Degrees or higher—and their professions were socio-economically similar to mine. Perhaps this contributed to their awareness of the inherent contradictions that were being made when I referenced collaborative practices and critical pedagogies of empowerment, yet was not sharing my own writing with them. They requested that I write something for the public reading, because if they had to get up in front of people and bare their souls through writing, then I did too. Although I emotionally resisted this request, they were right, and I shared a personal essay at the reading. In the current version of the DWS, the group mentors (volunteers from the community) are expected to write along with the people who participate in the groups. Not surprisingly, just as writing center tutors often report that tutoring helps them improve their own writing as much as their tutees', the mentors note that the writing groups help with their own writing.

In some ways, these writing groups have created versions of "habitable spaces" as coined by Jay Robinson, and noted by Cathy Fleischer and David Schaafsma in their *Introduction to Literacy and Democracy*. "What is crucial to the fostering of such a conception [of literacy]", they explain, "is the development of a 'habitable space', a common place, a safe place, where conversation

can begin and where meaning might be negotiated to create communities in which literacy might flourish” (xx). David Gravelle, a mentor for the GLBTCCU writing group said, “The writers in my group really value the space we’ve created, and I feel fortunate to be helping to sustain that space. Watching them work with each other, and watching them give and be influenced by each other’s feedback, has inspired me in my own writing.”

Even though writing with the group is a type of requirement, or expectation, of the mentors, we have found that it is easier for the some of the mentors to disregard these expectations than it is for the writers. Melissa Helquist, a mentor for the Literacy Action Center writing group, noted a moment when she elected not to follow the assignment that her group had established for itself,

The writers decided that their writing topic would be “abandonment,” something they all felt they’d encountered in their lives: in personal relationships, in the education system, etc.-that the abandonment they’d encountered had in some way halted their learning process. Often, I’ll also write on whatever topic was chosen, but this time, I felt that the topic was too challenging, only presenting uncomfortable emotional disclosure. So, I wrote nothing. One of the writers took on the topic and wrote a very thoughtful and painful reflection on abandonment throughout her life. She had not necessarily wanted to write about abandonment, but that was, as she said, simply “the assignment.” This was a writing-related and personal challenge, but only the writers made the effort. The two facilitators did not do the work. Even though writers in the group always have the choice not to write on a specific topic, as *students* they feel more pressure than we as teachers feel. The risk is much less significant for us.

I believe that this construction of “students/teachers” in this particular group is a response to its evolution as a type of “hierarchical collaboration” as described by Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede as interactions between learner and teachers that are unambiguous in terms of authority and responsibilities (153). While most of the writing groups operate in a collaborative feedback model-participants bring in their writing for feedback from the group and

work collaboratively on revisions, and sometimes topic generation—two of the groups, the Literacy Action Center and the Valley Mental Health group, have requested more “classroom-based” instruction in the partnerships. The adults in the Literacy Action Center see themselves as needing to learn from their mentor. The case workers with whom we collaborated on the development of the Valley Mental Health group felt a classroom-based workshop would fit in with their daily schedule of life skills courses.

In addition, the illnesses and brain injuries the writers in the Valley Mental Health group are coping with prevent them from engaging in most levels of revision; nearly all of their writing is done in the moment, and then turned in for consideration for publication in the anthologies. This also runs counter to the process in all of the other groups, which spend a majority of their time on the processes of revision and feedback. While it may appear that this type of collaboration contradicts the CWC’s intention to transfer the agency from itself to the participants in the writing groups, it is actually a manifestation of just that purpose; similar to the discovery that Thomas Phillion made in his literacy work with middle-school urban students that, “While I retained a commitment to the idea of making dynamic connections between classrooms and the larger world, I began to conceive the need to subordinate this goal to the less ambitious but equally vital aim of involving students actively in reading, writing, listening and speaking” (67). The CWC responded to the expertise of the adult literacy and mental health professionals and co-constructed writing groups that could accommodate their clients’ needs, rather than adhering to our own assumptions about the best approaches to creating writing communities.

As we revised the DiverseCity Writing Series, we wanted to move away from the focus on the individual’s relationship with the community and towards the relationships that exist within a community, the shared-ness of writing and its power to bridge differences. The first expansion goal stated, “The DiverseCity Writing Series operates under the idea that writing has the power to unite a community and build bridges over social chasms such as economic disparity and racial intolerance.” We wanted to move in a direction similar to the one described by Jay Robinson in “Literacy and Lived Lives,” about his work with high school writing and publishing collaborations:

We wanted these publishing projects, these introductions into the uses of written language, to serve as antidotes to debilitating forms of separation, isolation and loneliness [between two high schools]...We were seeking to make and remake a public, through engagement in a common project, in which language could be used to translate the deeply personal, which can only be deeply felt, in to the public character words can achieve as readers open their minds to worlds authors can shape for them. (7)

As we worked through the experiences and products of the first version of the DiverseCity Writing Series, however, we realized it was not possible for the Community Writing Center, as an institution of the community college, to continue to be the primary agent and meet these goals. The project had to become jointly shared by the college and the community and provide mutually-beneficial ends to each. Over the past two and a half years, it seems that this has been achieved.

### Notes

1. Between 1997 and 2001, I worked with Stephen Ruffus, Chair of the SLCC English Department, to found the CWC. Though I am currently the director of the CWC, I have maintained my faculty status at the college and still teach for the English department. As this article shows, this work has given me the opportunity to interact with the community in several different roles (service learning faculty, community publishing facilitator, and director).
2. Interestingly, one popularly successful documentary, *What I Want My Words to Do to You*, details a writing group in a women's prison facilitated by writer Eve Ensler (author of *Vagina Monologues*), in which the participants' writing was "read back to them" in a final performance by Hollywood celebrities.

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