

Merging Voices: University Students Writing with Children in a Public Housing Project

Michael John Martin

*What do I like and don't like about this program?
What I do like about this program is when we read
our stories and poems. And I like when we get to
draw. It will make you write better and read better
because the more you read the better you write.*

Traci, 7

*Our poems are gold
they are our songs.
They are gold gold gold and gold.*

Torey, 8

How can we nurture children's creative ability as writers outside the academic context, celebrating their unique voices, teaching them to trust their ears and value the creative process? It can be set up simply: A group of young students in an after school center. Some adults acting as mentors to help them do creative writing. A space in which to work, create, and perform, but without imposed goals or preconceived outcomes. This is a simple recipe, like those in an ancient Chinese cookbook: to inspire rather than instruct. A handful (or more) of adult college students, some transportation to a site somewhere with kids, aged, say, 5-12, a table and a room to put it in. Write some poetry and perform it, type it out afterwards, copy and distribute it. Put it on the web¹. Start a collection of it. After a while, say three months, have a big celebration of the written work with hot dogs, cake, and ice cream. Invite the children's parents and pass out certificates: The words are not school words, but they are extremely important to the kids who created them and their adult collaborators.

The Village Words project in San Francisco's Visitacion Valley neighborhood was designed to encourage literate practice at a neighborhood services center, an area with a mixture of private and public housing. Among other vital services, the Village Community Center cares for neighborhood kids before and after school (in association with the Columbia Parks Boys and Girls Club) and provides medical services, job training, and other family services. But one thing a visitor notices is that most of the kids' time is spent in entertainment such as video games or billiards; children often work on their homework at the center, but few other activities are consciously educational.

Begun in 1996 with grants from the San Francisco Urban

Institute and the California State University Chancellor's Fund for Community Service Learning, The Village Words Project was first run with volunteers from my writing classes and later evolved into a course dedicated to the project. Students read theories of literacy, education, sociolinguistics, and creative writing instruction, and the theory helps them understand and analyze their interactions with the children. The project's development required grants for release time for myself before the course was designed, and the first semester the class—an elective fulfilling no degree requirement—was offered, it drew only seven students. In the current semester, time conflicts and other problems have forced us to run it as a community service component of a section of a standard composition class. People involved in or aware of the program have no doubt of its eventual success, though logistics such as scheduling sessions to fit both students' and the centers' needs, arranging and coordinating transportation, and funding have presented near-continual challenges.

For the children, the program has attempted to provide some measure of positive literate experience in an extracurricular setting. For the university students who have worked as mentors, it provides an arena in which they can use their skills in academic language, their knowledge of pedagogy, and their position as nascent adults for some clear benefit. We practice creative writing with the kids, beginning each semester with little or no structure in mind, other than that children would write and perform their work in each session. Although few of mentors over four semesters have been trained as teachers, the mentors have worked variously as coaches, spellers, transcribers, counselors, and teacher-tutors. Their academic interests and concentrations have included psychology, engineering, English, Liberal Studies, management, and education.

In each case, mentors have been ambassadors from the conceptually distant university, demonstrating attitudes toward literacy and literate behavior. Whatever their preparation, college students have a wealth of literate experience which they can bring to school and extracurricular settings as tutors, mentors, and role models of literate and other adult behavior, but they are too often walled within the university, out of contact with their communities. Often, when they do get to the point of working in internships or pursuing volunteer work, they are far along in their studies and work as apprentices in a specific area (teaching assistants, day care

supervisors, technical apprentices). This ignores their more general capabilities as learners and successful adults, disallowing a vital role in their interaction with others, and especially with kids: working in narrowly-defined purview, they may be less able to facilitate and foster precisely the kinds of everyday behavior that supported their own success.

Village Words allowed university students to use their academic and life knowledge to model literate behavior with disadvantaged students. They drew upon their academic training to discover methods to facilitate and inspire creative writing, to mediate writing sessions, and to understand the circumstances such as devalued dialects or debilitating self-images under which disadvantaged children learn. In this open structure, university students learned what did—and didn't—work to get writing done, and the elementary students' writing developed in sometimes surprising and touching ways. While I would not argue that my students uniquely demonstrated this kind of literate behavior in the neighborhood, their participation provided to the children a new and exciting dimension of the writing process. Working closely with kids over a length of time also enabled them to establish friendships, adult-child relationships that informed the experience of both: Friere's ideal of teachers as students and students as teachers.

Latia: A Representative Example

Latia, a playful seven year old girl, illustrates one kind of change we saw. After initially refusing to write, her strategies for writing next all involved using text she did not create. Mentor Megan Segle wrote of one facet of this recalcitrance:

Latia... a highly affectionate and sociable little girl, spent a large amount of our writing time copying words she saw written elsewhere—on the walls or other kids' papers—then erasing them, claiming that they were too “messy.” This obsession could not have been self-ingrained; no doubt it has been learned.

In her early writing, Latia reproduced only existing text she knew, as in this example:

I see trees of green,
red roses, too.
I see them bloom for me and
you and I think too.

But after several sessions in which she got to know the mentors and was able to see and hear the writing that her peers did, Latia gained a sense of herself as a writer. Here, she uses given text from a wall poster that lists parts of speech, but builds on it creatively:

Adverbs and...
oh no
the cat playing
with my nouns!

And still later, she learns to use analogy, writing from an “If I were a ___” poetry prompt:

If I were an egg
they will crack me open
will color me
in red
they will eat me

Latia did not come easily to the freer creative writing she eventually produced. Recalcitrance and at times outright anger marked her early responses when mentors tried to get her to try something, and she worried a great deal about the spelling and appearance of her writing. Latia resisted writing creatively—at first refusing to participate, then drawing from existing or given text, but finally writing as a writer writes, inventing from her own experience. Mentors saw this progression again and again. Children's attention to the materiality of text caused reluctance and resistance during creative writing sessions, their tool kit of reductive skills an obstacle to creativity rather than a facilitator of it.

Benefits to Mentors

Our work with Village Words not only helped teach the children to engage in literate behavior and to perform literate acts, as Linda Flower terms it, but it also informed the experience of the adults, as when one senior Liberal Studies major saw the reification of intractable gender conflicts. In one of my classes, we were reading Peggy Orenstein's *School Girls*. One afternoon, we were working on the floor at the Village—about twenty kids and five or six mentors and myself, planning a play in small groups. Some boys in one group began to act up a little, goofing, calling each other names, when Kara, a wonderful student and a talented, insightful future teacher, began out of frustration to argue with them, yell at them, and threaten them, ignoring the girls in her group. After the session, as we walked out to our cars, she said with amazement, “I don't believe I did that. How could I let them command me like that? Take all my attention, just like the boys in the book. I'll never let that happen again,” she said.

Then she paused and said, “Yes I will, won't I?”

As it did for Kara, working beyond the classroom walls gave many of my students a perspective of themselves that enriched their academic learning, asking them to draw from and reflect upon what they knew about teaching, learning, the psychology of learning, and group politics as they worked as mentors with the elementary school children. They confronted the difficulties created by children's feelings of inadequacy. They studied (and identified with) the various manipulations and avoidance tactics the children used and analyzed the dynamics of the kids' relationships with us and among themselves.

My students resonated strongly with the children's reluctance to write, even though they had volunteered to be there to write. In the first few weeks of each term, this reluctance was partly due to the openness of tasks we set for the children's writing, though once the university students more

closely defined goals, outcomes, and writing practice—providing more scaffolding, for instance—they were surprised that many children’s recalcitrance did not lessen. This, in turn, got the adult students to consider their own impediments to writing and the social dimensions of literacy and literate empowerment, which allowed them to approach problems in group dynamics or with individual children keenly aware of the fragility of the learning moment: they were “expert,” as in “experienced,” but not in a narrowly defined sense such as “expert reader” or “good speller.”

We had many discussions of how we all suffer the legacy of the rule-bound conceptions of writing that the children also have, and participating in the program gave us a wealth of primary material to study. When students analyzed, for instance, a particularly meaningful or troubling moment during a Village workshop or tracked a child’s development over time, their writing involved them and engaged their experience to a degree that they had seldom experienced before in academic writing. They paid more attention to details, reflected more thoughtfully on their work, and had a stronger sense of what I call the social and political “contexts of importance” of their thinking. Because mentoring and writing about mentoring took place over time, mentors learned to see themselves as more than students. In a much broader sense, they had to see themselves as academic initiates—as adults with the kinds of general literate ability that enabled them to act as emissaries of higher literacy to which the children could begin to aspire.

This after-school project did not “fill time” with video games or other non-educational activities, nor did it seem directly to be school work: instead the adult students were able to facilitate creative use of written language, not bound by rules or “school” concerns like spelling or penmanship. This in turn helped the university students see the intrinsic value of children’s creative process and encouraged them to confront the limitations of the rule-bound, reductive conception of writing that most of them had been taught. The literate abilities of both older and younger students in this context became a matrix of teaching—of collaboration and creation—in which children taught adults and each other, as well as the dynamic object of theoretical study of teaching and learning.

Conclusion: No Losers

Some comments from one the mentors in Spring, 1999, when the project was integrated with a semester-length class on literacy and the writing process, illustrate the point:

Going to the Village every Wednesday became a real part of my life, as did the kids we worked with. I found myself talking about them to my friends and my family, thinking about them when I was not in class. This to me is the true value in a collaboration like this. College students become more well-rounded, more compassionate, less absorbed in themselves. I cannot stress enough how important our work has been. Seeing real relationships de-

velop and grow between the kids and ourselves was satisfying enough, but the excitement that came as the kids began to grow to be stronger, more confident writers made our efforts even more gratifying. Sure, we encountered problems, difficulties, and frustrations. But the lasting impression is one of hope and satisfaction. To me, the most valuable lessons there are to learn are hard to teach in schools, at least in the traditional curriculum. Programs such as this begin to confront the unfortunate tendency to separate 9 to 5 “real” life from one’s school life. Not only did we, the volunteers, have the opportunity to do this, but more importantly, the kids, through their experience, were hopefully given a chance to see the value and enjoyment that comes with writing. There can be no losers in an environment like this. I only wish there could be more opportunities for more college students to experience what I feel so fortunate to have been a part of.

—Megan Segle, junior English major

A room full of kids and adult mentors, writing for writing’s sake, collaborating, performing, and exploring, celebrated and validated the accomplishments of all. “Real” life, as Megan puts it, does not have to be so distinct from literate life. And the literate life need not be so hard to foster or attain. The community and the university have clear need of each other, and this is best seen when the walls come down and authority is relaxed.

Note

URL for the Village Words project is <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~mmartin/vilhome.htm>

Work Cited

Flower, Linda. “Literate Action.” In *Composition in the Twenty-first Century: Crisis and Change*. Ed. Lynn Bloom, Donald Daiker, and Edward White. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP., 1997.

The Author

Michael Martin has taught composition at San Francisco State University and other Bay Area colleges for over ten years. He continues to bring college students and children together at The Village and to look for other ways to bring the classroom to the community. For their unwavering support and understanding, he thanks Susan Alunan of the San Francisco Urban Institute; Elise Earthman, Jo Keroes, and Steve Arkin of the English Department; Dean Nancy McDermid of the School of Humanities; and especially the children and staff of The Village Community Center.