

What Changes When We “Write for Change?”: Considering the Consequences of a High School-University Writing Partnership

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Scholarship in community writing and service-learning has called attention to the lack of community partner voices in the assessments of writing partnerships. This article foregrounds those missing perspectives by reporting on the consequences of a community literacy program, Writing for Change, from the perspective of the high school youth involved. Analysis of high school student interviews and letters demonstrates myriad benefits of the partnership, extending from personal growth to a heightened sense of social responsibility. However, our study also reveals disconnect between participants' development as writers and rhetoricians and their perceptions of that growth and its relevance to their academic work. We ultimately argue for the importance of building connections between the rhetorical activism often forwarded by community literacy programs and the “school literacies” that youth associate with writing.

Community literacy initiatives that connect university members with young writers have the potential to help all participants develop their writing knowledge, increase their civic engagement,

build meaningful relationships, and improve their self-efficacy. Indeed, a defining characteristic of these partnerships is that they promise more than engaged learning opportunities for college students: they pledge that the community members involved will gain from the partnership as well.¹ But just what do community writers take away from their involvement in these initiatives? In his afterword to *Service-Learning and Writing*, Deans (2012) calls the absence of community partner voices in assessments of community literacy partnerships a “deep and hushed problem” (233). Indeed, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) warn that practitioners’ lack of knowledge of “how service learning affects communities from the perspective of those who live and work there puts us in dangerous territory” (7). The *CCCC Statement on Community Engaged Writing* (2016) is one of many sources that affirms the importance of assessing community writing projects in ways that take community partner voices into account (see also d’Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer 2009; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, and Kerrigan 1996; Holland 2001; Sandy and Holland 2006). For instance, the *CCCC Statement* lists the following as important questions: “How reciprocal was the project? To what extent did all the stakeholders involved (campus and community constituencies, which may include students and community members) benefit tangibly or intangibly from the project, its process, and outcomes?” As founders of a community writing partnership that involves college and high school students, we sought to address the “deep and hushed problem” by assessing the consequences of our program, Writing for Change, for the high school youth who participate in it.

What are community partners getting out of our courses and relationships? How might we improve community writing partnerships such as ours to better meet the needs of youth participants? In this article, we report on the most salient consequences of Writing for Change for the high school students involved. We then focus on the ways the writing and rhetorical elements of this initiative appear in the high school students’ perceptions of its effects. Our results show that while participants grew as individuals, community members, and writers, they did not always see the relevance of this growth to their academic success. Throughout this article, we speak to the tension that many community writing partnerships may face when trying to situate themselves as beneficial to students in *and* beyond school spaces—and when trying to teach young people to use writing

to effect social change *and* to succeed in school-sanctioned ways. We close by raising questions regarding the limitations of and possible improvements to community writing partnerships such as ours.

WRITING FOR CHANGE AND THE COMMUNITY LITERACY PARTNERSHIP

In 2013, we launched Writing for Change, a community literacy partnership that brings together college students (ranging from first-years to seniors) and ninth-grade students from a predominantly low-income local public high school to use writing and multimodal composition as tools for inquiry and social change. Every spring semester, about twelve-to-eighteen “college buddies” and thirty to thirty-six “high school buddies” participate in the 11-week program. The college students are all members of a 200-level elective writing class that attracts a wide variety of majors. The high school participants, meanwhile, do not opt into the program; all students in one teacher’s ninth-grade English class participate. Once a week, the college students travel together to the high school (less than one mile from the university) during a time that corresponds with one of the high schoolers’ 75-minute English classes. Throughout the partnership, the college and high school buddies work in small, collaborative teams, usually including one college buddy for every two-to-three high school students. The high school teacher and college instructor create these small teams based on students’ personalities and interests.

The objective of each small team is to create a multimodal advocacy project that connects to and extends the year’s theme, such as drug use, bullying, or stereotyping. Participants begin the process by using stasis theory to generate questions about their year’s selected issue. From there, teams have significant autonomy in all aspects of their projects and, through the course of the partnership, work through all the canons of rhetoric: they devise the genre or approach they believe would be most effective to convey their argument, and they brainstorm, research, compose, revise, and ultimately perform a persuasive composition that conveys their specific message about the theme. In years past, students have composed and performed a wide array of projects, including skits that integrate monologues and images, documentary videos, spoken word poetry, and symbolic

dance performances. The final performance event takes place in a classy recital hall at the university, which gives the performance cachet and motivates the teams to put in their best effort. The event is often well-attended by a large audience of community members, including college professors, students, and staff, and high school faculty, administration, parents, and peers. The primary goal of the performance is to give the high school students a platform to share their work, but we hope that their doing so may also legitimately influence audience members to think differently and more expansively about the issues addressed.

The college instructor and high school teacher work together before and throughout the semester-long project to ensure that the goals of the Writing for Change performances align as much as possible with the high school’s curricular goals. The overlap is imperfect, however, as the high school curricular goals relate mostly to literary and textual analysis. Throughout the course of their involvement in Writing for Change, the high schoolers continue to work on their district’s standard English curriculum, which usually includes reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and completing a prompted “literacy task.” Thus, in addition to their collaborative rhetorical projects, they simultaneously work on short and essay-length writing assignments based on themes in the novel and an analytical essay modeled after the SAT Essay. In recent years, the high school and Writing for Change program have been able to more closely align their objectives due to the high school’s new Arts Integration Initiative. As a result, Writing for Change now resonates with not only community literacy goals, but also the local district’s goal of integrating arts throughout the curriculum to enhance student learning.

A key principle that guides Writing for Change is the importance of reciprocity between the high school and college buddies. As a “writing with” partnership, Writing for Change provides space for “university faculty and students [to] collaborate directly with community members . . . to research and address pressing local problems” (Deans 2000, 19). Our program is but one of many community literacy partnerships that take up the model of “writing with” the community, engaging “ordinary people” in a rhetorical undertaking (Long 2008, 14) or a participatory literate action project that relates

to social change (Flower 2008, 21).² In keeping with best practices in community-university partnerships, we work hard to ensure that the program participants move beyond limited concepts of the “server” and “served” and form relationships in which they can learn from each other in a reciprocal manner (*CCCC Statement* 2016; Cushman 1996; d’Arlach, Sanchez, and Feuer 2009; Donahue, Bowyer, and Rosenberg 2010; Joliffe, Goering, Oldham, and Anderson 2016).

One way we foster reciprocity among participants is by teaching the teams of students to practice collaborative inquiry. The Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center (CLC) provided a particularly valuable model for us to emulate as we developed and refined this approach. Like the CLC, Writing for Change involves all participants in “intercultural inquiry” (Flower 2008, 7) in which the high school and college buddies work as “partners” (Flower 2008, 95) to “frame a question,” “pos[e] a problem,” and focus on what is at stake (Flower 2008, 230-231). Writing for Change teaches the CLC strategies of “seeking rival hypotheses” (or “rivaling”) and seeking “the story-behind-the-story” (Flower 2008, 56) to help the groups of writers “bring multiple voices to the table” and “reflect multiple voices in [their] text[s]” (Flower 2008, 231-232). The groups’ mixed media final projects represent the process of collaborative inquiry by embodying multiple perspectives on the issue they have chosen to examine. For instance, in 2015, one group created a short documentary-type movie about stereotyping that includes interviews, written words, and personal images. In the beginning of the movie, individuals silently hold signs with words that state one way they have been stereotyped, and at the end of the video, the performers flip the signs “to reveal the truth about their identity,” taking the stereotype into their own hands. The video includes interviews with high school students and teachers who discuss their different experiences with stereotyping based on race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

In encouraging students to explore and produce creative multimedia compositions, spoken word poetry, and texts in other hybrid genres, Writing for Change facilitates a bridge between participants’ academic and non-academic literacies. We take seriously Jocson’s (2006) entreaty to educators to value students’ “intersecting literacy practices,” including those sanctioned and unsanctioned, and

recognize *all* of students’ literacy practices as “viable building blocks for realizing and expanding [their] ability to write” (234). Jocson (2006) and Manning (2016) argue that poetry-based partnerships can help youth locate meaning and possibility in the writing projects they undertake (Jocson, 253; Manning, 289-90, 306). While we do not limit our participants’ writing projects to poetry, we do take to heart the importance of bringing culturally relevant and “meaningful” texts—both for analysis and production—into the classroom and partnership. Like many other community literacy partnerships, we also aim to increase participants’ empowerment and agency (Hull and James 2007, Joliffe et al. 2016, Kerr 2013, Manning 2016), build meaningful relationships across difference (Fleetwood 2005, Joliffe et al. 2016, Manning 2016, Vasudevan and DeJaynes 2013), and promote activism or community change (Hull and James 2007, Joliffe et al. 2016, Licona and Gonzalez 2013). We also take seriously the imperative to go public, making sure all participants’ projects have a high-stakes goal, a public audience, and a spot in the limelight (Flower 2008, 83; Jocson 2006, 253). As a result of students’ freedom in genre and the high stakes of the final performance, Writing for Change foregrounds the tough work of authentic invention in the face of a real rhetorical situation, a practice often absent from high school (and even college) classrooms that dictate the terms of assignments. In *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project*, Joliffe et al. (2016) remind us that “students—both high schoolers and university students—have had precious few opportunities to propose substantial projects of their own design, to carry out these projects over an extended period, and to produce ‘new knowledge’ about their topics rather than simply reproducing knowledge they find in other texts” (xvi-xvii). Writing for Change takes up this call to reinvigorate the tough but exciting work of invention and to shepherd students through the process of carrying out a long-term collaborative project that matters to them.

Indeed, many community literacy programs exist in large part because they believe the school setting is not doing enough or doing the right things with regard to literacy, writing, and power; these programs’ founders value youth-led inquiry, multimodal composing, and activist real-world projects in lieu of streamlined, standardized curricula (Goodman 2005; Gring-Pemble and Garner 2010; Hill 2009; Ife 2012; Jocson 2006; Manning 2016; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010). In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric*

of *Public Engagement* (2008), Flower represents the goals for literate action through the continuum of a writing project's "transformative potential" (19-20). On one end of the spectrum, Flower identifies the "institutional writing" of many schools and workplaces, which she describes as "stultifying limited literacies" that are "focused only on learning and playing by the rules" and offer the writer "little hope of making a difference in either a personal or public arena" (20). In contrast, in Flower's words, is writing that "tak[es] rhetorical action" (20) and makes a difference in the world. Like Flower's CLC and other community literacy programs, Writing for Change was also motivated in part by the legitimate limitations of "institutional writing" and the desire to engage participants in something more authentic or action-oriented. However, because Writing for Change takes place during school hours and during time that otherwise would have been the students' ninth grade English class, we felt obliged to do *more* than teach students to be responsible citizens who "take rhetorical action": we wanted our program to help participants develop knowledge and practices that they saw as relevant to school.

This ambition may sound reversed—usually literacy educators are striving to "fulfill more than just academic needs" (Manning 2016, 306)—but our persistent concern remained our responsibility to students' growth as writers in a school-relevant way. Indeed, even Hill (2009), whose hip-hop class sets out to "challeng[e] the political and epistemological underpinnings of formal schooling" acknowledges the need to "carefully negotiat[e][...]the tension between challenging school-sanctioned knowledge and providing students with bodies of knowledge that are requisite for mainstream educational success" (117, 124). As we formed our vision of Writing for Change and helping develop an empowered, rhetorically active, and open-minded cohort of young people, we did not want to lose sight of our responsibility to their "mainstream academic success." Even with its Arts Integration Initiative, our partner high school still features a mostly standardized curriculum with high-stakes bubble tests and brief constructed response-type writing. We wanted students to see writing as more than taking a test or completing a document in a standardized way, but we were also hoping that students might improve their writing in those spaces. With that in mind, we look to our results to answer two important questions: what did the high school participants take away from Writing for Change?

And to what degree (if at all) do students see those outcomes as relevant to their “school” writing and literacies?

METHODS

We used Gallagher’s (2012) distinction between outcomes- and consequences-based assessment to frame our assessment of Writing for Change. Whereas outcomes-based assessments tend to prioritize predetermined institutional or departmental goals, consequences-based assessment is attuned to “both the intended and unintended results” of the course and partnership (47). In community-engaged partnerships such as this one, the likelihood is high that learning and growth happen in unpredictable ways. Thus, we sought to discover the *consequences* that could include but certainly would reach beyond what we might have anticipated—consequences, in Gallagher’s terms, that might be “unpredictable, always emerging, tied to context, [and] recursive” (48). While we designed our study to gather data on the consequences of the partnership for both sets of participants (high school and college), we limit our scope in this article to the impact on our community partners, the high school students.

Importantly, our IRB-approved³ assessment of Writing for Change was developed in collaboration with our high school partner to be as minimally invasive and integrated with the project process as possible. That is, our collected data consisted primarily of documents that students were already producing as a part of the partnership: letters written by high school buddies to their college buddies at the end of the partnership, the high school buddies’ final performances, and synthesis essays written by college buddies. The letters and synthesis essays asked participants to reflect on their experiences in Writing for Change, including what they learned from the partnership, and, for the college students, how that learning was in conversation with literature on community-engaged writing. The high school students’ letters and college students’ synthesis essays were both central, rather than “tacked on,” features of the high school and college course curricula: the ninth-grade students were taught to target writing to an audience and use topic sentences, and the college students learned about synthesizing experiential and theoretical learning into a coherent argument. Our assessment, whenever possible, was

built around the existing needs and practices of all members of the partnership.

To gain insight into the consequences of the partnership after some time had passed, we also conducted interviews with both sets of buddies. In sum, we conducted nine interviews with participants from 2013, six with participants from 2014, and eight with participants from 2015. The interviews ranged in duration from 10-to-45 minutes and, transcribed, total 110 single-spaced pages. In the interviews, we asked participants about their expectations for the partnership, experiences with the partnership, and takeaways from the partnership. We also asked both the high school and college buddies what they thought their counterparts (their college or high school buddies) took away from the experience (see Appendix A for interview questions). We intended to record students' actual performance pieces as well. However, in both years (2014 and 2015) that we tried to do so, our recording equipment failed, so with few exceptions, we lack recordings of the performances themselves, although we do have an assortment of related artifacts, including images, scripts, and drafts. Our multilayered approach to data collection captures different types of information from participants in three years of the partnership (see Table 1 for details of data collected).

Table 1: Data collected from Writing for Change

Item Collected	Authors	Quantity	Years
Letters	HS Buddies	24	2015
Interviews	HS Buddies	13	2013-2015
Interviews	College Buddies	10	2013-2015
Performances	HS Buddies	3	2015
Synthesis Essays	College Buddies	7	2015

The data we collected is representative of the diverse range of participants in the program. The findings we present in this study draw from the high school students' documents, primarily their interviews and letters.

We took a predominantly data-driven approach to analysis, relying on grounded theory to shape our reading practices. We also found existing theoretical frameworks to be useful as we worked to interpret the findings that emerged. These include Felten and Clayton’s (2011) intersecting categories for goals in service-learning partnerships (civic learning, personal growth, and academic learning) and Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) subdivision of the “personal” category into inter- and intrapersonal gains (Felten and Clayton, 78; Pellegrino and Hilton, 4). In addition, we found Flower’s (2008) strategies for community literacy—particularly rivaling and seeking multiple perspectives—to be helpful ways to categorize and interpret the consequences of the partnership (240). Through an iterative process of sample coding, reviewing our findings, and re-coding, we developed a codebook and conducted our data analysis in Dedoose. To ensure reliability, we conducted multiple interrater reliability tests until we consistently achieved a minimum of 80 percent consistency (Cohen’s kappa) in code applications. Each document was then coded by one researcher.

“I LEARNED THAT I DO HAVE A VOICE”: CONSEQUENCES OF A COMMUNITY LITERACY PARTNERSHIP

In this section, we present the consequences of Writing for Change for the high school students involved, beginning with students’ self-reported individual growth and moving outward to their professed collective and activist-oriented gains. In the realm of individual growth, students reported gains in self-confidence as well as an increased investment in school. They also reported significant growth as members of a community: they saw the importance of seeking multiple perspectives and valued collaborating with others to invent ideas and create a shared project. As they grew stronger in their ability to empathize with others and assert their own voices, many of the high school buddies also developed an awareness of their personal and collective responsibility to be allies of and advocates for others. They reported an increase in their civic involvement and advocacy and a desire to use their words to “send a message” and improve their communities.

Individual Gains: Confidence, Investment in School

For eight of the thirteen high school buddies interviewed (62 percent), the most salient consequence of the sustained collaboration and public performance was increased confidence in making their voices heard. Many reported that this project helped them overcome shyness and social anxiety and feel more comfortable articulating their voices. High school buddy Sarai noted that the experience helped her conquer her stage fright by pushing her “to go in front of people and talk,” while Jasmine thanked her buddy for helping her “build up her confidence” and discover that she has “a voice and can advocate for something.” Some high school buddies noted that the heightened sense of confidence resulting from the project has transferred to other parts of their lives. Leneitta, for one, explained that the project helped her feel confident in contexts beyond this partnership. In her letter to her college buddy, she wrote, “this project helped me feel more comfortable to talk to new people so I’m getting there lol. This project helped me get closer to feeling comfortable to speaking in public without fear.” Leneitta went on to say that her experience with Writing for Change helped her remain calm and confident during her recent performance as a member of the school band.

Students’ investment in the Writing for Change projects also bolstered their investment in school and interest in pursuing higher education. Sixty-nine percent of the high school buddies in our study indicated that Writing for Change increased their investment in school. For instance, at the beginning of his semester in Writing for Change, Garo was often suspended and was frequently called to the principal’s office for skipping class. In his interview two and a half years later, Garo reported that the time he spent working with his college buddy “made [him] want to go to college one day and come back to high school and help people out.” For Garo, who was identified by school administrators as at serious risk of failing and/or dropping out of school, this shift was major, and one he attributed at least in part to his experience with his college buddy. Garo was one of many high school buddies who reported that Writing for Change helped them see themselves as having more potential, particularly in their future as students.

One of the most inspiring investment stories comes from Sarai, a high school buddy from 2013. For Sarai, Writing for Change was a pivotal experience that shifted her priorities as a student and set her on a new path. Before the project began, she said, “I really wasn’t much involved with school.” Sarai had been skipping school to spend time with her boyfriend and was at risk of having to repeat her freshman year due to absences. As she became more invested in the Writing for Change project, however, she began to shift her habits. She poured her heart into her personal journal and began writing poetry in her spare time. Her friends even nominated her to participate in an event at a local mall where she read her work to a large crowd. This creative engagement eventually trickled back into the classroom; as she became more invested in writing, she began attending class regularly. She reported back on that time, two years later: “I’m way more involved in school. Before I used to just choose not to go to class. It was so many problems that I was like, I don’t care about it. Then...[I had] a realization I had to go. I wanted to do it for me, not for anybody else.” As Sarai became more invested in writing and school, she influenced friends to join her. She said she now tells her younger friends, “if you have problems at home, come to school.” She added, “It was just a wonderful experience and I [would] really love to . . . in the future probably, be a college buddy. Come and work with them and talk to them. Especially if they’re freshmen, try to take them on the right path.” This encouraging testimonial reinforces many of the gains reported by other participants. As a high school senior, Sarai looked back on her first year and recognized how school and school-sponsored extracurricular activities can support her (and others like her) who are looking for a space to contribute and grow.

Collective Growth: Seeking Multiple Perspectives and Collaborating Across Difference

Another key consequence for the high school buddies was a deepened understanding of the benefits of collaboration and an eagerness to seek out their peers’ input to develop their projects. Twelve of the thirteen high school buddies interviewed (92 percent) discussed the value of working with others and the benefits of sharing authority and input in the project. For instance, Emily explained in her interview that collaboration with her diverse group was what enabled them to create a successful project: “I think I gained a sense of teamwork. Because it was hard at times, but being able to come together and

really talk about the topic, it helped us to realize how each of our perspectives were different but we ended up putting it all together to make our one piece.” Many buddies pointed to the obligation of the high-stakes final performance as a catalyst for teamwork and motivation to invent innovative, multi-genre approaches to their projects. Their creative performances grew out of “clashes” (to borrow from high school buddy Adrienne) and developed as group members compromised and sought common ground. Ruby wrote in her letter, “Our group was very diverse in a way. We all seemed to like different things, but through communication we found out things that we all enjoyed. This project allowed me to become more open minded.” Many high school buddies reported learning to consider new points of view and listen closely to others’ ideas.

Critically, this ability to consider others’ perspectives extended beyond the immediate rhetorical situation of the project; 85 percent of high school buddies indicated that this project helped them consider and empathize with the perspectives of various people in circumstances different from their own. Gabriela explained in a letter to her college buddy, “the experience taught me to be a lot more open minded to other cultures and even my own culture.” In her interview, Ebony went into depth about how she learned specifically about deferring judgment and the ways her statements might affect others. She said later, after the project:

I do think a lot more before I speak. After doing the project, I started to think a lot more about the things I say and how it affects people. And I need to stop judging other people before I actually meet them, because I’ve been doing that a lot, and I haven’t really thought about it until I actually did the project and I would think back on times when I would just give them a title without them even knowing. So, I think a lot before I judge, and I think a lot before I speak.

Other classmates’ interviews echo Ebony’s sentiments. For instance, Lylie reported that she gained “an understanding of people’s opinion. Because sometimes when people are saying something that doesn’t match what I think, I just don’t want to hear what they have to say. But after this, I realized that I have to listen to everybody’s opinion.”

The need to consider multiple perspectives in order to develop a successful product seems to have encouraged students to bring a similar mindset to their lives beyond the project.

Advocate and Ally: Taking Personal and Collective Responsibility

Many high school buddies developed a sense, throughout the project, that alliance and advocacy are matters of personal and collective responsibility. They began to recognize their peers as fellow rhetorical agents and themselves as part of larger communities in which individuals, working together, could advocate for one another and effect change. The themes of the projects (drug use, bullying, stereotyping) and the imperative to address these problems collectively may have helped foster these beliefs. Some high school buddies became allies of groups with whom they did not personally identify. For instance, when working with his group to synthesize their series of spoken word pieces about cultural stereotypes, Fernando said he learned from his classmates about the inequalities that women face. As a result, he found himself better able to empathize with this group and support the push for gender equality. “Of course I don’t have an experience like that,” he said, “So . . . knowing what problems they go through is a good experience . . . I can relate to them now.” He went on to state his willingness to be an ally, now that he has a deeper understanding: “Me understanding their problems will show them that I actually care, that I want to . . . I want to know their problems.” Likewise, Kadi shared that she and her classmates “gained confidence [to] . . . stand up for other people who are getting bullied.” She went on to explain that one of her classmates, after participating in the Writing for Change performance, was moved to defend a member of the LGBTQ community who was being bullied in math class.

Several students also indicated a greater awareness of the course’s signature goal: how their writing might bring about social change. In Gabriela’s letter, for instance, she explained, “The project showed me a lot more about advocating publicly instead of ranting about it on Tumblr. . . I will definitely take this project into consideration when in public. I’ll try advocating my points of view more often.” While she would previously just “rant” about her concerns to a general internet audience, she now recognizes the limits of “ranting” as a meaningful rhetorical act and has instead discovered new and potentially more useful

outlets for making arguments to specific publics. For Eva, the sense of responsibility to speak up was a central takeaway of the project:

From this whole experience I learned that there are many problems in this society. But for them to be fixed you have to voice out for something to be done about it. . . . I have learned that we all stood up for similar purposes and all had our different point of views. I also learned that you have to advocate important issues or else nothing will change in the world if we don't try to make a change.

Eva, like many of her classmates, articulated at the end of the project the belief that “mak[ing] a change” is a matter of personal and collective responsibility. Jasmine noted that “I learned that I do have a voice and I can advocate for something I agree or disagree in life,” and Hannah explained her similar takeaway: “some thing[s] are worth fighting/advocating for.” The project helped students see problems in their local community not as areas of frustration but as areas of action, places where they might intervene and make a positive change.

“ACADEMIC-WISE . . . NOT REALLY”: RECONSIDERING THE “WRITING” OF WRITING FOR CHANGE

It does not take much interpretation for a teacher or scholar of writing to see relevant writing and rhetorical gains in the section above. Students learned about collaboration, invention, genre, advocacy, and means of persuasion. They practiced writing for real audiences. Indeed, these gains become clear when we view the many student responses about learning to “get a message across” for social change. Manuela, for instance, wrote to her college buddy that the buddy “taught us a lot on how to advocate for what we strongly believe in. . . . and how to peacefully send a strong message through speaking.” Fernando emphasized the power of rhetorical choice and variation, explaining, “our performances were serious, and some were comical. So that got the message across.” Similar statements about the variety of ways to “get the message across” emerged as a sort of code language among the high school buddies, for what educators might call rhetorical knowledge and awareness.

This understanding reached beyond “sending messages”; eleven of the thirteen high school buddies interviewed (85 percent) directly mentioned the concept of audience. Lylie, for instance, explained that she felt proud because, she said, “I actually got to speak about something to an audience . . . you know something that I just been thinking about in my head but I didn’t know how to really get my point across. So I learned how to you know, get my point across, and I learned that people are going to disagree with me, and some people are going to agree with me.” Lylie believed her peers learned about “getting [a] point across” to an audience as well. Prior to the project, she reported, her peers “had strong issues but they didn’t know how to put that across, or put it in writing. So I think they learned how to organize their ideas, and learn how to say it to an audience.” According to Lylie, the performative situation may have allowed students to refine intuitive or fuzzy feelings about pressing social issues into coherent and audience-tailored arguments, something that may not have occurred under other circumstances. Fernando even perceived this project to be directly relevant to his other pursuits. He said, “I can take what I’ve learned from this to other classes that have to do with any type of creative thinking or in situations where I have to express my words through speech or writing.” Fernando located and could articulate the relevance and transferability of the writing and rhetorical aspects of the program.

However, Fernando was the exception to the rule. Eleven of the thirteen high school students interviewed (85 percent) actively distinguished the project they did as a part of Writing for Change from the work they typically do in school. In many ways, this is not unexpected: we created the partnership to extend students’ literacies and composition practices beyond what they would otherwise do during the school day, so it makes sense that they would see their work in this partnership as “different.” Whereas our goals were to require the college and high school students to grapple with the difficult questions of genre, invention, persuasion, and real-world rhetorical efficacy, “most of the students’ writing [in their other classes] was prompted, often with a specific question coming from the county-mandated curriculum” (Finkelstein, email to authors, October 31, 2017). Indeed, our partner teacher from 2015 corroborated that in spite of the strong Arts Integration Initiative at the high school, and in spite of her own commitment to innovative and creative

projects, many teachers still do not “provide student-centered work, so this project provides students with a lot more academic freedom than they are used to.” She goes on to point out that “in many classes, the summative assessment is a paper or test. In [Writing for Change], the students had creative input into the format of their assessment.” Emily is one of the high school buddies who found that the “interactive” approach of Writing for Change contrasted starkly with her ordinary school day. She said:

The program was very interactive and it was really helpful. In school a lot you don’t really get to be able to do things like this. It’s more of . . . when they say projects or anything, it’s basically just book work or something you do by yourself. But during this program it was very interactive, and being able to be with other people was a lot more fun than what we usually do in school.

For Emily, participating in Writing for Change highlighted the lack of collaboration in her typical school activities. The “interactive” aspect of the project also made it more “fun.” For Emily, the project was something she enjoyed more because it fostered a sense of community.

While students demonstrated robust gains in audience awareness and ability to “get a message across,” they often said in the same breath that they did not think they learned much about writing or anything else directly relevant to their “academic” careers. This trend in the data led to some trepidation: if the high school students see Writing for Change as a worthwhile and fun project, but irrelevant to school, will they be able to translate their gains from Writing for Change into “mainstream academic success” (Hill 2009, 124)?

Our data tells this story through absence. In their letters, in which the high schoolers were asked to write to their college buddies and share what they learned from the experience, high school students’ direct mentions of academic or writing-related elements of the experience are relatively scant. The ninth graders discussed collaboration and relationship building three times as often as they discussed anything related to writing, rhetorical knowledge, and audience. These lower numbers for talk about “academic” outcomes suggest that learning

about writing may not have been in the forefront of the high school buddies’ minds when they reflected on the course. While it is not surprising that the inter- and intrapersonal elements of Writing for Change may have been more memorable for the high school buddies than the writing-related parts of the partnership, the lack of reflection on writing is still somewhat concerning. Indeed, when directly prompted in interviews to consider the potential relevance of this project to their academic work, only four of the high school students interviewed (31 percent) located any connection, and these connections were vaguer than those articulated above by Fernando. Despite their enjoyment of the project and self-professed gains in self-efficacy, collaboration, civic participation, and advocacy, the high school students generally did not see those outcomes as relevant to “school” writing and literacies.

Let’s consider Alex as a case example. Alex felt very positive about his experience in Writing for Change, even saying, “I feel like stuff like this should be in every high school.” Alex indicated that this project stood out to him because it “was really creative. Because we had to take bullying, our subject, and turn it into a film, or an act ... we had to send a message through what we did. We had to send a message through not just writing something about anti-bullying—we had to actually perform it.” His group chose to make a short film about bullying and he describes the process as one of revision and rethinking. He said, “I learned that there’s a lot of bloopers ... You make a lot of mistakes, a lot of edits, a lot of retakes. And you’re not going to get it perfect every single scene, so you have to retry and retry until you get it right.” As researchers and teachers, we might read this as a victory, an example of a student who has learned about the revision process. Yet like more than two-thirds of the participants, Alex does not see this project as relevant to school. When asked whether he learned anything from Writing for Change that he could use in school, he replied, “Academic-wise ... not really.” He does not see how the film creation process is relevant to other writing or academic projects. If we look at the high school students’ letters and interviews from the eyes of writing teachers and researchers, we see many other moments like this: students report what we see as valuable writing knowledge while simultaneously dismissing it as irrelevant to their academic work. As we discuss below, this disconnect raises

concerns about the likelihood that Writing for Change participants will transfer their learning to other writing situations, particularly those in academic settings.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Writing for Change yielded substantial changes in high school students' levels of confidence, empathy, and sense of responsibility to others. It also encouraged them to see writing and their words as tools they can use to compel social change and be allies. We attribute these gains at least in part to the process of the high-stakes, collaborative project at the heart of Writing for Change. Writing for Change and other community writing projects like it reinvigorate the tough work of invention and the challenge to produce something based in one's own situated knowledge. They put a messy problem and the contours of genre-as-response into the hands of high school student-creators. We speculate that this design and corresponding level of responsibility is at least in part what prompted the high school students to radically rethink their own perspectives, seek the guidance of classmates and college buddies, and ultimately reconsider the perspectives and voices of people in a broader sense. Yet in spite of these robust gains in inter- and intrapersonal areas, few high school buddies saw their gains in writing and rhetorical knowledge as relevant to their academic careers in the ways that we might have hoped.

Most concerning to us is that this perceived disconnect may limit students' potential for writing growth or transfer across boundaries. We know, in the case of first-year college writers, that students "might assume such a strong correspondence between particular genres and specific domains that they may not call on (or may not be aware they are calling on) potentially useful resources that they associate with other domains" (Reiff and Bawarshi 2011, 324). In other words, if our high school participants see the project they composed as a part of Writing for Change as unrelated to school, they may not draw on their learning and relevant understandings when writing academically. This conclusion gives us pause. Indeed, we cannot ignore the relevance of White's (2015) study of community-engaged writing at the college level in which she argues that composition teachers' "raison-d'être [should be] to help students gain . . . writing

knowledge that they can then use in—that is, transfer to—further academic and non-academic contexts” (4). When the emphasis of such writing classes is on “civic engagement or responsibility, or on social change,” she argues, “writing instruction” may be “at best assumed and at worst overlooked” (28-29). While we did not overlook writing instruction in *Writing for Change*, we may have assumed that the high school students would draw connections that they did not draw, and we concur with White that helping the high school buddies develop transferable writing knowledge ought to be a key goal of partnerships such as ours.

One problem at the heart of helping students become more capable, flexible writers through their participation in community literacy programs, however, is that many such programs, including *Writing for Change*, intentionally locate themselves on the “taking rhetorical action” end of Flower’s continuum and thus as different from school. Emily’s labeling of the program as “fun,” distinguishing it from other academic work, is telling, and she is not the only buddy who clearly contrasts the program with other school-day pursuits. Though this contrast may increase students’ enthusiasm for *Writing for Change*, it may also lead students to view it as irrelevant to situations they see as more traditionally academic. Students’ perception of *Writing for Change* as outside the scope of their curricular education is likely due in part to the fact that it, and many community literacy programs like it, is based on the assumed shortcomings of institutionally sanctioned literacies (Flower 2008). As a result, and even if only implicitly, the program’s existence denies legitimacy to the same school-sanctioned literacies that it hopes participants might improve. We argue that this creates a seeming paradox, or at least a blind spot, for the youth involved, one that might impede transfer and prevent the youth from seeing the relevance of their projects to their “mainstream academic success.”

While our concern for students’ growth in school-sanctioned ways may be an unpopular (or at least rarely articulated) goal among others who initiate community writing partnerships, it is far from irrelevant. Despite our more radical goals and desire to change the ways schools go about teaching (and testing) writing in the first place, we are sympathetic to the need to align our program’s goals, at

least to some degree, with what the high school students think of as “writing” and what can reasonably translate into their future writing tasks. Better aligning our projects with students’ schoolwork would maximize the likelihood that they could succeed as civic activists *and* writers in school spaces, something preferable to their ability to succeed in only the former. For community literacy partnerships such as ours, there is more work to be done to bridge the divide between the multimodal projects students often compose as a part of the program and their “school writing.” Below, we propose two ideas for helping to bridge that divide.

First, Writing for Change and other community literacy partnerships can work more closely with classroom teachers to create bridges between the goal of “taking rhetorical action” (Flower 2008, 19), students’ in-school writing projects, and the tested standards. Our high school partner teacher has expressed interest, particularly since the launch of the Arts Integration Initiative, in making “more explicit curricular connections” that might encourage students to see the relevance of their creative and arts-infused projects to the rest of their academic work (Finkelstein, email to authors, October 31, 2017). This means students might remediate part of the Writing for Change project into a class assignment or vice versa; they might reflect on revision strategies across contexts; they might seek connections between Writing for Change projects and literacy standards. Certainly, as Vasudevan and DeJaynes (2013) point out, there are “challenges in translating the ineffable nature of education, relationships, discovery, and imagination that arises out of an arts-infused space or ethos into language that fits easily into preexisting categories of educational outcomes” (4). But, while rhetoric and writing scholars might feel constrained by the language in prescribed standards, particularly when it comes to genre, invention, and audience, these limits should not prevent university faculty from working with teachers to forge connections to school-sanctioned literacies whenever possible.

For instance, community writing programs can maintain a rhetorically based approach to writing while also embracing, wherever possible, the standards that schools and programs *do* have in common. Certain Common Core Standards are well aligned with projects such as ours, including the need to “anticipate the audience’s knowledge level and

concerns” (CCSS.W.9-10.1b) and the goal to “develop and strengthen writing . . . by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience” (CCSS.W.9-10.5). Our partner teacher pointed out that the Writing for Change projects are also especially helpful for enabling students to meet the untested, and therefore often ignored, grade-level standards for speaking and listening, such as “respond[ing] thoughtfully to diverse perspectives” (CCSS.SL.9-10.1d). Close collaboration between university faculty and educators in the local contexts of their schools has the potential to help youth participants discover and invent specific connections that pertain closely to their classes and academic requirements.

Second, we argue that community literacy partnerships like ours would be stronger with more opportunities for meta-conversations with participants about ways they are expanding and complicating their writing knowledge. Our findings suggest that the high school students are indeed learning about catering one’s work to a specific audience, the importance of seeking multiple perspectives, and the value of using writing as a tool to bring about social change. However, many participants do not recognize this—and many who do dismiss it as separate from and irrelevant to their “academic” careers. Thus, it would benefit both the college and community partners to reflect together on what constitutes writing and rhetorical knowledge. These reflections might enable students to see their ability to “get a message across” as relevant and transferrable to other settings, both academic and otherwise.

These meta-conversations might also prompt college and high school participants to consider how educators and institutions gauge writing knowledge and how that influences what students at all levels think writing *is*. We might discuss the sanctioning and exclusion of genres in classroom settings and how the genres favored in the high school classroom influence public (and student) perceptions of legitimacy and relevance. Arguments about sanctioning tend to target faculty, exhorting them to bring unsanctioned genres into the classroom, but students might also benefit from conversations about genre, sanctioning, and exclusion. High school students could contribute personal experiences with grief they likely receive for the music they

listen to, the video games they play, and the YouTube personalities they share and comment on. Being more intentional about such conversations might help teens develop a richer rhetorical savvy, perhaps enabling them to recognize “school writing,” like the teens involved in the CLC, “as a distinctive language game” (Flower 2008, 96). Students might be better equipped to realize the value of their “unsanctioned” writing if they have language to discuss unsanctioned genres and the exclusion of various types of writing from school.

A renewed focus on the goal of helping students see ways that writing experiences in and out of school can intermingle and infuse one another could enable more students to see the relevance of Writing for Change and other similar community writing projects. To increase students’ potential to grow as learners and writers, it is crucial that educators make explicit the blurry lines and connections between the two spaces. While we are proud of our outcomes, we must do more than build students’ investment in school and their confidence as performers. We must do more than enable students to work in teams and seek multiple perspectives. We must, as Jocson (2006) says, help forge “the connections between school and home, and places in between” (254). We as educators see and embrace the hybridity and relevance of participants’ literate undertakings, but we need to make sure that they see and embrace it as well.

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NOTES

1. Community-university partnerships, and service-learning courses more broadly, have been shown to have tremendous benefits—even “transformative potential” (Felten and Clayton 2011, 81)—for the college student participants. Service-learning can have a positive effect on college students’ self-efficacy, identity formation, empathy, ability to appreciate diversity, and open-mindedness (Felten and Clayton 2011, 80-81; Kendrick and Suarez 2003, 50-51). College students who participate in community-engaged courses improve their collaboration and teamwork skills (Alexander and Powell 2012) and increase their civic engagement (Felten and Clayton 2011, 80; Kendrick and Suarez 2003, 50-51). Participation in community writing partnerships can also help college students gain rhetorical awareness (Alexander and Powell 2012, DePalma 2012), develop investment in their writing that they transfer to other contexts (White 2015, 166), and compose essays with stronger rhetorical appeals, logic, and coherence (Wurr 2002).
2. There are many varieties of “writing with” partnerships, including established centers for youth and adults (Flower 2008, Rousculp 2014), summer camps for teens (Fleetwood 2005, Licona and Gonzalez 2013), after-school programs (Goodman 2005, Gring-Pemle and Garner 2010, Hull and James 2007), and hybrid online-F2F collaborations between high school and college students (Joliffe et al. 2016). Other “writing with” programs work directly with classes in public schools (Hill 2009; Ife 2012; Jocson 2006; Manning 2016; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010).
3. Our research study, “Assessing the Consequences of Writing for Change” (#749476), was granted IRB approval on May 18, 2015. For the purposes of anonymity, each participant has been given a pseudonym of his or her own choice (if no preference was expressed, a pseudonym was assigned by the researchers).

APPENDIX A: HIGH SCHOOL PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Think back to when you worked with the college buddies. What are one or two particular experiences from the program that particularly influenced or impacted you?
2. What were your first thoughts about the program? What did you expect from participating in it?
3. How did your expectations change over the time you worked with your college buddy?
4. What were your feelings about your college buddy at the start of the program? How did those feelings change over the semester?
5. What do you think are some of the primary things your fellow high school buddies gained from the program?
6. What do you think are some of the primary things the college buddies gained from the program?
7. What are some of the things you gained from the program?
8. What was it like working with your classmates and college students?
9. How did your understanding of your group's specific topic change?
10. How was the work involved in the project similar to or different from what you normally do in school?
11. Did you learn anything academic or helpful for school from the project?
12. Is there anything you would change about the program? What didn't work or could be better?

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