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"The Community Writing Center and Genre Literacy"

The contemporary community writing center (CWCs), offers children an uncritical, creative environment that encourages its young writers to experiment with their writing and to have fun reading books. CWCs like Mighty Writers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and 826 in Valencia, California, give the children its tutors greater confidence and improved genre literacy amid an educational landscape that all but discourages children from writing altogether. Through its one-on-one tutoring sessions, workshops, games and publications, CWCs spur a cycle of confidence, learning, and growing in its young writers. CWCs offer an environment free of the prescriptive academic pressures put on a grade school student or a young learner at a career writing center. The community writing center is interested in strengthening the individual's relationship to writing, helping each writer embellish his talents and improve upon his weaknesses. In a culture increasingly dependent on the ability of a writer to rapidly adapt to an ever-widening range of professional and academic genres, the impact of a genre-immersive institution like Mighty Writers in a low-income inner-city neighborhood is innumerable. The fostering, light-hearted spin on a traditional writing center, an approach pioneered by 826 and Mighty Writers, is a unique contribution to the evolution of community literacy programs and must be studied in a similarly inventive manner .

Mighty Writers is a non-profit, free-to-all community writing center for children

between the ages of seven and eighteen. Founded in 2008 by Rachel Loeper and Tim Whitaker, Mighty Writers was based on the store-front writing center model pioneered by Dave Eggers and Ninive Calegari in 2002. That organization, "826," has expanded to include chapters in seven cities. Mac Barnett explains the storefronts as "sort of an opening rhetorical gambit. They prove we can build a superhero-supply store that looks exactly as cool as the one you'd imagine. And that's the tone in the writing lab, too: Whatever project a student wants to work on, we say yes, let's do this, let's figure out how to successfully execute this idea" (Dunkelberger). Although Mighty Writers doesn't have a physical storefront like 826 New York's "Superhero Supply," it operates under the same playful assumptions.

The function of the community writing center changes according to the need, skill-level, and age of the young writer. This essay will focus mainly on the younger side of that age range – from kindergarten to approximately fourth grade – as these are the foundational years of a child's literacy attainment and offer the most illustrative examples. The older, more academically mature students who attend the after-school program at Mighty Writers need relatively little guidance from the tutors, and already exhibit a fairly sophisticated mastery of genre understanding.

Mighty Writers predicts that by promoting personal writing projects, children will develop more comprehensive writing skills and become more passionate about their work. Executive director Tim Whitaker believes "writing is a foundation for self-confidence," and considers the writing center he co-founded to benefit the children it tutors in more ways than may first seem apparent. "When you write well, you think clearly. You can express

yourself. That leads to all kinds of positive things. Success is built on having the confidence to communicate what you're thinking, and to do it clearly" (Argondizza).

Moreover, the publishing activities underwritten by the CWC helps young writers visualize their successes in the form of a physical object, further encouraging their progress and enthusiasm. The community writing center can also serve as an alternative forum for a badly-needed message that would otherwise fall on deaf ears, as was the case with Mark at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh. For Mark, the Community Literacy Center was home to his "art and argument and a place to begin a broader conversation about the issues he cares most about" (Peck 1).

The community writing center offers an immersive learning environment, complete with a wide array of activities focused on reading and writing. (For simplicity's sake, I'll refer to these two separate processes as "writing" activities.) The multitude of options available to a student at the CWC helps each child explore their own way of accessing writing as an activity they can pursue outside of the school setting. It shows children that language activities can be fun; reading can be a leisure activity; and that writing can be a way of exploring your thoughts and ideas and a powerful tool for relating to the community at large. The CWC is a place for students to *experience* for themselves the lessons they hear in school.

The community writing center offers many illustrative examples of the kinds of activities children can adopt to increase their likelihood of future educational and occupational success. Reading and writing, activities once exclusive to the elite members of society, is a skill set more available than ever. But as Deborah Brandt points out in

"Accumulating Literacy," not everyone has equal access to that knowledge (653). One of the community writing center's implicit goals is to expand that access. As Muriel Harris expounds: "There is a very noticeable tradition of perceiving [the writing center] as nurturing, helping places which provide assistance to other writers and sustenance to students to help them grow, mature, and become independent" (17).

I will work within a flexible definition of "genre" for this essay, stemming from the Bakhtinian approach of genre as a social phenomenon, or the "characterization of any discourse, from casual conversation to lengthy written text" (McCabe 57). This approach dismisses the view of genre as an "empty structure," and emphasizes the individual's use and contribution to its meaning (Boscolo 304). According to Daniel Chandler, children are able to discern between television advertisements and the program in which they interrupt as early as age three (7), an ability that translates to their reading of genres, and a skill of discernment that becomes more important as the student approaches graduation (Kamberelis 409). Learning the conventions and expectations of a given genre is an important, intuitive first step for a young writer. As Dahl and Farnan point out, children "can use a variety of genres... as early as first grade" (55). Children are awakened to possibilities for topics and modes as they learn the conventions and expectations of each individual genre (Dahl 38).

From comic books to science reports, young writers dutifully mimic the writing to which they've been exposed. They regularly implement examples given by their teacher in their own writing, including elements such as word plays, songs, and poems (Dahl 55).

Not unlike learning to play a musical instrument or the gradual obtainment of a new language, imitation is an effective way to success. Learning the conventions of a genre and reinventing those standards can "enable students to enter a particular discourse community, and discover how writers organize texts; promote flexible thinking and, in the long run, inform creativity, since students 'need to learn the rules before they can transcend them'" (Kay 310). Genre organization is also a way by which "children learn to put order in their experiences and knowledge" (Boscolo 302). By exposing students to a wide range of genres, the community writing center helps expand the students' repertoire of writing possibilities and encourages their experimentation within them. Notably, the hands-off approach to genre instruction in which a mentor "provides examples of different genres for the children to explore... independently and collaboratively" was first embraced in the field of literacy studies following a 1994 study of six first graders by M.L. Chapman (Boscolo 304).

Although explicit genre-related teaching methods are potentially controversial, genres are nonetheless an unavoidable aspect of student life and of writing in general. Controversy over the teaching of genres was discovered in a 1997 teacher survey conducted by Heather Kay and Tony Dudley-Evans. While some of the survey participants saw genre instruction as a confidence-boosting tool for beginner and intermediate writers, others "expressed concern... about the danger of the approach being prescriptive rather than descriptive, and the possibility of leading students to expect to be told how to write certain types of text" (311). Although genre teaching may serve as a point of contention in a broad sense, it seems that the contemporary CWC, with its emphasis on personal exploration and

complete lack of prescriptive instruction, goes to great lengths to alleviate these negative concerns. Indeed, their ideal solution, an approach combining genre-based knowledge and the writing process would be an apt description of a community writing center. As Heather Kay elaborates, "such an approach would combine knowledge about the genre product with the opportunity to plan, draft, revise, and edit work, as well as provide the opportunity for greater interaction" (312).

The community writing center represents a subtle, yet immersive, foray into genre instruction, one that avoids controversy without losing any of its benefits. When implemented thoughtfully, genre-based teaching methods can help students discover for themselves that writing is a tool to be "used and manipulated... [and help them become] aware of the structure and purpose of the texts of different genres – the significant features – and to empower him/her with the strategies necessary to replicate these features in his/her own production" (Kay 309).

An understanding of how genres function can help children find where their writing fits into the wider, perhaps slightly overwhelming, range of writing activities. It enables them to become successful writers more quickly, as they both conform to its conventions and invent new uses to suit their needs. Genre immersion gives children the "understanding of and competency with the forms, functions, rhetorical possibilities, and typical occasions of use of different genres [and] is an important part of learning how to write... generatively and effectively" (Kamberlis 408-9). The ability of children to write in a genre with an unconscious sophistication is a huge benefit, giving the illusion of a writer more experienced than they may actually be. It also opens them up to a larger scope of

writing activities – from investigative reporting to imagined conclusions to their favorite comic books – making them aware of possibilities otherwise unattainable to them. Without this training, young writers "...are unprepared for academic discourse, [and] often struggle through the uncertain process of imitation and slow initiation" (Peck 2).

The students who attend the after school program at Mighty Writers are offered a wide range of activities to help them become better writers, including the time and guidance to devote to personal projects and writing contests. The staff encourages its students in a decidedly non-didactic manner, giving the child the tools to make their own breakthroughs. The Executive Director of Mighty Writers, Tim Whitaker, in an interview by Brian Howard with the Philadelphia *CityPaper*, elaborates: "The way the space is – there's superhero art on the wall – it doesn't feel like a school. We don't have a lot of rules. It's self-policing. [The children] really feel like it's their space."

Once a student has completed their homework for the day, they are free to work on a writing-related project of their choosing. Each student has a folder for their individual works in progress, which may include a submission for an upcoming writing contest, a news report for the *Mighty Times* – or a personal work of poetry, personal essay, fictional narrative, and so on. These personal, undirected projects are an opportunity for the child to identify what they like to read, and to experiment writing in that genre in an environment free from criticism and prescriptive corrections. Although the projects at Mighty Writers offer a fair degree of autonomy, the students intuitively attempt exercises in genres with which they have some familiarity. They tend to have the most familiarity with narrative

genres, and "know more about macro-level genre features such as text structure than micro-level features such as intersentential logical connectives" (Kamberelis 448).

In addition to their personal projects, students may elect to read one of the several children's books that have been donated to the organization, with a tutor, who will ask questions to further the child's understanding and enjoyment of the text. There are also a variety of word-based games available, yet another option for independent, lightly-guided engagement available to the student. Internet-based writing contests are also used, which may help invoke the concept of a global writing community within reach of the student. One such contest, the "young novelist award," was a title awarded to any student who completed a story of 2,000 words, regardless of plot depth or amount of spelling errors.

The inaugural edition of the *Mighty Times*, published in late August, 2009 represents observations and opinions from a range of ages coming to terms with issues in their community. Its format follows that of a standard newspaper, printed on newsprint and lead by a traditional newspaper masthead. The issue features an article by Mukhtar Stones on the relationship between art and graffiti as they cross paths with the city's Mural Arts program, and an investigative report into the state of stray animals in Philadelphia. Notably, the very first word of the first article contains a proud spelling mistake: "Too get you started, not all graffiti is good..." This "mistake" portrays a key belief at Mighty Writers: having its children write about issues important to them is more valuable than having them do it correctly. That is not to say that Mighty Writers encourages careless grammar or doesn't take its tutoring role seriously— but they are cognizant of the harmful effects constant correction can have on a young writer's confidence and enjoyment of the

process.

The *Mighty Times* is an poignant icon for the community writing center as a whole. Its writers engage in a dialog of worthy community topics, an invaluable example of the kinds of transformative effects relevant writing can spark. The *Mighty Times* shows the sophisticated awareness its writers have regarding the conventions and expectations of the medium. "Fixing the neighborhood one home at a time," by Tiffany Mercer-Robbins, for instance, is written in an informative tone and with sparse personal opinion. Her article includes first-hand observations, statistics, and quotations from the "public engagement specialist" with the Mural Arts program, information she obtained from an interview she conducted for the piece. Tiffany clearly knows the difference between a news report, book report or a work of narrative fiction; *Mighty Times* is filled with evidence of this differentiating skill.

The layout and contents of the newspaper (About Us, News, Features, and a Crossword), highlight specific characteristics taken from the object that inspired it. The *Mighty Times* is both an exciting publication event for the children who help put it together and an acknowledgment of the community writing center as a genre-building environment. It's a living sample of the kind of engagement writing can provide an individual in society, a message that is particularly salient in a city with a high school dropout rate around fifty percent (John-Hall), and a city in which "fifty-two percent [of workers] lack necessary work-literacy skills" (Terruso).

Another arena of genre activity in the community writing center, and at Mighty Writers inparticular, is the writing workshop. Workshops are typically limited to a specific

genre (or topic of interest), such as journalism or poetry, and consist of several weekend sessions. Workshop topics at Mighty Writers (both past and future) include Sports Writing, Girl Power Poetry!, Blog Writing, Science Fiction, Graphic Memoirs, Writing Real Life, and StoryTelling in the Park. The irreverent topics are ones children will find current and exciting, and are an important reason for their success. (A few of the workshops offered by 826 include "writing labs, jazz and poetry workshops, language programs, summer camps, comedy nights, and with guest speakers including Michael Chabon and Spike Jonze" (Duin).) While the workshops help its students realize the full range of potential modes and topics to write in, they also contribute to writing as a community activity, with a helpful dynamic between the established writer leading the workshop and the child attending. Perhaps most importantly, workshops make genre concepts and their possibilities known to the child. They help children visualize the landscape of writing options available to them – and help them get excited about creating a spot for themselves in that realm.

In an educational system increasingly dominated by the pursuit of better test scores, what little time may have been devoted to encouraging writing as an enjoyable, extra-curricular activity in our public schools in the past has either disappeared or been severely diminished. The community writing center encourages children to come to writing on their own terms, and helps foster their ability to recognize and write in genres that interest them, which will translate into better grades as they progress through school and better jobs after they graduate. The benefit of an after-school program like Mighty Writers may at first

seem professionally ineffectual, but that conclusion would be a mistake. When examined through the lens of genre attainment and proficiency, the community writing center becomes a program that encourages and fosters the students' ability to recognize and practice various genre forms, making them better writers (McCutchen 460).

The community writing center helps make writing fun for children, while deepening their understanding of how we communicate and how they can fit into that landscape – an immersive genre environment that only a community writing center can provide. The expansive range of reading and writing experiences students encounter outside of the classroom heightens their enthusiasm and greatly increases their awareness and capabilities of writing across different styles and genres – a skill that will be with them throughout grade school, into college, and to the day they begin their professional career.

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