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Writing Together: The Art of Community Writing Organizations

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My first introduction to community writing organizations was Write Around Portland's reading event on a hot August day in 2007. About 200 people were crowded into a non-air-conditioned church hall to witness dozens of writers taking a two-minute turn at the podium to share their work. These readers, many of whom were living on low incomes or with disabilities, had recently completed an eight-week writing workshop with the nonprofit organization and were celebrating the publication of their work in an anthology. Watching people read their written pieces, which often dealt with the experiences of daily life, frequently moved the crowd to react, whether that meant sighing in sadness, laughing, or murmuring oohs and ahs. And as the writers left the podium amid enthusiastic applause, most of them looked as though they were truly proud of themselves.

After that summer reading, I began volunteering with Write Around Portland and quickly learned that the reading was one of many occasions in which participants could experience positive validation for sharing their writing with others. The entire workshop experience is rooted in the idea that everyone is a writer and can benefit from writing and sharing with others. Write Around Portland is one of a handful of community writing organizations in the United States; other groups include InkTank in Cincinnati, the NY Writers Coalition in New York City, and the Neighborhood Writing Alliance in Chicago. While the organizations may differ in their workshop techniques, they all bring people together to write about their ideas and experiences and to share them with others.

Most of these groups offer writing workshops to adults living on low incomes who may not otherwise have access to these kinds of opportunities. While arts programs for children abound, too often in our culture, practicing an art form as an adult and regularly sharing it with others is limited to professional artists and amateurs who can afford to take classes or live in communities where these opportunities are readily available. As a student of folklore, I became interested in these writing organizations in part because they reach adults who may not have ready access to the transformative possibilities of writing and the literary arts. These groups illustrate how arts programs can be beneficial to a variety of adult populations and serve as a model for creating such programming.

The writing workshops can be a powerful experience for participants, who may feel better about themselves after attending. The writers have opportunities to gain self-understanding and process difficult life issues, and they can be inspired to try new things and take positive steps in their lives. Additionally, they may develop community with other writers which can lead to connecting more easily with other people.

After attending several readings, facilitating workshops myself, and learning more about community writing workshops across the country, I began to focus on how writing workshops foster these kinds of transformative outcomes. The participants, volunteers, and staff of Write Around Portland and the Neighborhood Writing Alliance helped me consider this question in an examination of the main components of their workshops: engaging in the act of writing, sharing writing with an audience of peers, and receiving feedback from others in the group.

Before discussing each of these components in more detail, I would like to provide additional background about the writing done in the workshops of these two organizations. While writers' work can range from description to abstract poetry, my discussion is focused on writing that is about life experience. In Write Around Portland workshops, participants are encouraged to write about anything they would like to, including their lives, but all writing is treated as fiction to create a safe space and encourage writers to share their work. Participants in Neighborhood Writing Alliance workshops are encouraged to write about their lives and their reflections about the neighborhoods and social issues where they live.

The Act of Writing

Through writing, people can potentially understand themselves and other people

better. We are all constantly reviewing and assigning meaning to our life experiences and putting those experiences into words—whether through self-talk or telling stories to other people. This use of language is a way to organize and understand the events of our lives, thereby, making the chaos of life coherent (Ochs & Capps, 2001). When we write, we slow down this verbalization process and become increasingly conscious of the meanings we have assigned to our experiences (Burns & Engdahl, 1998). The self-understanding that often emerges in writing workshops may stem from the act of writing since it makes people think more about what they want to say and how they are articulating it.

The actual workshop space also allows writers to gain new perspective on their lives. Because the workshops are set apart from daily life at a specific time and place dedicated to this activity, participants can put aside the roles and status they have in their everyday world. In this way, they can step beyond their normal roles and perhaps reconstruct their identities and stories in new ways (Turner, 1986). The workshops become a period of time each week when writers are recognized for what they choose to express.

Sharing with an Audience

After writing, participants often share their work with others. An audience of other group members provides validation and often motivates participants to tell their stories in the first place, setting the stage for self-understanding and other more individualized outcomes. Folklorist Sandra Dolby Stahl (1989) argued that personal narratives on their own do not include the same spark as those that are told among people, noting that the “personal’ is a magic ingredient in such stories” (p. x). People often have a more heightened and intense connection with writers who are reading their work in person in the workshop than they would reading that work on a printed page. For example, a writer who shares a poem about a struggle with addiction can forge a personal bond with others in a workshop. Furthermore, listening to others perform their written work by reading it aloud can expand participants’ understanding of their own lives and the lives of others. By listening to someone else’s experience with addiction, participants may come to better understand the condition in their own lives.

Receiving Feedback

In these workshops, writers who choose to read their work out loud receive feedback from other group members. This feedback is focused on the writing rather than the writer and his or her experience, which prevents the workshops from becoming group therapy sessions. Virtually all writing is accepted and validated in the workshop setting which offers participants a safe opportunity to

compose and perform their writing and receive validation for it. Furthermore, in Neighborhood Writing Alliance workshops, writers not only receive feedback but also frequently discuss the topics and social issues raised in their pieces with others in the group. The feedback component of the workshops allows writers to experience praise and validation for their artistic expression and serves to build connections with fellow participants.

Everyone is a Writer

In Write Around Portland and Neighborhood Writing Alliance workshops, everyone is a writer with ideas and experiences worth expressing. Through writing, participants recognize the value of their own experiences as well as those of their fellow writers. Underscoring the value of their writing, both organizations regularly publish participating writers' work. Participants are often very excited to join the ranks of published writers and be recognized for their work. Also, community readings like the one I attended in 2007 play an important role in this process. The organizations hold events where all writers are invited to read their work to friends, family members, volunteers, and members of the larger community.

Both the readings and the published collections continue the validation provided in the workshop space. One Write Around Portland participant explains what happens this way:

[W]hen there's a public reading, you realize that you can connect with this huge roomful of people, some of them very different from you, some of them going through completely different things. But you feel the connection. You get respect, and people cheer for the writers and give them really warm applause for getting up there. You see that everyone who gets up feels this amazing sense of safety, of being welcomed and heard. That's magical. (Kendall, n.d.)

By engaging in the artistic activity of writing, sharing their creations with others, and then receiving positive feedback, adults who participate in community writing workshops have opportunities to gain self-confidence, understand themselves better, connect with other people, and experience the joy of artistic self-expression. These outcomes have the potential to improve the lives of participants and create community.

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