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The Writing Center and the Parallel Curriculum

Fall 2004 / Focus

by *Ann E. Green*

Complementing our writing center work and lives with creative writing and service-learning.



Ann Green and students

Our university is currently in the middle of a comprehensive curriculum review and revision. One of our recent speakers on curriculum, Joe Appleyard, S.J., focused on the idea of the "parallel curriculum": the series of extra-curricular activities, abroad and immersion programs, and student run groups, where much of student energy is spent. He argued that in many contemporary universities the "parallel curriculum" is much more viable and interesting (particularly in teaching the Jesuit ideal of "discernment," or reflection [1]) than the actual general education curriculum. Over lunch at another curriculum committee meeting, one of my colleagues from the business school pointed out to me that the Writing Center is a location of a kind of parallel curriculum, where there are no grades, where students initiate contact with one another, and where students drive the work. This idea intrigued me for several reasons, but particularly because it helped me to think about what students do in the Writing Center that they don't do in their general education courses and about how work that may begin in the "Writing Fellows: The Theory and Practice of Peer Tutoring" course grows after the course is over and impacts other aspects of Writing Center work.

My colleague's comment about the Writing Center as a part of parallel

curriculum rang true--we are a student-driven place; I had just done a workshop for Writing Fellows on effective resume and cover letters that they had asked for, that they scheduled, and that they contributed to. The graduating Writing Fellows distributed their own resumes for workshopping, and the underclassmen requested the workshop because it was the time of year when we get a number of resumes and cover letter writers. In thinking further about the Writing Center as a location for parallel curriculum, two particular aspects of our work at Saint Joseph's come to mind--creative writing and service-learning for social change.

The service-learning and the creative writing components of the Writing Fellows course are linked both in the actual course work that tutors do, and the work that they do with learners at their service-learning sites. In the Writing Fellows course, we begin by writing "creatively."

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When tutors receive the assignment to write "creatively," and have the opportunity to define their own writing, they take this opportunity to write something that is not "school writing." For those who are not practicing creative writers, this assignment encourages them to try something new and experiment with an unfamiliar form. For those who are creative writers, this assignment often changes their ideas of creative writing from the isolated-writer-in-the-attic to a more collaborative and inclusive model. Both kinds of changes are useful for writing tutors as they begin to conceptualize their work as collaborative and mutual rather than as top down and hierarchical. And as the assignment progresses, tutors often begin to think about how their previous definitions of creative writing (writing without rules or constraints) is complicated by their ideas of what "good" writing is.

After doing creative writing exercises in class, brainstorming, and taking the piece through several levels of revision, tutors write a reflective paper on their process of writing as related to the theories of writing that we've read. They return to their reflective writing at the end of the semester in their final assignment where they develop their own philosophy of peer tutoring.

The process of creative writing encourages tutors to discern what their roles are as tutors as they consider what kinds of feedback and writing practices have been most helpful for their development. For many tutors this is the first time that they have taken a piece of writing through multiple, global revisions; because each tutor is allowed to define the parameters for his or her own writing, they are often extremely invested in the process. This creative writing is important for two additional reasons: 1) tutors can engage and reflect on their own writing processes; 2) much of the work that we engage in at the service-learning sites is teaching "creative" writing. [2]

Through these creative writing exercises, and the student-led writing groups they often generate, students are engaged in writing on their own terms, students have agency in defining those terms, and students have created a spot, an oasis in the parallel curriculum for writing poetry for its own sake.

The service-learning component of the Writing Fellows course came from the creative writing work we had started in the Center. The university's service-learning program had a long-term commitment to a local, Catholic, urban K-8

school, and five years ago I began talking with a fourth grade teacher there about writing in her classroom. I spent time in her classroom writing and talking with students about their poetry. From those origins, our work has evolved to include tutoring in adult literacy programs and English as a Second language programs, and at a shelter for homeless youth. Tutors end up dividing their time about equally between the Writing Center and the service-learning site for a total of thirty hours of tutoring for the semester. While the service-learning component is not in and of itself student-driven, it has become one of the aspects of Writing Center work which the tutors name as most important to their experience in the Center.

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Tutors engage learners in preparation for the high school equivalency exam, in learning to speak English, in writing college applications and essays, and in creative writing, sometimes moving from one genre to another in the same session. Our tutors have tutored fifth graders' poetry, homeless youth's raps and essays, and elementary school students' autobiographies. When running creative writing groups, tutors write with students, free write, and create 'zines and collections of student writing. For students who attend under-funded, urban elementary and high schools (both public and Catholic), this is often a place where they can write about what is important to them, explore language, and have the kind of experience with the joy and beauty of language that is being lost as elementary and secondary schools focus on preparation for standardized tests. In this way, the tutors enact a kind of parallel curriculum for the students at the schools, providing places for exploration and experimentation that are not graded, thus modeling different ways of engaging with writing.

Tutoring writing at these various service-learning sites also makes certain aspects of the tutoring paradigm more apparent to new tutors. They are—depending on location—both a peer and not a peer, both insider and outsider, and sometimes both at once. As the Chicana lesbian feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa suggested in her interview with Andrea Lunsford:

Living in a multicultural society, we cross into each others' worlds all the time. . . .We all of us find ourselves in the position of being simultaneously insider/outsider. (254)[3]

The service-learning component has this kind of an impact on students. While I attempt to recruit a diverse group of tutors, some of them always seem to enter the course convinced that they are insiders in academic discourse (which they may be) and that their mission is to bring others "inside." By sending the tutors outside of the university, they often begin to recognize their subject position as complicated by elements of both "insider" and "outsider" status. The service-learning component enriches the peer tutoring course and leads to a deeper level of understanding of language use, social class, race, and gender, and systemic inequalities. (For more on this, see Green, "Difficult Stories: Service-Learning, Race, Class, and Whiteness" *College Composition and Communication* 55.2, 276-301.)It has also led to tutors' work beyond the course and in the community.

Most recently, two Writing Fellows designed their own year-long honor's thesis projects that engaged in community-based research at their service-learning sites. During these projects, each tutor continued her service over the course of an academic year, took field notes, and researched aspects of writing development as they evolved at the sites. Each tutor engaged in complex negotiations with the sites to work toward a more mutually beneficial ideal of research as social action. It was our attempt to "Work . . . within a social action model of research that involves students as participants . . . [to] be less connected with the need to serve and to please and more connected with the desire to understand, to articulate, and to interpret" (Grimm 88). Each tutor wrote her honor's thesis analyzing her own literacy practices and subject position through a reflective literacy narrative, seeking approval for the project through our Institutional Review Board (not an easy task as the IRB was largely unfamiliar with community-based research methodology), and defining her own subject for investigation (in one case the idea of the writer among homeless youth and in the other case a consideration of how community is formed in inner-city classrooms). Having just finished reading these projects, I am amazed at the level of engagement and thoughtfulness that went into each piece of work. Each tutor has spent about 19 months at the service site talking with and working with writers. Each tutor went beyond my expectations for these projects and wrote critically, creatively, and analytically over a sustained period of time. Based on their work, I suspect that each of these tutors will work for social change for at least part of their careers as teachers, writers, and activists.

And here's where I think that the idea of a parallel curriculum resonates for our Writing Center. During my six years of directing the Writing Center, I have had a number of students go on to careers as teachers, particularly teachers in inner city, urban settings. Students begin this work through a service-learning course, and then keep going, taking additional service-learning courses, doing the service independent of any course, and thinking about issues of justice. I've begun placing service-learning students with teachers who are former service-learning students of mine, who are committed to urban education, who think about issues of social change. And it is in these relationships that I think contributions to the parallel curriculum are most effectively made.

[T]he Writing Center work we do here is based not in a number of texts read or tests given, but in the kind of human contact which may lead to dramatic change.

The Office of Faith and Justice which houses our service-learning program refers to service-learning here as "relationship-based," as opposed to more task-oriented programs. As Frankie Condon's letter writing project in this issue of *Praxis* began with a relationship with her son's teacher, the basis of the parallel curriculum in the Writing Center work we do here is based not in a number of texts read or tests given, but in the kind of human contact which may lead to dramatic change, through which authentic learning is possible.

When teaching service-learning at Saint Joseph's, we often talk about who we are "in relationship" with, who we are interacting with who is changing us or challenging us. Tutors write about the difficult tutee who might have responded in anger or in pain as well as the joy of seeing someone achieve something through a piece of writing. Part of what I think happens in the parallel curriculum that makes discernment possible is the fact of the relationship, the emphasis not only on the positive aspects of interaction, but on the struggles as

well. The relationships that students build connect isolated fragments of knowledge to people and issues outside of the classroom. These relationships help students internalize what they're learning and connect it to larger issues. Ideally, these relationships broaden our vision of what's possible.

So rather than the actual curriculum which is based on exams, credit-hours, and numbers of books read, the parallel curriculum rests squarely on the relationships that students form in the creative writing group, in the Writing Center, or at the service-site. These relationships take time—and some of this time cannot be planned or structured and often does not look like traditional learning. The potluck in the Writing Center, the take out Chinese with the teachers from the service-learning sites, the time spent hanging out in the Center and chatting between tutorials, encourages us all to believe that change is possible, to engage in action for systemic social change, and to work for justice.

Notes

[1] Discernment, in a Jesuit sense, is a practice of reflecting on God's presence in your daily life. In a more general way, I am using discernment here to indicate the practice of reflection whereby students and faculty build connections between disparate ideas and create synthesis between intellectual work and the work of daily life. Thank you to Tom Brennan, S.J. for the discussions of discernment.

[2] This past year we used *The Pocket Muse: Ideas & Inspirations for Writing* by Monica Wood (Cincinnati, Writer's Digest Books, 2002) as a way of beginning writing. It is a wonderful, small book of pictures and starters that tutors and elementary school children alike enjoyed, particularly the exercise about how the hippos arrived in the Catholic school parking lot.

[3] Thank you to Susan Naomi Bernstein for drawing my attention to this quote.

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