

# Community Writing Centers and Genre Literacy

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Examining the rich, learning environment of a community-based writing center, this essay explores the possibilities and practical implications of a genre-intensive approach to writing instruction. Based on participant observation, the essay combines study of student-published texts and related additional research.

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Mighty Writers, a community writing center in South Philadelphia, offers children a relaxed, creative environment that encourages young writers to experiment with their writing and to have fun reading books. By giving the children it tutors greater confidence and improved genre literacy, Mighty Writers (MW) allows them to discover reading and writing on their own terms. Through its one-on-one tutoring sessions, workshops, games, and publications, MW spurs a cycle of confidence building, learning, and growing in its young writers. Mighty Writers is interested in strengthening the individual's relationship to writing and helping each writer build upon his or her talents and improve his or her weaknesses. In a culture increasingly dependent on the ability of a writer to adapt to an ever-widening range of professional and academic genres, the benefits of a genre-immersive institution like MW in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods are inestimable. The nurturing, lighthearted approach to writing instruction practiced by Mighty Writers is a unique and effective contribution to literacy programs and writing instruction. From my experience working at Mighty Writers, first as a volunteer tutor (September 2009 to May 2010) and later as an intern (June 2010 to August 2010),<sup>1</sup> I have come to consider that the organization's creative, genre-intensive environment warrants closer inspection and broader application, and should serve as a model for similarly inventive programs across the country.

## Overview of Genre Theory

I will use a flexible definition of "genre" stemming from the Bakhtinian approach to genre as a social phenomenon: the "characterization of any discourse, from casual conversation to lengthy written text" (McCabe and Peterson 57). This approach dismisses the "view of genre as an empty structure," emphasizing the individual's contribution to its meaning (Boscolo 371). According to Daniel Chandler, children are able to differentiate between television advertisements and the program they interrupt as early as age three (7). 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). A greater understanding of each individual genre and increased knowledge of different genres result in more possibilities for topics and modes the child will feel comfortable writing in (38).

Young writers dutifully mimic the writing to which they've been exposed, such as comic books and science reports. They regularly implement examples given by their teacher in their own writing, including elements such as word plays, songs, and poems (Dahl and Farnan 55). As is the case when one begins to play the piano or pick up a new language, imitation is an effective

mode of learning. Learning the conventions of a genre and applying those standards in their own work 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 and Dudley-Evans 310). Genre organization is also a way by which “children learn to put order in their experiences and knowledge” (Boscolo 370). By exposing students to a wide range of genres, Mighty Writers helps expand the students’ repertoire of writing possibilities.

Although using methods that explicitly teach about genres is potentially controversial, seen as a crutch for lazy teachers (Kay and Dudley-Evans 308), they are nonetheless an unavoidable aspect of student life and of writing in general. Mighty Writers represents a subtle, yet immersive, foray into genre instruction, one that avoids controversy without losing any of the benefits of direct instruction. When implemented thoughtfully, genre-based teaching methods can help a student discover for him- or herself that writing is a tool to be “used and manipulated . . . [and help him/her 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” (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 the conventions of genres and invent new uses to suit their needs. As Kamberelis writes, the “understanding of and competency with the forms, functions, rhetorical possibilities, and typical occasions of use of different genres is an important part of learning how to write . . . generatively and effectively” (408–9). The ability of children to write in a genre with an unconscious sophistication is a huge benefit, giving the illusion of writers more experienced than they may actually be. It also opens them up to a large array of writing activities, 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” (Flower, Higgins, and Peck 2).

### **A Portrait of Mighty Writers**

Mighty Writers is a nonprofit, free-to-all community writing center (CWC) for children between the ages of seven and seventeen. Founded in 2008 by Rachel Loeper and Tim Whitaker, Mighty Writers was inspired by the storefront writing center model pioneered by Dave Eggers and Ninive Calegari in San Francisco in 2002. That organization, called 826, has expanded to include chapters in seven cities. Mighty Writers believes that its promotion of personal writing projects will help children to develop more comprehensive writing skills and become more passionate about their work. Moreover, the publishing activities that a CWC sponsors help young writers celebrate their successes in the form of a physical object, further encouraging a cycle of progress and enthusiasm. A CWC can also serve as an outlet for expressing one’s messages, as it does for Mark, a teenage student and aspiring rap artist at the community literacy center (CLC) in Pittsburgh. For Mark, the CLC is home to his “art and argument and a place to begin a broader conversation about the issues he cares most about” (Flower, Higgins, and Peck 1).

The community writing center is an immersive learning environment, characterized by a wide array of activities focused on reading and writing. (For simplicity’s sake, I’ll refer to these two activities solely as “writing” activities.) The multitude of options helps each child explore

his or her own way of accessing writing as an enjoyable activity he or she can pursue outside of the school setting. It shows children that language activities can be fun: reading can be a leisure activity, and writing can be a way of exploring their thoughts and ideas as well as a powerful tool for relating to the community at large. Students are taught in school that reading and writing are fun and are important skills to acquire. A CWC is a place for students to *experience* for themselves the lessons they hear in school, as they are actively encouraged to read books for fun and to take on their own individual writing assignments.

The function of a CWC changes according to the need, skill level, and age of the young writer. The older, more academically mature students who attend the after-school program at Mighty Writers need relatively little guidance from the tutors, as they already exhibit a fairly sophisticated mastery of genre understanding.

Mighty Writers currently operates out of two locations in Philadelphia. The original location, in a residential neighborhood of South Philadelphia, occupies three floors and includes a quiet room for homework and writing projects, a teen lounge, a library, a waiting area, and a communal first floor that is utilized for meetings, announcements, and special events. MW is designed to be a space where kids can feel comfortable, at home, and at ease. By maintaining a careful balance between work and play, MW reminds its students that they are in a space where they can be themselves. The second, storefront-style location—dubbed MIGHTYVISION—is located on the always-vibrant South Street. MIGHTYVISION concentrates on a genre most students can easily relate to: comic books and graphic novels.

Writing opportunities at both Mighty Writers and MIGHTYVISION are 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, are 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 [writing centers] as nurturing, helping places which provide assistance to other writing centers and sustenance to students to help them grow, mature, and become independent” (17). I believe Harris is alluding to two different aspects of community, both encouraged by CWCs—the feeling of connection to another’s world made possible through reading and writing, and the more immediate connection to their physical community students encounter by interacting with their peers and tutors.

### **How Mighty Writers Fosters Genre Development**

The students who attend Mighty Writers are offered a wide range of activities to help them become better writers. The staff encourages its students in a decidedly nondidactic manner, giving the child the tools to make his or her own breakthroughs. (The *laissez-faire* approach to genre instruction, in which a mentor “provides examples of different genres for the children to explore . . . independently and collaboratively” has been embraced in the field of literacy studies following a 1994 study of six first graders by M. L. Chapman [Boscolo 372].)

Once the students have completed their homework for the day, they’re free to work on a writing-related project of their choosing. Each student has a folder for individual projects, which may include writing contests, a news report in progress for the *Mighty Times*, a comic book panel, a poem, and short fiction as well as nonfiction. This is an opportunity for the children to

make an effort to identify the kind of things they like to read and to experiment with writing in that genre in an environment free from criticism and prescriptive corrections. Although the projects at *Mighty Writers* often follow a template or a prompt, 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 or lightly guided engagement available to the student.

The inaugural edition of the *Mighty Times*, published in late August 2009, represents the observations and opinions of children of a range of ages, coming to terms with issues in their community. Its format follows that of a standard newspaper, printed on newsprint and with a masthead reminiscent of traditional newspapers. The issue features an article by Mukhtar Stones on the relationship between art and graffiti as they intersect in the city’s Mural Arts program and an investigative report into the state of stray animals in Philadelphia.

The *Mighty Times* is an excellent icon for the community writing center as a whole. Its writers engage in dialogs about worthy community topics firsthand, an invaluable example of the power of writing. 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 with little personal opinion given. Her article includes firsthand 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 *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 example of the kind of community engagement writing can provide for an individual in society, a message that I believe is particularly salient for today’s urban youth. The *Mighty Times* gives basic reporting skills to the students and teaches kids the importance of asking questions and building relationships with people in their community.

But the *Mighty Times* has a lighthearted side, too. A special movie review edition of the student-run newspaper was released in fall 2010. The issue was based on work produced during a movie review workshop led by Sam Adams, a writer of film reviews for the *Philadelphia City Paper*. The addition of movie reviews to the *Mighty Writers* curriculum strengthens the students’ relationship to writing in many ways. It encourages them to think critically about art, pushes them to feel confident about their opinions, and shows them that they can write about anything they’re interested in. As the workshop leaders reflect in their introduction to the newspaper, a simple concept can spark some unexpected conversations:

Along the way we had interesting talks about audience, message construction and special effects, covering everything from the MPAA rating system and product placements, to Hollywood box office economics. . . . Beyond writing

some hard-hitting reviews, the kids learned to watch and analyze movies in a whole new way. We think their experience will make them confident and conscientious media consumers—quite a handy skill in our media-saturated world.

In this excerpt from the newspaper, author Kezia Baht reviewed *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. She starts her review with the journalistic who, what, when, and where:

This movie is about a girl named Emily Rose (Jennifer Carpenter) who was thought to be epileptic, but was really demonic. After her parents did all they could, they asked a priest named Father Richard Moore (Tom Wilkinson) to help.

She continues her analysis and delivers her verdict:

I thought the movie was creepy, but awesome. It was also funny, like when Dr. Cartwright (Duncan Fraser) got hit by a car. I think people who aren't scaredy cats and like mystery would enjoy this movie. The movie is loosely based on the true story of Anneleise Michel. It cost \$19 million to make, and the gross revenue totaled over \$160 million. I think the amount the movie cost to make adds to how good the movie was.

*The Mighty Times* is an illustrative example of the community writing center's ability to enrich the students' connection to their community through writing, reading, and reporting.

Another way Mighty Writers strengthens the students' relationship to reading and writing is to give them tailored writing opportunities they aren't likely to receive in school. Enter MIGHTYVISION, MW's graphic novel and comic book venture. Both a physical space and a series of workshops, MIGHTYVISION uses a genre from popular culture to show the student that writing can be instructive and meaningful outside of the classroom. According to the MW website:

MIGHTYVISION [aims to] engage comic book writers, cartoonists, artists and art students to help us mentor and teach Mighty kids to write, design and illustrate their own characters and stories. The goal of MIGHTYVISION is the same as it is at Mighty Writers: to create a city of young people capable of using their writing skills to get where they need to go—be it high school graduation, college, a job, a new business or a creative venture.

Like Mighty Writers' other ventures, MIGHTYVISION provides more benefits than may first meet the eye. By pairing students with practicing professionals, MIGHTYVISION provides children with a mentor to whom they can relate and a point of reference for their lives moving forward. The genre of comic books and graphic novels may be the perfect tool to engage young people with reading and writing. MIGHTYVISION further develops this relationship by giving them the tools to create, the connections to inspire, and the serious attention a comic book fan is unlikely to find elsewhere. Finally, MIGHTYVISION shows the flexibility and dedication of the community writing center to cater to students with programs that interest them.

### **The Practical Applications of Genre Knowledge**

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 extracurricular 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. My concern is that public awareness of the potential benefits of CWCs is severely limited. We need more CWCs, and they need more serious academic and professional attention.

As institutions focusing on genre attainment and proficiency, CWCs encourage and foster their students' ability to recognize and practice various genre forms, making them better writers (McCutchen, Teske, Bankston 560). Mighty Writers helps make writing fun for children, while deepening their understanding of how we communicate and how they can fit into that landscape, now and in their future. The extra help a first grader receives with a book report at Mighty Writers may translate to that student someday successfully composing a fifty-page paper for comparative literature in graduate school. The letters to President Obama drafted by the children at 826 may help them craft more effective cover letters to prospective employers when they enter the job market. The expansive range of reading and writing experiences students encounter at a CWC like Mighty Writers heightens their enthusiasm and greatly increases their ability to write across different styles and genres—a skill that will be with them for the rest of their lives.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Specific examples of student work are from published sources only.

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