

Theory in Practice: Halloween Write-In

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This essay offers an archive of our collaboration as teachers of Basic Writing and former students of Basic Writing on the October 31, 2017 Halloween Write-In for students of Basic Writing. Archives are meant to solidify knowledge by acting as the institutionally approved and organized evidence of some sort of truth. What we seek instead is a challenge to this traditional meaning of archives by clarifying our work as a space to seek refuge, rest, succor, security, and possibilities for utopia. In times of scarcity, we have found building and creating connection across communities to be our greatest challenge and our most abiding strength.

The Write-In offered opportunities for community building, peer and faculty mentoring, and free breakfast. Based on an award-winning proposal submitted for a competition sponsored by our university's Writing Programs, the Write-In was conceived and written by second-semester first-year students in a year-long Stretch¹ writing class, second-year students who had completed Stretch the previous year, and graduate students in a Basic Writing teaching practicum that one of us facilitated. Students at all levels identified food insecurity, lack of opportunities for community building, and difficulty finding peer and faculty mentoring as major issues for first-semester students in Basic Writing, which served as the first semester of Stretch. The Write-In sought to bring visibility to these issues, to create community in an informal setting, and to offer support for writing outside of the classroom.

In a recent *PMLA* article, Cathy N. Davidson¹ discusses the decline of education as a public good, resulting in severely decreased public funding from federal and state legislatures. Davidson writes:

We have experienced a twenty percent per-student funding cut over the last decades, resulting in soaring tuitions and a national crisis of debt, as well as food and housing

insecurity for students (Goldrick-Rab). Exploding class sizes shortchange our students and faculty: over fifty percent of our college courses are now taught by underpaid, part-time, adjunct, contingent instructors. This is a travesty for a country that claims it is a democracy with aspirations to maintain a strong middle class. We are robbing the future.

(708)

These conditions can feel permanent and hopeless, especially for those of us who participate in the current “travesty” as contingent instructors. Our working conditions and our futures can feel hopeless and pointless, and this can be exacerbated by the toll that contingent labor exacts on us. While often invisible to WPAs and other administrators, the costs are part of our daily embodied experiences: unhealthy working conditions, poor compensation, and lack of wider recognition for our labors. As Davidson suggests above, the conditions of neoliberalism rob us of a future, which in turn robs us of hope for participation in shaping a better future for ourselves and for others. The treadmill of contingent labor keeps the neoliberal machine running, some of us able to speak out with impunity and others of us permanently silenced by the fear of losing our positions.

But, as José Esteban Muñoz offers us in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, another future is possible. Muñoz suggests that “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). In this respect, Muñoz anticipates the rise of the anti-austerity movement, Occupy Wall Street, which argued for the possibilities of a better world on an international scale.

For teachers and students of Basic Writing, Occupy Wall Street offers a significant example of hope: “To imagine pedagogy in the wake of austerity, imagine bearing witness to suffering. Imagine the promise of occupying hope for the future by creating ephemeral

communities that foster hope and connection” (Bernstein 92). Because of this promise, we center our interests in a more student-centered community building, especially when we find tepid support from neoliberal institutional structures. Our power, as teachers of Basic Writing, is concentrated in our classrooms. And, as our experiences with the Halloween Write-In taught us, that power can be substantial.

In the archive that follows, we offer a record of documents and photos that shaped our Halloween Write-In experiences. Since none of us holds tenure-track positions in higher education, we prefer to contribute to Basic Writing scholarship with a collection of materials we hope will be immediately useful for classroom teachers, and especially for temporary faculty who are often the majority of the Basic Writing teacher workforce. This archive is important as a recognition of two separate but interlocking communities: teachers and students. The circumstances of teaching Basic Writing can feel oppressive and beyond our ability to change the system. Given this material reality, we want to demonstrate a brief moment in time when we found cause for celebration in our work as classroom teachers and when, in the midst of many challenges, we were able to envision a more utopian future.

Because we believe the abstractions of language always lead us to read and interpret the world differently, we want to suggest that moments such as these can demonstrate that classroom teachers can foster change and growth through horizontal rather than hierarchical structures of organization. To put it more bluntly, we are writing to envision possibilities which, in the midst of scarcity for many of us as contingent faculty, speak to the abundance we can create together through official and unofficial structures.

Even as we incorporate the vocabulary of neoliberalism in order to frame our work in the context of current working conditions, working within university structures always already

signals a limitation in what our project was able to realize. For instance, the project's chief beneficiaries seem to be those who did the planning: former students of Basic Writing who served as mentors, and Basic Writing faculty. But we veer from neoliberalism as we suggest that the most significant outcomes may unfold in a future outside of the parameters of Halloween, and are therefore beyond our control to predict or measure, especially under neoliberal conditions of austerity and precarity that intentionally limit the amount of labor that contingent faculty are able to devote to conventional research.

As an assessment of this specific event, we would want to create a stronger link between communities through additional collaboration through the Writing Project (see Appendix A). This work probably should have been given as an assignment across the Stretch classes, which would give greater focus to the event through the eyes of the students (and faculty). Indeed, part of future events might include a greater focus on activism as an event discourse. How might we lead group conversations during the event itself? This again addresses ideas of collaboration, similar to that in more formal learning communities. Indeed, we had a support team of Second-Year Students (veterans of Stretch) willing to spend time with current First-Year Students workshopping writing projects and addressing these projects within the larger academic context. For future events, in order to reflect our current austere environment, we would like to develop a template for creating a learning community model. Our outside resources were relatively small and will remain so in the foreseeable future.

In place of conventional outcomes, then, we offer our archive of the event, and with it, our hopes for the future. As Muñoz suggests about queerness, the “here and now” is not necessarily our aim, but “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1). Specifically, we offer our experience to other

teachers—adjuncts, graduate students, all of us gig workers in a neoliberal economy, with the hope of dismantling Davidson’s notion of our future as “robbing.” Instead, we desire and work toward a future suggested by student projects listed in the archive: that we promote activism and that we “love each other,” or perhaps more accurately, that we care for each other. We see care as a means of breaking down barriers that hierarchize us. We bring ourselves close when we care, when we are attentive and worry over and for the other. Care implies an action that effaces the self to incorporate the other. As Hélène Cixous reminds us, “In one another we will never be lacking (“The Laugh of the Medusa”).

Our archive contains the following documents, edited for length and clarity, and with names and places redacted to protect privacy:

- The final assignment at the end of the year-long Stretch Writing Program
- A proposal written in collaboration with students and former students of Stretch, Stretch faculty, and graduate students who participated in the Basic Writing Practicum
- Narratives of people who participated in the Halloween Write-In
- Photographs of Halloween. We have included the photos because the Halloween aspect also has greater potential for student/faculty discussions of activism and identity. Costumes are text

Appendix A: The Writing Project Archive

The Final Assignment at the End of the Year-Long Stretch Writing Program

WP 3: Proposal

Socrates speaking to Glaucon: “Dear Glaucon, I said, you will not be able to follow me here, though I would do my best, and you should behold not an image only but the absolute truth, according to my notion. Whether what I told you would or would not have been a reality I cannot venture to say; but you would have seen something like reality; of that I am confident.”

--Plato [Allegory of the Cave](#)

Propose a project to be supported by the foundation “Make the World a Better Place or Else (MWBPE).” Our brand is human rights and our slogan comes from [Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”](#): “they rule who are truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom, which are the true blessings of life.”

Realize that MWBPE receives many proposals every year and its CEO needs to be very discerning in selecting proposals to support. You must write your most persuasive essay of the year to convince the beleaguered CEO that your proposal is appropriate for MWBPE support.

Format: letter or memo addressed to the CEO

Length: Aim for 1000+ words, which includes a complete introduction, body, and conclusion.

Sources: 3-5 of your choosing, which can be images (see below). Make sure to include a works cited list at the end of the essay.

Images: Optional. Use images strategically and only if the images show direct connection to the central focus of your essay.

Suggestions for drafting: Content and organization are up to you. To begin drafting, consider an old reliable method: 5W + H: who, what, when, where, WHY + how.

Suggestions for proposals: a new course, internship, or program of study; a new law, policy, or innovation for our campus, or your home community; a new use for an abandoned building or vacant lot; a new way to prepare students for transitions to college or transitions for college to post-college life. We will discuss more possibilities in class.

Journal Entry

Use the template below to create a draft for the final essay. The template offers another way to approach organizing and writing a proposal:

- Explain the purpose of your proposal and why it is needed. Include the following details:
 - Who would benefit from the proposal? Why?
 - What activities would be included? Why?
 - When, where, and how would these activities take place?
 - Why is this proposal significant?
- Address objections: What objections could the reader have to this proposal? Why?
- Refute objections: Why are the benefits more significant than the objections?
- Restate the purpose of the proposal. Why is it important? Leave the reader with something significant to think about.

Sample Projects from Class Discussions of the Assignment

- Create groups outside of class so first-semester college students can get help outside of class and make new friends.
- Offer college preparation for students living along the US/Mexico border:
 - Support high school students in talking about our future
 - Provide academic advisors in high school and middle school that can talk to us about what college is and the steps we need to take to get to college
 - Bring in panels of college students to discuss their experiences with us.
- Expand gifted and talented programs in primary and middle school so all students can feel like part of a special program to expand their learning.
- Develop social change programs that promote activism/social change for students.
- Love each other.

The Proposal: Community Writing Groups

Abstract: We propose to enhance Stretch curricula by adding community-building activities into the first semester of the course through the use of Community Writing Groups. Community Writing Groups would offer students time and space to work on writing projects for Basic Writing. Community Writing Groups would have the residual impact of assisting with time management, and fostering resilience through first-year transitions of balancing heavy course loads with social pressures, and family obligations, and would allow space for interacting with classmates and faculty in a more informal setting.

The Stretch Writing Program offers a cohort-based year-long course in engagement with academic writing. Currently, some students do not enroll with their Stretch cohort for the second half of the course for a variety of reasons including schedule conflicts and the challenges of creating community in the first semester. We propose to enhance Stretch curricula by adding community-building activities into the first semester of the course through the use of Community Writing Groups.

This proposal attends to the second of those reasons, building community, and also addresses these significant principles of our university's charter:

- Maintain university accessibility to match our state's socioeconomic diversity, with undifferentiated outcomes for success.
- Maintain the fundamental principle of accessibility to all students qualified to study at a research university,

We plan to offer Community Writing Groups for students enrolled in the Stretch Writing Program beginning in fall 2017. Our goal is to have the groups meet outside of regular class time. Stretch faculty, graduate students involved with the Stretch Teaching Practicum, and former Stretch Writing Program students would serve as facilitators and mentors. Money would be used to provide healthy food for students at each Community Writing Group meeting, and to offer a small honorarium for facilitators and mentors.

The idea for creating Community Writing Groups evolved through class discussion with students in the second half of the Stretch course (ENG 101). Students were asked what could be done in the first half of the Stretch course (Basic Writing) to enhance their growth as academic writers, and also build community. The students' contribution to this proposal allowed us to arrive a threefold proposal for community building in Basic Writing:

- Organize out-of-class community writing groups that would:
 - Give students time and space outside of class to work on writing projects
 - Assist with time management
 - Foster resilience through first-year transitions
 - Promote interaction with classmates and faculty in a more informal setting.
- Offer healthy food snacks to deal with food insecurity, a common need expressed by students.
- Present opportunities for Stretch faculty, Stretch Practicum graduate students, and former Stretch students for:
 - Professional development in Stretch pedagogy
 - Community Engagement
 - Résumé building

Our proposal is intended not only to grow and sustain the Stretch Writing Program, but also to become an innovator in enhancing and strengthening access to Writing Programs courses beyond the first semester and first year. Our team believes that Community Writing Groups, by addressing the points of the Charter listed above, can become a model for diversity and inclusion across the University.

Narratives of Halloween Write-In Participants

First-Year Student

The Halloween Write-In was helpful in that I got to meet other stretch students, discuss my writing with others & ask previous WAC students about their experience with the course.

Meeting with other students allowed for:

- “Friendships” with other students - should other Stretch students be in my courses the years to follow, I already have an established similarity/relationship with them
- Collaboration - make the shy one’s engage in conversation more
- Writing sessions where we can meet up to write upcoming prompts - bounce ideas off one another
- Discuss my writing with others
- Provide feedback (how can I make it better?)
- Catch grammatical errors: typos/run-on sentences
- Taking notes of ways other write to incorporate in - “I like how they did this so, I will use that in my writing”

Previous WAC Student:

- How can you be good students and successful in WAC?
- What is the grading like?
- Any unexpected curve balls thrown your way?

I can take what I experienced in the Halloween Write-In as a way to improve my writing for WP 2. Granted it was Halloween, I still learned about how to be a better writer and collaborate more with others even if I am an off-campus student.

Second-Year Student:

I showed up kinda late, and not many of the freshman were left from the morning. With great food, the environment I saw was chill and calming. The role of the teachers and dressing up played a significant role of this party's environment. Of course, it’s awkward and nobody knows anyone, but the teachers and the atmosphere were friendly and seemed to make people talk to others. When I was asked initially to be a part of the stretch group I thought of a classroom where students sit down and write and then if they got stuck could feel free to get advice on what to do next. I was surprised and quite happy that the Halloween party was more a party then another classroom experience. All the teachers being dressed up and always telling us to take free food was great. Ian was nice and always telling us to eat some fruit. I wanted to talk to him, but I was too antisocial and missed my chance to get to know a person like that. The party I liked, the mix with Halloween was a good idea to start the stretch groups. I think so because people are self-preservative of what others perceive of them, so many times doing nothing is better than embarrassing yourself, talking to new people. The idea of others dressing up, breaking that norm and stepping into that weird realm I feel it made an environment where

everything goes without judgment. Without the social judgment from others, I think students were allowed to talk more freely. I myself talked to strangers that I didn't know and talked about costumes and Halloween was a good icebreaker to start conversations with. The stretch program looks good and helpful for WAC students. It makes me wish I had a chance to go to gatherings like this and improve my freshmen writing skills.

Second-Year Student:

During the write-in, I would have hoped to meet new students, but even though that wasn't the outcome, I feel I got an even better outcome if you ask me. At first, it was B, C, and I as they were talking because they had the same topic, I tried to compare it to my topic but it was difficult so I kind of just heard them out and put my input in if they asked for it. Then E showed up and was actually writing about the same topic as me. He asked me what I had and I told him, to be honest, I'm so lost and have no idea. So C began to ask E what he was writing about. He told us honestly I have written about has to what is going on in the world and who is controlling it. He went on talking about how he thought about it like people going to a play and while the audience is waiting for the play to begin a cast member peeks his head out through the curtains and tells the audience what is going on backstage and disappears in the curtains. Then another cast member peeks out his head too and tells the audience a completely different story about what is going on backstage and disappears as well.

This leaves the audience in thinking who really is telling the truth and obviously, it makes them pick a side on which cast member they believe. He began to explain how we do this today with the media. In the end, the audience doesn't ever find out what was happening behind the curtain. This honestly made me open my eyes so much and made me realize like in amazement because I never thought about the topic in that way. It made me open my eyes and made me open my eyes to what I will be talking about in my WP 2. So I think my biggest take away from the write-in was truly a really positive one and I loved how we interacted with each other outside of the classroom.

Stretch Faculty:

Conversations during this event included work on current writing projects, but I found most conversations among my students addressed matters outside the immediate goals of the writing class. Students were interested in my own experiences as a college student (in the 1980s) and my expectations as a teacher. Stories about the academy were a means of considering their own potential opportunities in college. It became a method through which they could assess their own progress during their first year. The Halloween event was a place where these types of conversation were possible for this cohort.

Stretch Faculty:

At the community write-in, almost none of my students did any writing. At first, I thought it was a flop, that they were disinterested. After seeing them laugh, talk, and meet other students, I understood that it was the glue that reinforced our relationship with each other and allowed us to successfully move into Project Three, a community action research paper, with full force. The motivation for students to tell a story, to present research on a social justice issue they were connected to and passionate about was generated through the personal connections they had made with each other. Other students clearly thrived and were eager to write when their peers were interested in hearing their stories. I believe they became interested in each other because we created the space outside of the syllabus for personal relationships to matter, for voices to matter.

What/why: Haloween write-in: much about us as instructors too. My expectations were changed too - this was as much about meeting them 1/2 way in a 'real' way + understanding myself to be a mentor, a person with compassion for their humanity first + foremost! Teaching cannot exist in the vacuum we pretend it does... we must strive to be higher human beings if we really want to see social change.

Stretch Faculty Journal Entry

Photographs of Halloween



Students at the 2017 Halloween Write-In.



Susan, Ian, Meghan, in costume on Halloween, stand behind the fruit trays.



Bill, Meghan, Susan, and Ian celebrate on Halloween morning.

Works Cited

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¹ See Gregory R. Glau's germinal description of the Stretch Writing Program at Arizona State University.