Chapter 2. Flattening Hierarchies in Community-Engaged Writing Studies Research

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The first meeting of Our Writing Group (OWG) took place in a small back room at the Venture classroom space. As I smiled at the four writers who made their way into the room that evening, I felt nervous. I wasn't sure how to behave. I was the odd one out, the only person in the room who wasn't a Venture graduate. The automatic comfort with one another that their Venture experiences granted did not extend to me. For a brief moment, I wondered if this pilot would work—could we build a writing group while we met as a writing group?

We began with everyone's name and the year they graduated from Venture. As the newbie in the room, I introduced myself more thoroughly and talked about my affiliation with Venture (its dedicated writing center tutor), how I got involved (connecting with one of the co-directors and becoming a grant writing volunteer), my family of "nontraditional" students (mom, dad, both brothers—all except me), and my graduate program and research interests (community literacies, lifespan writing development, writing groups). I explained why I wanted to start OWG—to continue to build on the community around literacies that the credit-bearing two-semester Venture course for income-qualified adults begins—and the benefits of writing groups for developing a writing practice, finding accountability, struggling together, giving and receiving feedback, and dedicating time to writing. After that, we free-wrote on what we hoped to get from OWG and how we imagined it would work. The writers shared they hoped to "learn more about grammar and punctuation," receive "inspirations" to write, and "gain an understanding of writing and skills to develop to make writing better." They requested to learn new things and get feedback from me since I was "the expert." Despite my denial of that title right away, I wondered if my outsider status in the group combined with being a university writing center instructor made it so that

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it was the only role I could hold: expert or bust. I hoped that I could find my way into being considered just another member of the group eventually.

I ended up fulfilling their expectations of me as the expert at the very next meeting (and beyond) by bringing an agenda for everyone to follow and take notes on and using a lesson from *Everyday Editing* by Jeff Anderson to teach about the serial comma. Many participants shared one of their biggest writing challenges was punctuation, and while I at least once challenged participants to think beyond punctuation and instead about the messages they want to impart on their readers, I still focused many mini-lessons on punctuation during the pilot writing group. For instance, during this second OWG meeting, we had an intense discussion about the Oxford comma. Most OWG members believed that the last comma before the word 'and' in a list was the 'rule,' but one participant disagreed. The discussion demonstrated these writers' belief in the adherence to rules in order to write well and reflected their experience of writing as a site of judgment. In the end, the writers looked to me to provide a definitive answer; instead of reorienting the writers to writing as a site of empowering individuality rather than judgment, I took the bait, sharing that the Oxford comma can reduce confusion, but it's ultimately a stylistic choice.

Thus, the pilot version of OWG during Spring 2020 operated more as a class than a community writing group, as indicated by members treating me as a "teacher" and writing prompts as "homework." Additionally, OWG provided opportunities to gain greater awareness and facility with the conventions of White Mainstream English (WME) in the mini-lessons and find inspiration through the writing prompts in a traditional classroom sense: the group was almost entirely centered around me as an expert/ teacher rather than honoring the understandings of writing that the members of the group brought with them. OWG moving to virtual meetings in Fall 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity to revise the structure of our meetings to become guided more deeply by members' literacy desires, which in turn helped enhance OWG members' writerly confidence by validating and affirming their literacy desires as important and worthy. Tiffani's story shares more about the effects of this revision.

Tiffani

2020 was a rough year, especially for Black people. OWG began shortly after the murder of George Floyd. I identify as a white female, and I try to relate to many different kinds of people. I have been an activist for human rights for as long as I can remember, and the events of 2020 got my inner fire burning bright. Nonetheless, I found being the only white person in OWG challenging. While we all came from low-income backgrounds, that was still a stark difference. I could not possibly understand what the BIPOC members of OWG experience on a daily basis.

As we started OWG, as much as I wanted to voice my own opinion about racial division in the US, I kept a lot to myself. I was more interested in how it

was affecting the lives of others in OWG. When Gabbi expressed that she wanted us to facilitate OWG meetings, presenting anything that may interest us, I volunteered first because I wanted to show everyone that we had the skills to do it ourselves. Around that time I had read an article about the US Mint deciding to put Susan B. Anthony on the silver dollar. I honestly didn't know much about Susan B. Anthony, so I looked into her and found that she was one of the harbingers of the Women's Suffrage Movement. I thought that would be a fabulous topic, considering that most OWG members were women. I thought this could be a topic that would encourage us to work across the differences that felt so stark to me. Suffragists fought hard and long to get us the right to vote and have our voices heard, and I thought the other members of OWG might be able to make connections to current activist movements taking place. I was eager to hear what everyone would write with my prompts: I had a picture of the monument of the meeting between Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and asked what they thought the conversation between the women would be. I also posed a prompt about reflecting on the right to vote.

I turned to women's issues for many of the meetings I facilitated because it's an identity I shared with most members of the group. For example, I also facilitated a meeting highlighting Ruth Bader Ginsberg after one of the members used one of her quotes but didn't know much about her. I thought Ginsberg's life was very inspirational, and felt that knowing her struggles as a white Jewish woman would inspire others in the group. Looking back, I know my identity impacted the topics I chose for the meetings I ran. I simply wanted to show that our voices matter, which is one of the key values of OWG, especially as women and low-income folks, regardless of skin color.

Gabrielle

One way I tried to flatten the hierarchy that our positionalities in OWG seemed to impose was through shared leadership of the writing group. Before entering my graduate program, I was a 9th grade composition teacher at a Chicago charter school. My experiences working with Venture alumni provided windows into previous educational experiences similar to those perpetuated at my former workplace that taught these students that they don't belong in academic spaces, they're not enough, they'll fail. Such experiences demonstrated to me the need for increased encouragement and understanding for adult undergraduates like those in OWG to undo that previous harm—harm that I know I unintentionally contributed to as a secondary teacher. OWG afforded an opportunity to build the community around writing I originally entered education to construct.

Thus, I invited and trained OWG members to lead meetings of the group on topics of their choice in an effort to position them as teacher-leader-writers. I wanted to actively work against traditional conceptions of academic literacy, instruction, and power/knowledge relations that positioned me, the credentialed

graduate student, as a sage on the stage and the group members, writers from various generations and with diverse lifetime writing experiences, as blank slates to be filled with knowledge. My interest as a researcher was how this positioning might (positively) impact members' writerly self-efficacy; my interest as a human and a fellow writer was how this might challenge members to think about writing differently—to think about it for themselves and their purposes beyond the academic and professional expectations that had characterized many if not most of their previous writing endeavors.

I was grateful that Tiffani volunteered as the first member-facilitator. Reading her reflection now, I see how I could have also encouraged OWG members to name their differences and similarities—to reflect on their diverse positionalities. Just as I name my experience as a 'successful' student with a 'prestigious' academic pedigree who followed a very traditional path and who self-identifies as a 'good' writer in my interactions with folks who've taken various paths to and through higher education (no matter the lines of difference that this may draw), I wonder how similar hard, reflective identity work might have strengthened the relationships among OWG members. True mutualism and connection is achieved by building bridges across differences, but those bridges can't be built if differences aren't named and acknowledged.

Marisol

My name is Marisol Gonzalez. I am thankful for my last name since it is so popular that almost everyone in the US knows how to pronounce and write it, which is different for my first name.

I don't try to correct people anymore because I know it's hard to make sounds that you've never made before, so when people call me Maryson or Mariposa I don't correct them. I know my name is Marisol and that is what matters.

I am a writer. I found the love for writing thanks to Venture, which taught me that my ideas were valuable and that it was important to write my stories so they would exist forever and not be invisible as I feel in this country, invisible but necessary, as many immigrants are.

When I was part of Venture, I felt very excited when my teacher used my writing as a reference during her lecture or asked me to make specific writings to use for fundraising for the program. Something that I was always aware of since the beginning of this journey was that as English is my second language, my grammar and punctuation weren't perfect and it was okay to give my draft to my professor to fix my mistakes. I was okay with that, until … I wasn't.

Later, in OWG, I remember talking about the process our work would go through to be published on the prestigious Venture website because even though our work was mostly creative writing, the program needed it to keep some "standards" and make our writings sound white, when most OWG writers were people of color.

I chose to publish a story about discrimination and police profiling with accented words in it as part of my identity, as part of who I am, and as part of the need to be accepted in this country made of immigrants. Unfortunately, they suggested editing some of my accented words. Otherwise, the readers might find it difficult to understand. Also if it was grammatically incorrect, it would make a bad impression so they wanted to fix it and make it perfect. I thought, *Perfect*? *Like a white person wrote it*?

Our group already had a hard editing process where we chose only a couple of writings, presented them to the group, got suggestions of how to make them better, submitted them for revision by our professional writer, Gabbi, and accepted or denied the suggestions. Not to mention my particular challenge because it is already hard for me to find in my brain the English words every time I write a piece. It is already very hard for me to start writing and try to not pay attention to the "auto corrector" underlining all the words with red telling me that it's already written wrong. Despite that, I continue writing to not lose the ideas in my head. This is a struggle against the words! As I continue writing, they continue to appear underlined in red, and at the end, I have to review my writing more than three times because even my computer wants me to write in a different way than I want to express myself.

How liberating it was when we decided as a group not to be part of the Venture publication and to create a website that did not put restrictions on our creative writing. How liberating it was to have someone who encouraged us to continue writing what our creative and powerful minds wanted, without the "perfect" accent. Why if I don't correct people for not knowing how to pronounce my name in a perfect Spanish accent, why do others have to correct me for writing with an accent?

Gabrielle

As Marisol's reference to me as the "professional writer" shows, I still haven't quite shaken the role of expert. At the same time I was trying to flatten hierarchies in OWG, I also worked to leverage the greater structural power that my university affiliation afforded. One such way was facilitating community publishing through Venture. However, as Marisol mentions, this process revealed tensions between Venture's goals to open wider the door to a traditional humanities education for income-qualified adult students and OWG's goals to decenter WME and transform conceptions of authorship.

It's important to note that Venture was not intentionally discounting OWG writers' identities. Instead, the prioritization of WME that Marisol writes about is more likely the product of the push-pull community-university partnerships face in the midst of the competing demands from community members, the nonprofit system under capitalism, and the neoliberal university. More specifically, while we no longer engaged with WME in OWG and the editing of the writing in

our publication reflected this, for Venture on the other hand, WME lends legitimacy to their work with low-income, BIPOC community members in the eyes of their donors, the university, and other stakeholders. This legitimacy underpins the use of respectability politics that perpetuate racism. To be fair, Venture's adherence to a carefully managed image that subscribes to WME in student work they publish probably feels necessary: the program doesn't want to lose financial and institutional support for its free credit-bearing courses and resources to low-income adults in the community because the program truly cares about the students it serves. Thus, expectations for publishing student work on Venture's website highlighted how writing is wrapped up in hierarchized power dynamics inherent in the university.

When Marisol writes about making her writing sound white, she speaks to how Venture's administrators did not acknowledge or interrogate their positionalities when they suggested edits to OWG's publication. They did not recognize their positions as white, professional-class, tenured and tenure-track professors of English speaking to low-income, predominantly BIPOC adult writers and a graduate student of color. This was one moment when my status as "the expert" in the group helped legitimize my characterization of the administrators' suggested edits as just that: *suggestions*. As a campus-based advocate for OWG, I strived to, above all else, honor members' ownership of the group and its publication and not allow Venture to exercise undue power or pressure. Some writers chose to edit their work and other writers chose to leave their work as it originally appeared because, in the words of our response to Venture, "they reflect our identities as BIPOC, people who speak languages other than English, and humans who make mistakes. We also feel that our pieces, as they are, reflect our humanity and the rhythm in which we think, speak, and write."

Tiffani, Marisol, and I share our experiences here so that others who occupy similar positions and/or engage in similar community-facing collaborative work have more examples of challenges and successes positionalities can impose on community-engaged writing studies research. We hope this reflection illustrates some ways we strived to enact equitable reciprocal relationships characterized by shared authority and mutual respect. Our positionalities as a mixed-race early career researcher, an immigrant mother-teacher-activist, and a white nature-enthusiast battling houselessness deeply impacted our work to establish and co-lead OWG. The storied practices shared here exemplify successes and tensions that can happen when folks from diverse, complex identity positions attempt to break down, subvert, and overcome the traditional expectations of our various stakeholder positionalities—positionalities that would point to a clear hierarchy—and instead work with one another.