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## Extending Literacy Work Beyond Our Buildings: The Collaborative Work of Creating a Community Writing Center

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## Literacy Work Beyond Our Buildings: The Collaborative Work of Creating a Community Writing Center

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*"I can't imagine a world without writing because nothing that we're doing right now would be possible. On the laptop there would be no words -- just colors, not words! Everything would be blank and super weird!"*

YpsiWrites Participant, Age 10

*"Writing matters because it allows us to talk to the world, even though we might be at a distance. It is the closest we will get to seeing into the minds, hearts and histories of our fellow human beings. The smallest, lightest, shortest story can show us something new, something delightful or provoking, and that will open our own minds and hearts."*

YpsiWrites Participant Sarah Zettel, adult

*"Writing is a form of expression. It is a form of creativity that connects us to one another. Writing unites us in the midst of heartbreak, love, peace, war, fear, and faith."*

YpsiWrites Participant Andrea Buckley, adult

### Introduction to YpsiWrites

In October of 2020, [YpsiWrites](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/), a collaborative community writing center, celebrated a full year of programming with a virtual, multigenerational writing workshop. The celebration began with adults and young people writing and then discussing why writing mattered to them, first as individuals and, then, for the

*Teaching/Writing* invited articles from authors prepared to present at NCTE 2020, but were cut due to COVID program restrictions. We thank the authors of this piece for sharing their work.



community as a whole. Eight writers in the community—nominated by local organizational partners of YpsiWrites—were then honored as “[Writers of Ypsilanti](#)” as they shared their own stories as people who use writing in their daily lives to make change. Next, in cross-generational breakout rooms, participants worked together to draft ideas for initiatives to make a difference in the community through writing: groups came up with caring ideas, like a community pen pal project in the midst of the pandemic and an “Ask an Elder” project to connect young people and aging adults. These ideas are now informing plans for future community writing center programming.

This collaborative workshop is just one example of the writing work taking place in Ypsilanti, Michigan, through YpsiWrites. YpsiWrites originated through a collaboration between [826michigan](#), the [Office of Campus and Community Writing at Eastern Michigan University](#), and the [Ypsilanti District Library](#), and it has been brought to life by members of the community. Staffed by volunteers and housed in all three branches of the library (with all programs happening virtually since March 2020), YpsiWrites has offered drop-in consulting hours, evening and weekend writing workshops for youth and adults, and after-school tutoring in all subjects for youth for more than a year, although the groundwork for the initiative started well before our grand opening in October of 2019.

At the heart of this work is a collaboration between three organizations that have worked separately and in partnership with youth and adults in the Ypsilanti community for many years. [826michigan](#), one of nine active chapters of [826 National](#), works with youth in Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Ypsilanti, holding drop-in hours, in-school writing and book publication projects, and evening/weekend workshops in Ypsilanti since 2005. EMU’s Office of Campus and Community Writing, formed in 2017, houses campus writing initiatives (like the University Writing Center, the Writing Across the Curriculum program, and the [Eastern Michigan Writing Project](#)) and supports community writing in partnership with multiple organizations. Both groups had connections with the Ypsilanti District Library, which also has a robust commitment to community literacy (each of its three locations serving different populations within Ypsilanti’s diverse population).

Leaders within each of these three community groups recognized the benefits that could result from working collaboratively to reach more writers, to learn from each other, and to complement each organization’s strengths. We began our partnership by reaching out through surveys and in-person conversations to other local education non-profits, families, students, and library patrons to assess interests and best approaches for providing writing support community-wide. Based on our findings, we then began piloting different kinds of programming for a range of age groups. In our first full season, we jointly hosted eight writing workshops for youth and adults (including memoir writing, poetry, mysteries, and

a generative writing workshop for older students with disabilities), hosted a dialogue series for writing tutors on the teaching of writing, offered drop-in tutoring hours for adults three days a week and for young people four evenings a week, and celebrated [a publication release](#).

**826michigan (Catherine Calabro Cavin):** For years, 826michigan worked with the YDL to offer weekly creative writing workshops for teens and young students in multiple library branches as well as [publishing opportunities](#) and a regular after-school tutoring program in the YDL downtown branch. Adults consistently contacted us asking to participate in programming alongside students—to get feedback on a novel or a resume, or to seek support as an emerging bilingual adult. As a small organization, our focus has always been on working with young people first. The YpsiWrites partnership connects us to a larger community of writing and resources. Our volunteers, students, and family members of students have the chance to write together in a wide range of programming we would not be able to support on our own. And, just as participants in writing programs benefit from writing alongside writers of all ages and interests, we as community partners grow as we learn from each other in how we train volunteers and structure writing programs to be inclusive and equitable for all community members.

**Campus and Community Writing (Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer):** After several years of working with and seeing the good work 826michigan does, C<sup>2</sup>W saw opportunities to collaborate more directly in the important work of community literacy. For many years, we have worked with both student writers and K through postsecondary faculty. In 2017 the university created the Office of Campus & Community Writing, and Ann and Cathy began reaching out to and cultivating new literacy partners throughout the community.

As we began to do that work, we learned about a community writing center run by writing center staff at Saginaw Valley State University and realized there was an opportunity and potential to create a similar kind of entity in Ypsilanti. We already had an established collaboration with 826michigan and had recently begun working with YDL, so the timing seemed perfect to explore ways to expand community writing support in partnership with these two organizations. The missions of all of our organizations, particularly in regard to community literacy, were certainly aligned. Importantly, EMU was highly supportive of our working more with the community since, like many universities, it was seeking ways to strengthen its own “town-gown” relationships.

**Ypsilanti District Library (Mary Garboden)** In 2018, Ann and Cathy began a conversation between the C<sup>2</sup>W, Ypsilanti District Library (YDL), and

826michigan (with whom we had a strong partnership) to discuss the creation of a community writing center. This did not happen overnight. Over the course of ten months, staff members from the three groups met to discuss and plan the implementation of this center. The survey mentioned above was administered throughout the community and the results showed support for a community writing center, with patron interest in writing support in a range of genres, including resumes, creative writing, memoir, and songs. With the survey results and the expertise of the organizational partners, YpsiWrites was formed and officially launched in October 2019 with kickoff events at all three YDL locations.

After a campaign to recruit volunteers from Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, and surrounding areas, YpsiWrites began operating with a dedicated cadre of volunteers and with staff from the three partner organizations. Until the pandemic required us to move our services online, workshops and tutoring services were offered in person at all three locations, with topics and hours matching the needs of the diverse communities each location serves. In March 2020, we moved all these offerings online, which has even allowed for an expansion of some of the activities. For example, writers from communities beyond Ypsilanti can now participate easily in the workshops YpsiWrites offers, and both the library and YpsiWrites websites have become sources of prompts and resources to support area writers, especially during a time of quarantines and social isolation. We now offer weekly nature writing prompts, instructions and resources for all types of writing, and writing activities connected to library exhibits and special programs (e.g., an online civil rights exhibit).

YpsiWrites partners meet regularly to debrief about past programs and plan new ones. Each partner organization has its own audience/user base and YpsiWrites strives to offer programs that meet the needs and interests of these different audiences. Taking advantage of cross-marketing and each group's built-in audiences, YpsiWrites is able to reach broad groups that none of the individual organizations would be able to reach alone. Programs are planned 2-3 months in advance and promoted in the library's printed newsletter as well as in social media from each partner organization. In between planning sessions, staff members from the partner organizations are in frequent communication about program needs. What we've learned is that the success of YpsiWrites hinges on constant attention, communication, and marketing.

Two ongoing challenges of YpsiWrites are funding and marketing. There is no dedicated funding for YpsiWrites; however, we ran a successful crowdfunding campaign and have drawn from the regular operating budgets of the partner organizations. Sustaining a robust social media and web presence between three different organizational websites and social media accounts has also been an ongoing challenge. The bright side is that YpsiWrites' funding and marketing

challenges have presented opportunities to strengthen our connections and involve the broader community in investing in our work.

## **Conclusion**

YpsiWrites has quickly become a notable community resource that is continually offering new events and initiatives to support and celebrate writers. Even in a little more than a year, the scope has expanded tremendously. But this has not been without effort and constant attention from all of the partner groups. For others who might contemplate developing a similar kind of entity, we recommend a process that, like the one we took, includes careful planning and an assessment of community needs and interests. Surveys work well. There also are many questions to be considered. We conclude with a few questions that can be used to lead discussions, initiate plans, and cultivate collaborations. They include

*What are some ways in which your local community might benefit from writing support offered through a community writing center?*

We initially thought here, for example, of individuals who might be working on job materials such as resumes. Ultimately, patrons expressed an interest in learning about a number of different types of writing, including song writing, grant writing, and picture book writing, to name a few.

*Who, in particular, might have an interest in and/or benefit from this collaboration?*

We found, in our case, that interest spans age groups and generations. In recent holiday writing workshops, for example, we had elementary students, parents of school-age students, and senior citizens.

*With whom might you collaborate to provide community writing support? What might each collaborator provide?*

Again, for us the collaborators came together because of our shared missions and the work we had previously done together. Timing clearly was a factor as well. It just seemed right. Sorting out roles and responsibilities and developing a memo of understanding also can be very helpful.

*What form(s) might this writing support take—a full-fledged writing center, occasional writing workshops, special events, other?*

Every group has different capacities and capabilities. Being realistic about those is important in an undertaking like this—and starting small can be better than overreaching and not being able to sustain programming.

*Where might be the best location(s) for writing support in your community?*  
Libraries are wonderful places for this kind of support, but there are many other possibilities, including community centers and senior centers. We recommend doing what makes the most sense for the community in which you reside and/or are targeting.

*How is a community writing center best supported and sustained?*  
Recruiting and retaining volunteers from the community is essential for a successful community writing center. Having some resources, from partnering organizations if possible and also from committed donors, is important.

Whatever approach is taken, community writing centers create an opportunity to extend writing resources into the community and to reach multiple generations of writers. Our themes for the past two years (*Everyone's a Writer* and *Writing Matters*) express so well what these centers promote and support.