

Service to School

Creating Connections, Creating Democratic Cultures

As the three of us discussed our own experiences as high school students, Whitney admitted that she never experienced much school pride. From her cynical teenage perspective, “school” was a group of students arbitrarily placed together because of geographical boundaries that someone had arbitrarily determined. Even though she served on the yearbook staff and wrote about various school groups and events, Whitney thought of school pride as a forced attempt to bring together a group of students who only attended the school because of where they lived.

Whereas Sara and Jeff felt more connected to their high schools, mostly due to their extensive extracurricular involvements, Whitney’s view of high school is common among adolescents. Her memories serve as an important reminder of the need to provide opportunities that help youth connect to their school. After all, they spend roughly 40 hours each week there! Jeff often jibes that kids are in school for two reasons: Their friends are there, and it’s required by law. Schools need to be places that students find not only safe, but also engaging, significant, and fun places where they want to be and where they engage in personally and socially significant work with other people that they could not do on their own.

Despite the antipathy that many students may feel about their forced attendance, schools are rich potential sites for community, for collaboration and research, for deep learning that can be pursued enthusiastically with something akin to joy. Jeff challenges the preservice and inservice teachers involved in BSWP programs to make sure that the unique social potential of the classroom and school is leveraged each day. He advises teachers, “Make sure that you are engaging students in activities that require us all to be together, and that require our complementary perspectives and contributions, otherwise the unique power and potential of school as a social space/third space is not being actualized.”

As a site for service, school can function as a microcosm of the larger community and society, allowing students to develop habits of mind and engage in literacy practices that they can transfer to their participation as democratic citizens. At school, students can explore, map, participate, and practice enacting their knowledge and skills in an intimate context with which they are familiar and where they spend a good portion of their time.

To this end, many BSWP teachers have involved their students in community and school history projects.

DOCUMENTING SCHOOL HISTORY

Students can become actual historians when they are assigned school history projects. They conduct meaningful primary research, learn how the current moment has been shaped over time and by a variety of people and factors, build understanding between past and current students and teachers, and learn the value of documenting institutional memory. School history projects create a third space wherein students serve their school communities and develop research, analysis, and writing skills that are central to the next generation of standards and assessments like those associated with the CCSS.

School history projects serve the larger community, too, as Whitney's memories of a lost school history illustrate. She fondly remembers her elementary school in Roy, Utah: two buildings separated by a large asphalt playground. The front building housed 1st and 2nd grades, the school cafeteria, and the gymnasium, and the back building contained kindergarten and 3rd- through 6th-grade classrooms. Built in the early 1900s, the front building served as the original site for the elementary school. Old wood doors with paned glass windows and brass doorknobs with keyholes, brass coat hooks in the hallway, and the smell of a building with history—Whitney remembers the intimate details of the building where some of her most important educational experiences took place.

Although most of her later elementary school years would be spent in classrooms in the newer back building, she always loved going to lunch or physical education in what she and her peers called “the old building.” In 6th grade, she and a friend discovered a hidden door behind the curtains on the gymnasium stage, and opened it to find a room filled with shelves of roller skates—the kind that used metal keys to adjust the fit. Their curiosity led them to continue exploring the building that they thought they had known so well, and they discovered a door that opened to a long, narrow stairway and into a basement filled with storage from the school's past. In those hidden spaces of the school, Whitney wondered who had been at the school before her, and when the old building became too small to accommodate all students.

During her college undergraduate years, the old building was torn down and a new addition was built onto the newer building in the back, leaving only a small parking lot in front. Although Whitney was in college, she was sad to see the beautiful historic building demolished, no longer a familiar landmark that she passed regularly. Even though Whitney did not experience what she would call school “pride,” she was intensely interested in the history of her school as part of the community and her own place in that process.

Returning to Utah to visit family, she now drives past Roy Elementary and still feels a twinge of sadness. When Whitney thinks about the space that housed her and countless other students, she recognizes it as a rich research site with institutional memories worthy of preservation. Although she didn't have the opportunity to document school history in her own youth, Whitney intentionally provides opportunities for her students to document the histories of their schools. Many of our Writing Project fellows, such as Andrew Porter (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011), have followed the model in Figure 5.1 to pursue school history or ethnography projects, providing service to school by creating and sharing archival research documents and displays.

One of Whitney's students, Austin, compiled an extensive body of research as part of a school history project designed to document the history of the Women's Studies program at Marshall University. Austin's reflective excerpt illuminated what we believe is possible for students of any grade level to experience:

It is my hope that this information serves as a useful starting point for anyone else interested in the history of WS [Women's Studies] at Marshall and with that goal in mind, I have structured this portfolio for ease of use. It will be made clear what information has been verified and what information has not. Any unknown information that I believe may present further research opportunities or require further verification will be indicated by red font and will also be accompanied by a short explanatory note if necessary to ensure clarity. Further discussion of potentially rewarding areas of research will be included in the reflection. If this portfolio serves as useful aid, to whatever degree, for any future research I will consider it a great success.

Austin saw himself as a participant in a larger and ongoing conversation. He valued his research not in terms of individual ownership, but as part of a continual shared process. He saw his project not as a finished project, but as a knowledge artifact that was extensible, revisable, transferable, usable, and archivable (see Wilhelm, 2007 and 2012b, for more on knowledge artifacts). In this way, knowledge artifacts are part of an ongoing dynamic, interpersonal process leading into the future. Austin did not define success based on his individual effort or project grade, but by how he shared and built knowledge with others and created connections among past, present, and future students. He saw himself as entering a conversation as a member of a "community of practice" in a "third space" of possibility.

Through guided reflection, students can situate their experiences in disciplinary conversations and consider how to apply their knowledge in broader contexts. Students then recognize how disciplinary conversations have application in and bearing on the world beyond school. School then functions as a place where focused knowledge making and transferable learning happen, rather than a contained place for learning information. They move beyond deterministic views of information to an understanding that knowledge creation is dynamic and ongoing.

Figure 5.1. School History Project Template

A school history research project guides students to research and document institutional history for purposes of preservation and/or analysis and as a springboard for future action. Research focuses on gathering facts about the school, creating a repository of written artifacts, and finding people from whom students can potentially gather oral histories. Such a project also requires students to “jigsaw” the research, to teach each other and help each other reflect and see connections across the different sets of findings, and then combine all of these findings into a coherent whole, representing and publishing this whole in some kind of archival electronic and multimodal document.

Essential Question: What is the history of our school, and how does this history reflect and/or shape the culture of our community?

Subquestion: How could the history of our school be used to transform the future of our school and community?

Guiding Questions

- What year did the school open, and what else was happening locally at that time? Nationally? Globally?
- How was the school name chosen?
- Who was the first principal?
- Who else has served as principal?
- Who were the first teachers?
- Who else has taught at the school?
- Who served as staff when the school opened?
- Which current teacher has taught at the school the longest and what changes have taken place during his/her years teaching for the school?
- What major policies have been implemented? For what purposes? With what effects?
- What events has the school sponsored? With what outcomes?
- What fundraisers has the school held? For what purposes and effects?
- What programs have been performed at the school?
- What significant athletic, artistic, or social and civic events are related to the school?
- What have teachers and students of this school gone on to do and what contributions have they made to the school culture, the local community, and the wider culture?
- What stories can school alumni tell us?

Prompts for Reflection

Through reflection, students consider their research, position themselves within the history of the school, see how they are part of something larger, and reflect on their ability to make contributions and/or changes based on the knowledge they have acquired.

- What contributions have you made/do you make to our school? This includes extracurricular activities (teams, clubs, organizations) as well as attitudes and behaviors in classes and hallways.
- What was most surprising in your research?
- What new questions has your research raised for you? What additional research could help you find answers to those questions?
- What connections can you make between your experiences and observations as a student at our school and your research?
- What did you think about our school before you started your research? What do you think about our school now?
- How has your school reflected and shaped community culture? Reflected or resisted larger cultural forces? Worked toward change and transformation?
- What resources are there in the school's traditions and history that could be used to move mindfully into the future?
- What was most valuable to you about the research you did?
- What might the research our class has done show about future directions for our school?

Sharing and Archiving Research

Projects may assume a number of forms, depending on grade-level abilities and the aims and scope of the assignment given. Typically the final artifacts involve electronic and multimodal elements. Some possibilities include:

- Collection of oral histories
- Repository of written artifacts (each artifact might be framed by student writing)
- Repository of other knowledge artifacts: videos, artwork, photo collections, music, and so on
- Permanent museum displays—both physical and digital—that make room for future students to add to them
- Performance piece for presentation to the school and/or community

Connections to CCSS and Next Generation Standards

Depending on the project, students might:

- produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience;
- develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach;
- use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish various forms of compositions and to interact and collaborate with others; and
- conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS AS DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS

In *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher*, Todd DeStigter (2001) defined democracy as “a way of interacting with others by which all people have the desire, ability, and opportunity to participate in shaping their individual and collective lives” (p. 12). As he further explained, democracy is “a process of associated living in which individuals participate in deciding what their world should be like, in acting to pursue these aims, and in sharing equitably in the consequences of that action” (p. 12). DeStigter’s definition demonstrates that democracy (like the creation of knowledge artifacts) is an ongoing dynamic interpersonal process. Democracy requires collaborative inquiry, research, dialogue, and connection, all leading toward transformative possibilities. If we conceive of school as a microcosm of the larger society, then school is a democratic space where teachers and students are democratic citizens imagining new ways to interact in the current moment and in the future.

In “A Curriculum Framework for Active Democratic Citizenship Education,” Ahmet Do’anay (2012) examined the National Council for Social Studies’ list of qualities of democratic citizens, which we draw on, adapt, and connect to the CCSS in Figure 5.2. Effective citizens, as these qualities illuminate, are mindful, lifelong learners who engage in inquiry as a key literacy practice for participating in ongoing democratic conversations.

Service to school can further solidify the sense of association among students and accountability to themselves, others, and ongoing cultural institutions as they expand their vision of school and collaborate to foster a safe and vibrant school culture.

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE

Robert D. Ramsey (2008) suggested that “[t]he definition of a healthy school culture has to be as fluid, flexible, amorphous, and adaptable as . . . well, as a healthy school culture” (p. 19). Although flexible in definition, a healthy school culture has certain attributes, regardless of context. Ramsey identified attributes of such a culture: It works for everyone; is principle-driven and values principles over policies; values connections, collaboration, and open communication; is a learning culture; prioritizes respect and each person’s dignity; is fear-free or fear-reduced; and as a place of joy, is driven by passion. A good tool for examining school culture, Ramsey’s list of attributes can be used to help students and teachers illuminate where change to school culture is most needed, and to ask existential questions that address curricular issues and standards in ways that will lead to service to the school (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2. Qualities of Effective Civic Participants

| Effective Civic Participants | CCSS College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace their responsibility for the well-being of themselves, their families, and their communities • Collaborate well with others and are concerned for the greater good | <p><i>They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.</i></p> <p><i>They prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</i></p> <p>[Students are better positioned to recognize their communities as diverse groups of people with a range of perspectives and needs. They are able to work respectfully and effectively with people from diverse backgrounds to foster the well-being of their communities.]</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are knowledgeable about the people, history, and traditions that have shaped their communities, their country, and the world | <p><i>They build strong content knowledge.</i></p> <p><i>They comprehend as well as critique.</i></p> <p>Students do not just learn surface facts but are able to inquire, make connections, and interrogate the “whys” and “hows” behind history and traditions.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continually seek information from varied sources and perspectives as they consider issues and move toward addressing or solving issues • Analyze and evaluate information they read, watch, hear, and see | <p><i>They value evidence and evidentiary reasoning.</i></p> <p>[Students actively and inclusively seek to understand the different ways participants in a cultural conversation are situated, and understand that addressing issues and solving problems takes time and careful consideration.]</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask meaningful questions of themselves and about their world | <p><i>They demonstrate independence.</i></p> <p>[Students take ownership over their learning as self-directed and lifelong learners. They see learning as an ongoing process that happens in and out of school and as a service to both self and others.]</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address issues in innovative ways and develop creative solutions to problems whenever possible | <p><i>They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.</i></p> <p>[As independent learners, students are able to consider what's at stake and for whom when addressing issues, and can develop creative solutions by considering their audience, task, purpose, and disciplinary knowledge.]</p> |

Figure 5.3. Healthy School Culture Attributes

| Attributes of a Healthy School Culture | Essential/Existential Questions for Inquiry |
|---|---|
| Works for everyone | <p>For whom does the school environment work best; for whom does it not work as well?</p> <p>What can be done to make our current school environment work better for everyone, and for particular subgroups that might be marginalized?</p> |
| Is principle-driven and values core principles over policies and procedures | <p>What are the most important principles that guide our actions?</p> <p>What <i>should</i> be the most important principles guiding all school activity and decisionmaking? What would it take for us to act on those principles on a daily basis?</p> <p>How do we “do business” at school and how does this accord with our values and principles?</p> |
| Values connections, collaboration, and open communication | <p>What connects us to one another, regardless of how different we may seem?</p> <p>How can we draw on our connections to work together and dialogue across difference?</p> <p>How can diversity bring vitality and strength to our school?</p> |
| Is a learning culture | <p>What is learning and what encourages it to happen?</p> <p>What does an ideal learning environment look like?</p> <p>What would we need to do to create an environment that would allow each learner in our class to thrive?</p> |
| Prioritizes respect and each person’s dignity | <p>What is “personhood” and how does school culture recognize and promote “personhood”? In what ways does school culture work against valuing and recognizing “personhood”?</p> <p>What does it mean to have dignity?</p> <p>How do we create a school environment where everyone has dignity and feels respected?</p> |
| Is fear-free or fear-reduced | <p>What fears do we have at school?</p> <p>How can we use our knowledge of fears to create a safer and more inclusive environment?</p> |
| Is a place of joy and passion | <p>What passions make me, me?</p> <p>What promotes engagement and joy in living and learning?</p> <p>What can school do to promote joy and passion in learning?</p> <p>How can we learn in a way that builds from our passions toward new ones?</p> |

Through service projects focused on transforming school culture, such as Angela Housely's 4th-grade students' efforts to promote friendship and caring and to reform the playground, students identify issues and problems at school, determine methods of intervention for addressing issues and solving problems, implement plans of action to shape a healthy culture for both present and future students, and take measures to increase the potential of the learning environment.

Inquiry into School Culture

Students talk a lot about school. Some of their talk focuses on their learning, but just as much focuses on the social experience in the halls and cafeteria and at recess. Lots of their talk involves critiques of school structures and activities.

When students are activist learners in conversations about school culture, they can move from complaint to commitment. Every critique opens a door toward working for change. Every complaint means they are committed to change, and therefore the conditions for deep commitment and connection to projects that develop new ways of “doing school” and “being in school” already exist. When complaints are reframed as problems to be solved, then students stand back and assume a new perspective from which to observe and interrogate the place where they spend hours each week. They assume an agentive and activist identity vis-à-vis the foregrounded problems.

A service project aimed at serving school community and transforming school culture requires teachers to value bringing students into all stages of the project as collaborators—from identifying problems and defining the scope of the inquiry, to engaging in background research, documenting findings, proposing, implementing, and studying the effects of various changes, and evaluating the level of success and setting a future agenda for themselves or others to take up. Students are treated as novice experts who are being apprenticed into disciplinary expertise and “third space” conversations as well as the possibilities of democratic life—a clear focus of the next generation of standards.

In Figure 5.4, we provide key questions for guiding students to articulate and internalize an existential question based on a teacher's observations of students and school culture.

Depending on the age and/or maturity level of students, the teacher may already have inquiry and social action options for a culminating project. But student ideas should also be solicited early on in a unit. These ideas become goals that can leverage the power of backward planning, because teachers and students can now plan what needs to be learned and realized in service of achieving the culminating projects.

Questions about possible service applications might be incorporated into brainstorming and class discussions that allow students to collaboratively generate potential solutions, actions to take, and documentation to produce. Regardless of approach, inquiry into school culture projects intersects seamlessly with CCSS

Figure 5.4. Service to School Project Template

| Service to School Steps | Questions to Frame Discussion |
|---|---|
| Set the stage for inquiry | <p>What do we notice as an issue or problem?</p> <p>When have you seen or experienced the effects of the problem? How did it make you feel?</p> <p>What is the context of the problem?</p> <p>What are the ways to reframe the problem so it can be seen from another perspective?</p> |
| Make the problem matter | <p>Why is the problem so problematic and worthy of attention?</p> <p>Why might it be important for us to solve the problem—for ourselves and for others?</p> <p>What follows as the consequences and costs of the problem? For different individuals and groups?</p> <p>Who benefits and who loses from the current situation?</p> |
| Brainstorm action and potential solutions | <p>How might the problem potentially be addressed?</p> <p>What challenges will be faced in addressing it?</p> <p>Here are some ways I’ve thought of for us to address or solve the problem. What are some other ways you can think of to address or solve the problem?</p> <p>Are there others outside our class who could also help address or solve the problem? If so, how can they help us? How can we contact them and solicit their input and help?</p> |
| Decide on a course of action and break down the task into steps | <p>What will we do to address or solve the problem?</p> <p>What responsibilities do we each have to help make sure our plan works? Depending on the problem, this might include daily, weekly, or monthly steps.</p> |

| Service to School Steps | Questions to Frame Discussion |
|--|--|
| Establish markers for progress | <p>What will be our signs of progress and accomplishment?</p> <p>How will we know when we are making progress in the short and long term, and how should we keep track of our progress?</p> <p>How will we know when the problem is adequately addressed or solved?</p> |
| Document the results | <p>What is most important about our project for us to share with others?</p> <p>How can we share what we have learned through our project?</p> |
| Some connections with the next generation of standards (e.g. CCSS) | <p>Students can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elicit and value multiple perspectives; • Converse and collaborate with diverse partners; • Consider and develop different problem-solving strategies; • Collaborate on creating real-world projects to address the problem; • Engage in short and extended research projects; • Explore their experiences with the identified problem and their ideas for solutions through drawing or writing opinion/argument pieces; • Share their opinion/argument pieces and participate in collaborative conversation to brainstorm potential solutions to the problem; • Reflect on their experiences and observations through drawing and writing as the project unfolds and they notice the impact of their service; • Make connections between the project and texts they are reading, comparing their points of view with the point of view of an author or narrator; and/or • Apply their knowledge about informational texts as they document the results of their service through the creation of informational texts for others. |

speaking and listening standards that prepare students to effectively participate in conversation and collaboration with diverse partners. The scope of a service to school culture project can also address CCSS writing standards if students are assigned to produce different types of texts or to conduct short or sustained research as part of the project, and can address reading standards as well if students read documents related to their inquiry.

Thinking back again to the way she conceptualized school as an arbitrary grouping of students based on geographic boundaries, Whitney recognizes how the arbitrary grouping is one of the components that makes the potential for transforming school culture so great. Diverse groups of students, with diverse needs and perspectives, can work together to effect change, just as diverse citizens must collaborate to ensure a healthy democratic society.

Reading Made Real. At the junior high where she teaches, BSWP fellow Yoli Gonzales noticed a disturbing amount of bullying taking place. Her 8th-grade reading class had just finished a civil rights unit wherein they had read *The Outsiders*; during the unit many students revealed that they had experienced bullying both in and out of school. Yoli challenged her students with a succinct yet powerful invitation: “Let’s do something.”

With Yoli as their faculty advisor, six students started the Paw Out Bullying Club (the school mascot is a bobcat) with the aim to stop bullying through raising awareness and education about what to do about bullying. The club’s membership grew from 6 to 60; included in its ranks were some students who had once bullied others. Part of the students’ service involved modeling positive behavior for other students, such as assuming a friendly, inclusive demeanor by saying hello in the hallways to everyone, or asking others to stop bullying behaviors when they were observed. The scope of the project increased to creating PSAs, tip sheets for addressing bullying, and a play about addressing the issue of bullying, written and performed by students. The group also went on to make several public presentations about their work to “paw out” bullying.

Paw Out Bullying is a stellar example of a service project that positions students as agentive learners. What students experienced through their reading was not theoretical or distant from them, but real and close to home. Students subsequently transformed their school culture through an application of what they had learned and saw a marked decrease in bullying. Paw Out Bullying also shows how activist learning need not be limited to the school day. Extracurricular activities that emerge from the curriculum and/or school-based issues can intentionally help improve school culture and climate, as well as continuing to develop academic skills (e.g., as students-made public presentations).

Who Cares? Sometimes opportunities for service learning projects present themselves spontaneously. Shari Griffin, a 4th-grade teacher and a Wyoming

Writing Project fellow, unexpectedly launched a service learning project with her students. Shari recalls how it began:

I noticed my annoyance over a sticky note in the hall. It was there when I went to the office and later when I went somewhere else and again on my way back. Then I realized I hadn't bothered to pick it up. . . . Why? Who would?

Shari decided to share this experience with her students, thinking that a simple collective conversation might lead them all to be more likely to pick up trash and create a cleaner and nicer school environment.

A simple conversation was not enough to satiate Shari's inquisitive students. Her 4th-graders had already been empowered through Shari's learning- and learner-centered approach to teaching; student voice and social action were honored, allowing the young learners to experience part of Todd DeStigter's (2001) description of democracy as Shari fostered their "desire, ability, and opportunity to participate in shaping their individual and collective lives" (p. 12) in the classroom. The students were so intrigued by the issue that they wanted to learn more about who did or did not pick up trash in their hallways—and why.

Shari embraced her students' interests and was confident that the as yet unknown teachable moments that would ensue were sure to directly address learning goals or could be connected to these goals. She trusted that authentic data collection and analysis would lead to conversations about civic responsibility and would help meaningfully address upcoming mathematics standards.

With Shari as the guide, her class designed an experiment: They planted various types of trash, ranging from snack wrappers to wadded notebook paper to Kleenex to Band-Aids, in hallway areas. Students took turns pretending to be reading nearby and kept data on the number of people who walked by and the number of people who stopped to pick up the trash. On the second day of data collection, the students started to keep track of the general age of the people who passed by—adult, intermediate, primary—because on the first day they noticed that younger kids seemed to be more likely to pick up trash.

Just like in real experiments, the 4th-graders' research design unfolded in response to trends in the data. Students learned how sometimes data bring more questions than answers. In their efforts to graph their data, the 4th-graders struggled to place data points such as the case of a special education paraprofessional who was helping a boy use his walker. Keeping the boy safe was more important than picking up trash, but how could the students plot that fact when they were seeking to determine who was most likely to be a good school citizen and pick up trash?

Rich conversations unfolded about responsibility. The students were taken aback by the idea that if there was something they didn't want to/shouldn't pick

up (e.g., dirty Kleenex or a gross Band-Aid), then who should? Why should a custodian be the only person responsible? They explored questions such as: Why do people litter? Who should pick up trash? Why don't they? What might encourage people to pick up trash? Is there anything or any time that you shouldn't pick up trash? Rich conversations about issues of citizenship ensued as students developed the skills outlined in the CCSS for mathematics and language arts.

Shari's journey with her 4th-grade students illustrates how existential questions can emerge naturally, without prior planning by the teacher. The end result was students who were better prepared to analyze social issues and who cared enough about what they were learning to launch a campaign to clean up their school.

The Mockingbird School Community Project. Sarah Veigel guides her 9th-grade students to advocate for positive change in both school and community. When her students study Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they learn to be mindful peer responders to one another's thinking and writing, and they pursue service learning projects that include schoolmates who might suffer from exclusion (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). Their service projects extend beyond the school grounds to invite community members into the school who might benefit from an increased sense of community.

In Harper Lee's hauntingly beautiful novel, mockingbirds are innocent and vulnerable, making it especially wrong to cause them harm. Sarah frames the service project by asking students to consider who the mockingbirds in their school and community are, and how they and/or others might assume the role of Atticus, a just man who acts with empathy in a town that is rife with racial tensions. Learning in Sarah's class is couched within an ethics of responsibility: When one acquires knowledge, one has an obligation to apply it. Sarah asks her students, "When you know something, are you now responsible to transform yourself, to line your behavior up with what you know? . . . [D]o you challenge yourself to change your behavior?" (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, p. 4).

Service on a Smaller Scale. Even when a teacher isn't able to implement a larger inquiry unit that focuses on service to school, smaller projects can still be integrated to create connections among students and to positively shape the learning culture. For example, in one of Whitney's classes, students watched Eve Ensler's documentary *What I Want My Words to Do to You*, focused on a writing workshop that Ensler facilitated in a women's correctional facility. In the conclusion, famous actors read the women prisoners' writing aloud, and the camera panned out to show each prison writer's response to the public reading of her work.

Whitney asked her students to use the phrase "What I want my words to do to you" as a springboard for writing their own pieces about the work they wanted their words to do in the world. Names were removed from the pieces and they were distributed so that each student was given another student's piece to read aloud.

Afterward, students reflected on how they had tried to “feel” the other person’s words and perspective as they read, noted the intimate connection they felt to the writer, even without knowing who he or she was.

Whitney further probed students to raise questions about the connections they noticed between the “What I want my words to do to you” pieces and how they might draw on those connections in situations that required talking across differences to create increased understanding and a stronger sense of community in school.

Ethical Arguments for/with Service to School

Service to school projects are excellent ways to develop the habits of mind that are needed for considering, participating in, and writing ethical arguments (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2013). When service is integrated into the curriculum, students’ written arguments can connect to texts that they read as well as integrate research gleaned from primary sources, observations they have made, and their lived experiences. Students see firsthand the effects of thoughtful research and the consideration of evidence as their arguments become the basis for collaborative action that leads to positive change in the school culture.

Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins (1995) defined and examined the concept of “community literacy,” a concept useful for thinking about the intellectual work we ask of students in projects aimed at transforming school culture. Arguing that a crucial but difficult step in community building is creating “an intercultural dialogue that allows people to confront and solve problems across . . . boundaries” (p. 204), they defined community literacy as “a search for an alternative discourse” much like a third space (p. 205). The four primary aims of community literacy are to support:

- social change that involves the use of writing for purposes of action;
- genuine intercultural conversation that allows people to dialogue across differences and seek diverse perspectives to work toward mutual goals;
- a strategic approach to the conversation, helping people as they develop new strategies for decisionmaking;
- inquiry that acknowledges the difficulty of empathy and joint action while examining the conflicts, assumptions, and practices that each person brings to the Burkean parlor (the ongoing cultural conversation) they are entering.

Projects focused on transforming school culture embody the aforementioned aims, acknowledging the inherent complexity of jointly solving problems in sustainable ways.

In problem-solving projects, students can discuss, research, and write about school problems they have witnessed and experienced firsthand, considering a

wide range of explanations, evidence, and options. They also can adopt a reflective stance to consider the why and what behind their own assumptions and values in order to understand the ways their positions affect what they see and inform the decisions they make. Students then can begin to question the broader and ethical implications for their positions in relation to others. In short, students engage in the dynamic process of democracy through problem-solving projects.

In “The Rival Hypothesis Stance and the Practice of Inquiry,” Linda Flower (2000) provided a framework for designing meaningful service projects that hone the skills necessary for democratic citizenship and understanding multiple perspectives (a goal of the CCSS and other next generation standards). When students consider rival hypotheses, they participate in “rivaling,” a process that values a certain “*attitude toward inquiry . . . [and] addresses problems as genuinely open questions*” (p. 30). A strategic approach to inquiry, rivaling “seeks out other voices, alternative interpretations, and their supporting evidence” while generating rival hypotheses that “challenge and conditionalize favored claims” (p. 30). With multiple alternatives on the table, a group can move toward a consensual conclusion that has the greatest positive outcomes and that avoids negative outcomes for as many people as possible.

As a literacy practice, rivaling is ultimately an ethics of argument. It emphasizes the humanity of all stakeholders in a conversation and embodies the “power of softness” as students draw on their own and others’ voices as they learn to “live for people rather than just for things” (Wilhelm & Novak, 2011, pp. 40–41). Researching and writing about real, collectively identified problems that teacher and students “care *about* [are] dealt with within an attitude of solicitous caring *for* one another” (p. 44).

Rivaling embodies the Common Core standards for writing, which value arguments that support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant evidence. Such arguments also proactively respond to competing arguments, which are highlighted by the process of rivaling. Rivaling also incorporates primary and secondary research to find relevant information from multiple sources, and calls on students to use their research purposefully with consideration of their audiences. **Online Figure H** provides the rivaling framework that we have used with middle and high school students to guide them as they generate arguments in consideration of the greatest good.

When students are asked to generate arguments through the rivaling method, the research and writing process can shift from an abstract, assigned academic stance to a concrete, lived accountability stance. Students learn the value of doing research to assume informed positions, recognize and genuinely listen to alternate positions, and make ethical arguments to advocate for changes that can have positive human and environmental consequences in their neighborhoods, communities, and society. These habits of mind are central to effective democratic participation.

FOSTERING COMMUNAL LITERACY PRACTICES

In a world where global connections are rapidly increasing and knowledge is made and shared in public, online spaces, making a shift to writing and research practices that emphasize collaboration is invaluable, if not essential. When conducted in the service of school, research functions less as an isolated, individual, and grade-driven endeavor, and instead becomes a dynamic and communal literacy practice.

Student writers experience an authentic sense of audience when they create texts and knowledge artifacts that represent their work, that speak responsively to others and to rival hypotheses, as these can be shared with school officials, parents, peers, and the local community. Through sharing their work, students can also teach and incite peers in other classes and grades to consider ways in which they, too, can provide service to the school to create a healthy, vibrant environment. Such texts and artifacts are visible signs of accomplishment and “proof positive of learning.”

Students are also empowered through school-based research as they become experts on the cultural conversation and recognize their activist potential to transform culture through thoughtful inquiry that leads to planning, research, reflection, and action. When we think of some of the most transformative moments in history, we recognize that they all began with inquiry: Someone questioned the status quo or an injustice, or considered how to meet a challenge or need. Service to school projects teach students to ask *good* questions that lead to in-depth, meaningful research, innovative ideas, and creative solutions, developing habits of mind and ways of acting that are essential to a healthy democracy.