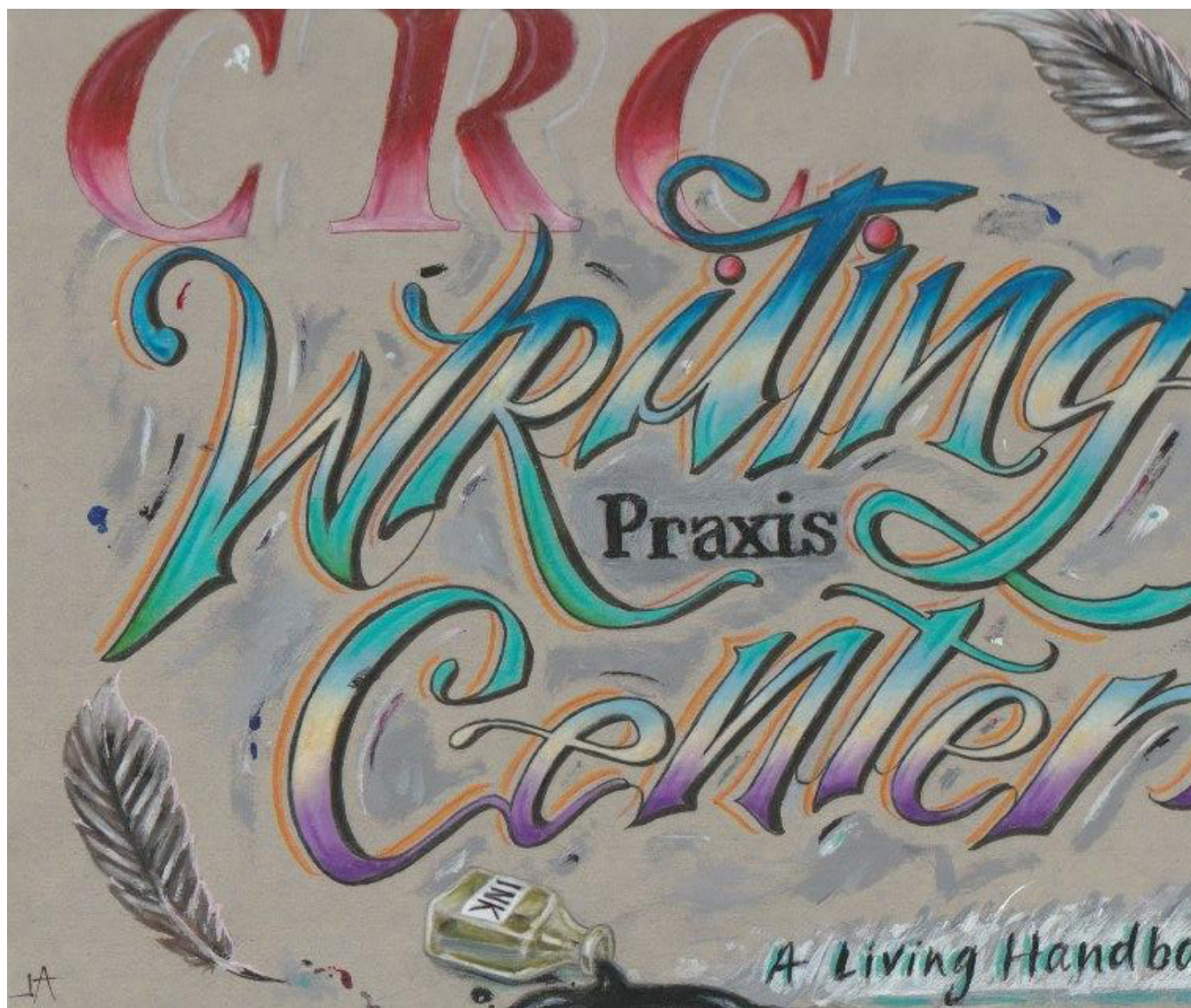




Literacy Sponsorship in Carceral Contexts

The CRC Writing Center Handbook

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Introduction

Literacy sponsorship: who sponsored you?

Please close your eyes. Take a moment to think about how you have come to read this book. What opportunities and experiences in your life have led to you being here in this moment now? Think about your access to education, technology, and literacy. Think back to a time you were taught something important. Do you remember learning to read? Who taught you? Did they believe in you? Did they want you to believe in yourself? Were you allowed to speak your own language in school or at work? Did you have teachers that were kind and supportive? Did adults help you with your homework growing up?

Your first literacy experiences as a child shaped you in ways that are not just educational, but also emotional, neurological, and political. The way you acquired the skills to communicate can be predicted by and predictive of your position in social hierarchies. Educational decisions about how and when you became literate, and who sponsored that process of literacy acquisition, were made by teachers and boards of education who based those decisions on ideologies about intelligence, obedience, productivity, and value. Those ideologies may have been self-fulfilling prophecies.

In this book we acknowledge that violent literacy sponsors play roles in a larger network of intersectional oppressions, and that beginning with early literacy education, these sponsors indoctrinate students into accepting a particular place in a social hierarchy. We need more literacy sponsors who can challenge this indoctrination and help students develop their self-expression and communication with others through collaboration.

This handbook reflects a practical long-term project: the construction of a Writing Center at California Rehabilitation Center, in which CRC Writing Associates tutor other students as they all work to get their AA and BA degrees. This Writing Center is being created through Inside-Out courses in Writing Center Pedagogy taught by faculty at the Claremont Colleges and at Cal State University, San Bernardino. Students taking those courses live inside the prison, where the classes are taught, or outside the prison in Claremont or San Bernardino, but they have all been working together for nearly two years on this vision of a collaborative writing space. Our goal is that the CRCWC will contribute to a much-needed intervention in literacy practices and educational systems inside and outside the prison. All of our CRC Writing Center tutors will reenter society with the ability to facilitate communal literacies wherever they might choose to do so.

The handbook itself began as a classroom assignment typical of Inside-Out courses, one involving knowledge of existing Writing Center scholarship, the production of analytical and creative writing, and the ability to collaborate on a group project. However, as we wrote the handbook, we realized that it had quickly overrun its boundaries and become a collection of innovative approaches to collaborative learning and mutual literacy sponsorship. We decided to expand the 47-page handbook into a full length mixed-genre book on writing, speaking, collaborative learning in carceral contexts, and radical inclusivity in academic spaces.

Literacy acquisition in spaces of patriarchal white supremacy

A popular definition of literacy is the ability to read and write. However, we prefer an expanded and nuanced definition that includes the ability to navigate within a specific realm of knowledge, experience, and expertise. Literacy is a sociohistorical phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by its participants (Vieria et al., 36). Stephen Fox defines “literacy as the ability to make meaning with written language in a particular group or community that prizes that ability” (Fox, 25). This means that literacy can be studied and understood as a collection of practices used by cultural groups rather than a skill that individuals either possess or do not possess. This means, too, that we must consider oral literacies in addition to written. Many come to understand literacy through family, friends, and community. To an extent literacy is rooted in identities. In this sense literacy is related to a hierarchical system of power, meaning it can lead to social isolation, and exclusion from resources. This exclusion is often perpetrated by “literacy sponsors” (Brandt 2001), who are figures that positively or negatively encourage literacy development in others while benefiting from that process themselves.

Acquiring literacy is a learning process and often involves a process of communication between two parties. Oftentimes educational institutions are primary locations where this process happens and where folks encounter literacy sponsors. In order to learn a skill, people have to understand the jargon that is used. Similarly, to learn to read and write in English, one must be able to understand the basic instructions, but those instructions are not always given in English. Specifically in California, in the late 90's, legislation was passed that outlawed bilingual education, forcing students to use only English in classrooms, with the goal that English would replace their home languages—rather than the goal being to create multilingual learners. How does limiting the language that is allowed in classrooms affect the possibilities for literacy and restrict those who don't speak the dominant language from acquiring necessary skills to navigate certain environments?

Damian describes a literacy experience in 2nd Grade in South Dakota

I was singled out from the rest of the Native children. Probably because I had finished the readings for the entire grade. Growing up, I spoke a mixture of French, Sioux, and English. I didn't realize that I spoke differently from the other children. But this apparently made me stand out enough to go to a “special class.” The school informed my mother that I was in a bilingual class, but that was a lie. The fact was that the class was a brainwashing operation meant to strip me of anything other than English.

I felt special, as if the school was giving me something special, because it was just two more students and I. The small room was filled with high-tech equipment for the time: reel-to-reel tapes, a movie projector that showed us English actors teaching “proper” speech, microphones, headphones; we had special books—German and Spanish for my classmates, and a Lakota-English dictionary for me. We were made to think in English; they used games where we had to respond in English as fast as possible. They gave us trinkets and sometimes candy when we performed well.

This made me want to please my teacher, an English woman who reminded me of Mary Poppins. She always smiled, but looking back I realized how spiteful and full of contempt she was. She would say things like “that was good; but next time try not to say it like a dirty red savage.”

She did the same for my classmates; one she called a dirty Mexican, and the other a bloody kraut. But she said it so sweetly that we wanted to please her all the more. When she told me I spoke like a proper Englishman, I was proud of my accomplishment.

I don't remember her name, but she was an important literacy sponsor in my life. The program eventually re-wrote the language center in my brain, and I continue to struggle to regain the languages I inherited from my ancestors.

Why did Damian have to erase his other languages from his brain when he was already highly advanced in his reading? This approach, and the way his literacy sponsor treated him, clearly demonstrate the goal of the intervention by his school: linguistic assimilation to English. The fact that such assimilation would isolate Damian from his peers and his community seems to be an intentional part of the process. His ability to communicate was in fact damaged greatly by this intervention rather than expanded.

Academic literacy, or white English

In the U.S., there is an emphasis on using white mainstream English in professional and academic settings. By framing literacy in white mainstream English as necessary for success in these areas, white supremacy upholds itself by framing while language as the most useful, easiest to understand, and valuable within the capitalist system. As Damian discussed earlier, being forced to kill a literacy within yourself and replace it with a hostile one, one which creates the rhetoric of colonialism, is isolating and discouraging. However, that is not how literacies work; they cannot logically be arranged in a hierarchy. Literacies are ways of experiencing the world. To stifle the amazing diversity of literacies would be to lose the stories of generations and the knowledge encoded in the ways we understand reality and the ways we speak, write, read, and think about it.

We'd like each of you to think of a time you were asked to perform a task on a computer and you had absolutely no idea how to do it. Maybe it was the first time you tried to share your screen on a Zoom call. In the past few years, those members of global society who were able to work or learn remotely (or whose children were learning remotely) experienced what we would call a "mass literacy event," which is the experience of many people simultaneously learning a new mode of verbal communication either because of a change in technology or, in the case of COVID, a global crisis. In the process of learning how to use remote technology, many people re-experienced the frustration and isolation that accompanies the acquisition of literacy. When literacy sponsors don't first ascertain individuals' baseline knowledge of a particular literacy, they end up teaching the literacy using jargon that a portion of the learners will not understand. This creates more frustration and alienation in those who were not given adequate literacy sponsorship. When students who already feel marginalized in academic spaces are unable to communicate or participate, they may reject literacy acquisition altogether, which can permanently place them outside of discourse communities that might help them develop and succeed.

As you are all aware, communication barriers within the classroom setting are not a new concept that arose from our ever-increasing dependence on technological literacy. In fact,

some barriers have been intentionally implemented by the people in power to gain and maintain control over certain groups of people. The actual literacy sponsors, often teachers, are not “the people in power” but are often complicit in upholding the barriers.

Danny’s experience with a rule-breaking literacy sponsor:

I remember getting ready for my first day of class. I’m nervous because I did not know how to speak English. Upon arriving at my designated classroom, I entered looked around and realized that the class consisted of African American and Latino kids. There were two teachers; Ms. Green, who was African American and Ms. Zaccarias, who was Mexican.

When the class started and the teachers discussed what the objectives for the day were, I was confused. I could hear what the teachers were saying but could not comprehend the English language. When Ms. Zaccarias came over to my desk after seeing me puzzled and asked me in English if I “understood what we were doing.” I replied in Spanish that I did not speak English. My teacher Ms. Zaccarias, in a mild manner translated the assignments in Spanish. In addition, she had me sit by other students who were Spanish-speaking, and said I could complete all the assignments in Spanish and that if I needed any additional help, I could seek her out.

This initial “Literacy Sponsor” experience was so instrumental in my educational journey as it encouraged me to continue with my studies. What is still unclear to this day is whether my teacher, Ms. Zaccarias, violated any rules or standard operating procedures by allowing me to do the classroom assignments in Spanish. However, what I do know is that she had the Spanish-speaking students’ best interests at heart. Ms. Zaccarias cultivated a learning environment that was inclusive and participatory for all students. In turn, this validated me as a person and student as it made me realize that I was literate, but just lacked the ability to speak in English. Eventually, I became fluent in English and able to do all my assignments in English.

Jorge’s narrative of the way in which he was introduced to English when his family first moved from Mexico to California:

Back then, I was a teenager and I was enrolled in high school. Most of my classes were conducted in English, I think that this was because it was believed that a fully immersive process was to be effective in my English learning journey. But to be honest, this was very difficult for me because I did not understand a single word that was being spoken. I was also in two English learning classes that were supposed to help with my transition from Spanish to English, but I learnt English in those classes because there were many other Spanish speaking students that would help me understand words that I didn’t know. The rest of my other classes were only spoken in English. And from all of the classes, I believe that my history class was the toughest one of them all because my teacher had always expected me to learn history completely in English from the start when I had no idea what everything that was being thrown at me meant. It probably would have helped if I had the chance to understand what I was listening to, so I would gradually begin to make sense either by knowing certain words or getting help from another schoolmate. Sadly, every time I tried to do that I was yelled at and as you can already imagine there was no way for me to argue my case because I couldn’t speak English at the moment. I felt like I had to work twice as hard as others to understand most of my classes. And

I'm not going to deny how frustrated I felt for not being able to express the way I was feeling at the moment, and this even brought me to wanting to drop out of high school which I eventually did. Though I understand now that my history teacher probably believed he was doing the right thing, because he was probably taught to teach this way. So he didn't know any other way of helping his students appropriately learn both his class and English.

As we can see, these stories exemplify how the educational system can either be harmful or beneficial depending on circumstance and situation. Systems like these can really affect the way some people view that specific avenue, in this case education. A bad experience can prevent an individual from pursuing a career that requires further education; a good experience on the other hand can lead to a person fulfilling all of his academic goals. We also see how a system that is intended to be beneficial can turn out to be really oppressive, promote forced assimilation, and disregard the culture and language of a person as they struggle to acquire the English language.

Having to adhere to standard English may be difficult for some; in Jorge's experience in school, learning English was a challenge that left a horrible impression of school. Linguistic justice advocates challenge the notion that students should strictly conform to this standard and that forced assimilation should not be exercised in schools. There are valid arguments on both sides that suggest there can be a combination of both, learning English in order to promote equality within literacy. They say you must master the rules before you go ahead and break them, but the argument continues especially when we consider the negative consequences of acculturation and assimilation. There is always room to grow, especially in systems that are created to benefit people. We must examine every potential roadblock and/or successful element of a system and either change or continue to build on it. Danny's experience exemplifies the proper use of teaching pedagogy that fosters language acquisition, was that teacher breaking the rules or being a good teacher.

The politics of literacy acquisition

As we can see through the shared experiences of Danny, Jorge, Damian, and the others before them- we come to the idea that the process of Literacy acquisition is intentional and inherently political. All technologies come packaged with a set of politics: if those technologies by themselves are not inherently political, the conditions in which they are created and in which they circulate in society are political and this politics in turn influence their uses in society and profoundly change the ways in which messages are created, received and used.

Literacy acquisition has been made more or less accessible to certain individuals by employing technical jargon, mandating standardized English and other practices which discourage bilingual or multilingual speakers, as seen in Jorge's experience. Limiting the language allowed in classrooms to standard English forces non-English speakers to commit to the emotional labor associated with language assimilation. Hence, uncovering the hidden political dynamics behind the process of literacy creation can reveal how resources are spent in ways which turn literacy into an intentional tool of oppression or liberation.

A concept called the translation model is helpful for conceptualizing the ways that literacies work together. The translation model of literacy recognizes that reading, writing, and communication are always acts of translation, even within languages and codes. This concept

that communication always requires interpretation, called linguistic friction, is useful for discussing how literacy functions to uphold systems of domination in America. When the education system, capitalism, and colonial mindsets frame white mainstream English as a superior literacy, the knowledge created by other literacies are devalued. Not only will the diversification of linguistic ecosystems disrupt the systems which uphold systems of domination, but it will also expand and enrich communication, history, and the realities we experience.

Legend's lifesaving literacy acquisition

I grew up in Richmond California which has always been a city known for its violence, unemployment, unaffordable housing, prostitution, drugs, and homicides. We've held California's highest murder rates on multiple occasions. The socio-economic status of my community was between low income and non-existent income. The life expectancy for African American males was extremely low in my community. Many of my closest friends were killed or murdered before ever getting the opportunity to see the age of 18. The concept of literacy just didn't exist in my community; nor did college. We were always focusing on trying to stay alive so we could see another day. Gang members and drug dealers were honored in my neighborhood, due to the tangible materials that were acquired by illegal means. It was hard to dream within the realms of a never ending nightmare. I remember getting exposed while becoming desensitized to the trials and tribulations of my environment. It was at this pivotal moment that I began seeking new ways to escape reality, which directed me towards discovering the creative writing ability within myself that became my quantum of solace. Rapping ... gives me a voice to bring awareness to social issues and injustices.

Tony's literacy sponsorship

When I first came to prison I did not realize the stigma surrounding prisoners as being "illiterate" and I myself became aware of the controlling theme very quickly. I came to prison with a couple of literacies – some good – some bad. However, when I started college things began to change for me because I was able to stack up success one class at a time. People would ask me about college and I became known as the "college guy". I naturally embraced the role of helping and encouraging people to enroll into college. Some guys were nervous, some had a fear of failing, and some just did not believe in themselves. These were all things that I felt at one time, so I encouraged them to do like I did and build success one class at time. I enjoyed the role of helping others because it made me feel good to be that bridge for people seeking to find change through education. I helped many navigate their journey and gave encouragement when needed because all our lives most of us in here had been told we were not "good enough". Seeing the change in some people has made my time in prison very fulfilling and for me it is a way to give back and balance the wrongdoings of my past.

Social stigmas and literacy sponsorship in the CRC Writing Center

Social labels are assigned to individuals who have failed to assimilate the cultural norms of behavior, including learning to read and mastering "standard English." Once a label is assigned, justified or not, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is an idea that becomes true when acted upon. So the negative impacts that affect formerly incarcerated persons tend

to perpetuate. When an individual's self-concept and behavior begin to change after their actions are labeled by members of society, the individual might begin to fulfill the role of the label as an act of rebellion against the society that has labeled that individual as such. Basically, if society labels one as an outcast and treats them as such then do not be surprised when they start acting out that role.

How can one overcome the negative impacts associated with social labeling? One of the ways to transcend the negative effects of social labeling is to become aware of the cultural views. That is why education is paramount in the rehabilitative process because it helps open the mind to how oppression works and the colonial wounds that are still healing to this day. Only then can one have a better chance to not reoffend because most people do not want to willingly play a role that perpetually puts them behind bars.

The CRC Writing Center is meant to serve tutees taking classes and producing work for college classes. However, the Writing Center is also meant to challenge linguistic hegemony. One of the biggest dilemmas we face is how to be a radical space that celebrates a diversity of literacies while also serving the needs of people who seek assistance for academic writing. How do we balance playing the game and changing the game? In the Writing Center, writers are made aware of the power of their dialects, of the cultural history and significance they hold, and **they** come to understand the potential they have to disrupt linguistic hegemony.

To do this, we strive to make the Writing Center welcoming and non-judgmental. It's hard to ask for help, invalidating tutees will not give them confidence or incentivize them to return. Tutors are soundboards to bounce ideas off of, an extra set of eyes with a fresh perspective. Going to the writing center does not hinge on the condition that a tutee is lesser or unintelligent. Instead, it is a space to celebrate and collaborate across and within dialects.

In this handbook, then, we discuss literacy and literacy sponsorship, but also the ways that collaborative writing affects lives. We talk about the ways that a writing center in a carceral space provides barriers to peer collaboration along with student-created innovations in writing center pedagogy. We also create dialogue with professional writers about writing, editing, and tutoring. Finally, we spotlight the theories of writing center pedagogy and the creative writing around literacy acquisition from our inside student colleagues. The audience for this handbook is not limited to Writing Center directors or consultants, but includes people acquiring literacy, people working in social justice movements around incarceration and carceral education, and people who want to hear a good story or two.

Section 1: Prison Writing Center: Rules, guidelines, goals, vision, statements, and logistics



Illustration by Amelie

Our Mission Statement:

To create a writing center that empowers students, adopts a progressive philosophy towards literacy, promotes meaningful disagreement and discussion, enables students with tools for success for life outside of prison, and creates an all-inclusive environment, providing a safe space and sanctuary for a diverse community, in our unprecedented context of a collaborative writing center in a prison.

DJ on: What is the CRC Writing Center?

A writing center as a space is, I believe, with a level of comfort and trust built on a tutor/tutee partnership. Camaraderie becomes evident when that partnership shows high levels of equality and acceptance, as well as respect and discretion.

I have read how it differed in other prisons and have heard people's personal experiences. Some say that it's better and some speak of average quality. There has been so much that has happened in this past year, and a lot of us feel lucky to have gotten through it; COVID-19, the Vaccine, the Election, and The Black Lives Matter movement. In my experience, the writing center is a much needed, great space.

It's been a hell of a year and it's only 1 third over. But the effort of the staff and really anyone involved was nothing short of magnificent. Education is difficult for many more reasons than those of which have been a hindrance thus far this year in prison. It's a different kind of experience one would rarely gain for someone like me, mainly because it's my 1st and last time in here.