Part I: Preliminary Information

Title: Rewriting Injustice in Alamance County: Fostering Youth Agency and Community Engagement Through Social Justice Writing

Abstract:
      Virtual schooling, educational disparities, and increased community tensions around local and national inequalities have wrought havoc on the lives of young people in Alamance County. The power of youth voices to speak against the forces of social injustice is considerable (Applegarth 2020, Flower 2008, Ingalls 2012, Jocson 2006), but youth in Alamance County are largely silent. This Leadership Prize project seeks to amplify and empower youth voices through a six-week creative writing for social justice workshop rooted in the leadership strategy of intercultural inquiry. This project will celebrate and create space for youth voices by publishing a bound collection of their work and hosting a virtual public reading event. Analysis of youth writing will provide insight into the areas of tension, passion, and insight that Alamance County teenagers bring to our community's most pressing social justice issues and will provide a jumping off point for intercultural dialogue and change.

Part II: Problem Description and Personal Statement

Problem Description:
      As we reflect on the year 2020, we can see nationally, and more locally in Alamance County, the rifts that racial inequality, confederate monuments, food deserts, lack of access to quality healthcare, and widespread systemic injustice have caused in the community. The students at the Alamance Burlington School System Early College go to school seven minutes away from a Confederate Statue that has started a conversation about racism as far away as the United Kingdom, where the British new source *The Guardian* has reported about the incidents of racism in Graham and throughout the county (Madeson 2020). On September 19th, Alamance County Taking Back Alamance County, an organization that the Southern Poverty Law Center has identified as neo-Confederate, drove throughout Alamance County—including Elon University's campus—shouting racial and sexist slurs and threatening the safety of community members and Elon students (Norcross and Terry 2020). As recently as October 31, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have reported about incidents of police brutality in Alamance County. These incidents of racism and unrest have opened up a conversation about rifts in the community and the country, but youth voices have largely felt excluded from this conversation. We know that in situations of community turmoil, such as with gun violence and the March for Our Lives movement, youth have the potential to be vital contributors to social justice and community self-examination (Applegarth 2020, Flower 2008, Ingalls 2012, Jocson 2006). Young people are capable individuals, and they have the potential to bring their voices to these issues (Applegarth 2017, 2020), but they lack the audience, opportunity to be heard and taken seriously, and the educational space to tell their versions of the story. In short, youth would be valuable contributors to intercultural dialogue, but their voices are largely absent and ignored.
      Additionally, the pandemic has exacerbated the already significant disengagement that teenagers experience in school. In 2016, research from Gallup was already pointing to the fact that, "The more years students are in school, the greater their 'disengagement'" (Warner 2016) and "The number of students classified as 'disengaged' is increasing over time'" (Warner 2016).

Thus, in a pre-pandemic world the high school age student was already the most susceptible to becoming hopeless and discouraged in school (Warner 2016). Now, research from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) points to the impact of "chronic absenteeism" and "reduced learning time" that has negatively impacted student learning and development (García and Weiss 2020). This same research from the EPI notes that "research on homeschooling shows that it works well for students for whom intentional, personalized, and sufficient resources are available" (García and Weiss 2020). Students that do not have these "intentional, personalized, and sufficient resources" are not situated to succeed in the virtual learning environment.

My project provides a counterpoint to these problems by breaking through the Zoom and hybrid schedules that currently litter public education and creating a space for students to engage with self-identified community issues. Through a 6-week creative writing for social justice workshop incorporated into the Alamance Community College Early College program's 10th grade World Literature class, my partner teacher and former Leadership Prize recipient Courtney Kobos and I will create the necessary space to empower students voices through creative writing and grant them the power to articulate and advocate for the needs of their communities. When students are given the tools, time, and space to write about social justice issues, they are able to creatively and intelligently express opinions on the causes and issues that feel most critical to them, strengthen their individual agency, and hone their academic and non-academic writing skills (Flower 2008, Ingalls 2012, Jocson 2006, Lindenman and Lohr 2018).

Take for example Shirley Lyle, a ninth-grade student who participated in community writing programming at the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center (Flower 2008). When Shirley first begins the program, which pairs up adult community leaders with mostly older high school students, she is timid and often sidelined (Flower 2008). Like teenagers in Alamance County, Shirley was grappling with incidents of racism that were prevalent in her Pittsburgh neighborhood. However, her participation in the program allows Shirley to write creatively as a means of expressing her experiences with racist policing practices in her neighborhood, leading her to write a piece called "The Racist Cop in My Neighborhood" (Flower 2008). Not only does she detail a personal incident of racism, but she also reflects on how "That summer was the most heated summer I can remember. Maybe I began to notice because I was becoming a young adult and going out more" (Flower 2008). In this part of her creative nonfiction piece, Shirley is learning to analyze her own development and assess what that means for her as an individual community member. In addition to fostering a better understanding of self, "The Racist Cop in My Neighborhood" later becomes the foundation for a community dialogue on policing in Pittsburgh, and Shirley begins to lead and mentor other students learning to write for change at the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center (Flower 2008).

Or consider Antonio, a 17-year-old student who dealt with gang violence and death in his Bay Area community for most of his life. Throughout his high school career, Antonio participated in Poetry for the People and Youth Speaks, poetry programs that exist both inside and outside of the school setting. Participating in creative writing workshops with a strong community emphasis helped him have "membership in learning settings both in and out school" (Jocson 2006). This is because participating in poetry programming gave Antonio the space to learn lessons on workshopping pieces and creating urgency. These lessons helped Antonio develop both academically and creatively, and gave him space to write poems such as "No One Cares," where he was able to address the apathy of his community towards the death and disparity that plagued their streets (Jocson 2006). Writing gave Antonio a feeling of ownership and stake in his community, and thus changing the narrative of it (Jocson 2006). After his

partnership with Poetry for the People, Antonio became a leader in Youth Speaks, another program in Berkeley that empowers and encourages students to write poetry about their communities and experiences (Jocson 2006). By participating in the Poetry for the People program, Antonio became a better writer both in and out of a school setting and a more engaged community member who encouraged others to do the same.

My project adapts and builds on the programs that Shirley and Antonio participated in. Over the course of 6 weeks, I will lead a Zoom writing workshop, where students in the ACC Early College will learn how to use various types of creative writing – such as the short story, personal essay, and poetry – to examine community problems, create a sense of urgency, and push for reform in the spaces that they occupy (Jocson 2006). Students will learn how to employ strategies such as "rivaling," (Flower 2008), "intercultural inquiry" (Flower 2008), and "counterstorytelling" (Martinez 2018).

The problem is not that a community writing project like the one I am proposing has not been done before. The problem is that it has not been done here in Alamance County, and that programming of this vein is hard to integrate because it goes against the grain of public education. However, taking the risk of teaching social justice writing to high schoolers in the Alamance Burlington School System means that the community will get to hear the voices of a specific demographic of students that are missing from the current conversation on social justice and community reform. Additionally, research already shows that custom and intentional educational programming is one of the only ways to foster engagement among students (García and Weiss 2020, Warner 2016). This is likely especially the case in the current pandemic world of virtual and hybrid schooling.

Personal Background and Motivation

My passion for writing and literacy education stem from a twin interest in education inequality and my own love of writing. As a high schooler, I had the opportunity to take an English class that focused on rhetoric and language and one of our first projects was writing a personal essay on education inequality in Connecticut. Through research and recollecting my own experiences, two things became clear: there is a massive divide in the quality of education Americans are receiving and being able to use personal literacy as a tool of advocacy would be crucial for bridging that disparity. That experience in adolescence followed me into college, leading me to major in English Literature and Creative Writing and take on a leadership position within Elon's Community Engagement Program. This kind of research matters to me because I have seen the way disparities in education and literacy can limit the potential of students, but also the way writing has helped young people develop their voices and can be a tool for social change.

Since my first year at Elon, I have worked at the Kernodle Center for Civic Life as Service Ambassador. Through this leadership role, I have learned a great deal about how Alamance County functions as a community, as well as the social issues that are most prevalent. This work has also taught me about what effective and informed community engagement looks like. I am well versed in the practices that emphasize the partnership between students and the community. Additionally, I am able to facilitate reflection and deliberative dialogue as a result of my experiences doing so with the Kernodle Center. This year, I am the Director of Education and Youth Development. Through this role, I provide support to student leaders and the community partners providing educational enrichment to community members. These roles have allowed me

to do work that links my passions of education accessibility and social change, and I hope to continue nourishing those passions through my research project.

In addition to the community engagement roles that I have had during my time at Elon, this semester I am taking the service-learning class Teaching Creative Writing in the Community (ENG416), which has given me the opportunity to teach in the Early College 10th grade World Literature class. This is the same group that I will be working with in the spring. My experience working with these students has provided me with the opportunity to practice lesson planning, teaching, and, because of the pandemic's impact on education, fostering learning and community over Zoom. Additionally, this existing partnership allows me to have pre-existing credibility and an authentic relationship with the Early College before the research begins.

Finally, I am deeply moved by the power of language, particularly creative writing, to bring about social change. When I look at people, specifically high schoolers, I can so clearly see the capability that pulses through them and the ever present need to pass the mic and amplify their often-marginalized voices. This project isn't about test scores and writing requirements, it is about doing the hard and creative work that is necessary to sustain human spirits.

Part III: Plan for Intellectual Inquiry

My proposed project has two main goals: the first goal is to foster youth agency and facilitate youth advocacy through a creative writing workshop; the second goal is to learn, by analyzing high school students' writing, how youth express their relationship to their community and voice their opinions on social change. To accomplish these goals, the project will occur in two phases. In the first phase I will host a six-week social justice writing workshop for the 10th grade World Literature students at the ACC Early College and in the second phase I will analyze the works produced by the students during the workshop. The first question I will ask when analyzing the student work will be what issues students identify as important to their community. The second question is how does writing for social justice foster individual agency and community engagement in high school age students from Alamance County?

During the writing workshop, students will participate in lessons that build on the preliminary writing skills they have learned in the creative writing class I have been teaching this semester. These skills include writing poetry, creative nonfiction, and short stories, developing individual voice, and reflecting on their own work. In this new phase of their creative class, the students will build on their prior knowledge of creative writing by engaging lessons focused on writing for social change. The students will participate in exercises that promote writing with urgency, creatively conveying personal and community experiences, and counterstorytelling across mediums. For instance, I will teach a lesson on using slang that will broaden students' understanding of how they can incorporate their own language and the language of their communities into their storytelling (Young 2010). Another lesson about urgency and precision in writing will teach students how to carefully use language to spark social change (Ingalls 2012). At the end of the workshop, the students will have produced a final work that will be incorporated in a bound collection that I will use Leadership Prize funds to bind and distribute. Additionally, the students will be able to participate in a reading of their works and a dialogue that members of the Elon University and greater Alamance County community will be invited to attend. This reading will either be on Zoom or in-person depending on the circumstances of the COVID19 pandemic.

In the second phase of my research project, I will analyze the final student works that were included in the collection. I will use a form of systematic textual analysis to explore elements (such as use of different perspectives and ways of claiming agency) that are shared across student works. By paying attention to commonalities shared among the works, I will be able to code for them and unpack the meaning of their repetition. Based off my current understanding of issues in Alamance County, I will be attuned to themes such as racial inequality, wealth disparity, and gender and sexuality discrimination. I will draw on methods for methodical coding of data that enable me to examine and categorize large-scale patterns in student writing (Geisler and Swarts 2019). My approach to coding and analysis will draw on the approaches of similar projects, such as the work of Adela C. Licona and J. Sarah Gonzales. Licona and Gonzales examined ways the student writers that participated in their Arizona social justice writing camp accessed local knowledge to discuss community issues of relevance to them (Licona and Gonzales 2013). When I am completing my own analysis, I will make sure to incorporate knowledge of relevant Alamance County issues, such as the confederate monument in Graham and the presence of a food desert. The analysis of these student works will provide insight on the student-community relationship, and how writing about the community can help foster purpose.

My project is rooted in the leadership strategy of intercultural inquiry (Flower 2008). Intercultural inquiry focuses on bringing multiple perspectives to the table and creating space for people of various ages, backgrounds, races, and political points of view to think critically about solutions to complex community problems. The leadership strategy is necessary for any community-based writing project because, "A rhetorically based collaborative community literacy *starts* in inquiry" (Flower 2008). Intercultural inquiry is deeply tied to the leadership values of Elon University, where our definition of leadership includes, "working with people to move together toward the attainment of a vision informed by the common good" (Elon University). By creating a space for a diverse group of students to share their experiences, equipping them with a knowledge and practice of creative community writing, and encouraging them to share their own vision for the greater Alamance County community, my project is not only rooted in intercultural inquiry, but what it means to be a leader at this university.

The ACC Early College is the ideal partner for practicing intercultural inquiry because of the diverse racial and economic background of its students. The Early College is racially diverse. In the 2018-2019 school year, the demographic makeup of the school was approximately 44% of students identified as white, 28% identified as Hispanic, 19% identified as Black, 5% identified as two or more races, 3% identified as Asian, and 1% identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native (NCES). It is also economically diverse; during the 2018-2019 school year 77 of its 228 students were eligible for free lunch and 22 were price-reduced lunch eligible (NCES). By partnering with the Early College, I am able to invite a diverse collection of voices to participate in community writing and be part of my analysis of student writing, community engagement, and agency.

Step-by-step plan:
- Finalize ABSS approval and submit IRB
- Apply for SURE 2021
- Submit application for Conference on Community Writing 2021
- Develop lesson plans to be used for my writing workshops (under the guidance of Courtney Kobos)

- Teach creative writing for social justice workshop for six weeks (over Zoom as a result of the COVID19 pandemic)
- Gather final copies of students works and organize them into a collection, which will be bound as a book and distributed to the students, the Early College library, and the Elon University library
- Host a reading (most likely on Zoom) for students to share their works with members of the Elon University and Alamance County communities
- Submit proposal to present at CCCC Undergraduate Poster Session
- Use systematic textual analysis to code and interpret student works as a means of better understanding how students connect with their communities and social justice issues (Geisler and Swarts 2019)
- Further my understanding of effective university-community partnership as it specifically pertains to community writing work and share the field community writing with Elon University by bringing Paula Mathieu to campus for a Zoom lecture on *Interrogating White Good Intentions and Community-Based Work*
- Write a research paper explaining the findings of my analysis
- Attend the Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies at York College of Pennsylvania for support and feedback on my analysis and research paper
- Present at CCW 2021 in Washington D.C.
- Present at CCCC 2022 in Chicago, IL
- Present my work at SURF 2022

Part IV: Feasibility, Budget, and Timeline

Feasibility:

      While I am not unaware of the unique challenges presented by the COVID19 pandemic, my personal experience teaching this population of students over Zoom during the pandemic shows me that it is possible, and in fact a very worthy endeavor, to teach creative writing in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. In fact, because of the myriad of community issues facing these students at this exact moment, I am confident that high school students are in the best position to tell their community stories and advocate for change. As far as the logistics of hosting the writing workshop are concerned, I am prepared, in the event that a hybrid teaching schedule prevents me from running the workshop during class time, to pivot to running the project as an after-school writing program.

      The timeline below outlines my various steps of data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of learning. The first stage of the project is already underway, as I have spent the fall semester learning about the student population I am partnered with, as well as the state of the field of community writing. Spring 2021 will largely be focused on running the writing workshop, collecting student writing, and compiling a bound collection of student work. During Summer 2021, I will focus on using methodical coding to analyze student writings. In Fall 2021 I will compile my conclusions into a research paper, and in the Spring of 2022, I will share those findings at various conferences. I am confident in my ability to complete the community writing project and the analysis in the proposed timeline, particularly because of the support I have from the Elon University English Department and the Kernodle Center for Civic Life. Additionally, I will have the guidance and support of Courtney Kobos, who, as a former Leadership Prize recipient, is well versed in what it means to implement an effective and impactful project.

The majority of the budget will be used to support my educational experience, through tuition, conferences, and bringing a speaker to campus. The rest of the funds will be used to support the actual community writing project.

Budget:
Workshop Resources
Book Binding
- $1600
Illustrator Fee
- $500
Participation Incentives for ACC Early College: $200

Conferences
Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies
- Flight from Raleigh to Harrisburg: $200
Conference on Community Writing
- Conference Fee: $215
- Gas to drive to DC: $90
- Hotel (for 3 nights): $450
- Food: $300
Conference on College Composition and Communication
- Conference fee: $90
- Flight from Raleigh to Chicago, IL: $215
- Hotel in Chicago (4 nights): $550
- Food: $400

Continuing Education
Paula Mathieu Zoom Lecture: *Interrogating White Good Intentions and Community-Based Work*
- $300

General
Tuition
- $2500

Total: $7500

Timeline:

Fall 2020	Proposal and Literature Review; Elon College Fellows Junior Seminar; 2 credit hours of ENG499; Teaching Creative Writing in the Community Teaching Placement
December 2020	Apply for IRB and ABSS Approval
January 2021	Assess state of Early College virtual/in person instruction; submit application to present at the Conference on Community Writing 2021
February 2021	Plan creative writing for social justice lessons and get feedback from Courtney

March 2021	Begin writing workshop
April 2021	Finish writing workshop; put together collection of students' final works; host reading
May 2021	Begin reading through and analyzing student work; submit application to present at the Conference on College Composition and Communication
Summer 2021	Participate in SURE; continue to analyze data
September 2021	Begin writing final paper; attend the Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies
October 2021	Continue writing my final paper; present at the Conference on Community Writing in Washington D.C.
November 2021	Finish final paper
January, February 2022	Prepare poster for CCCC 2022
March 2022	Present completed Leadership Prize findings at CCCC in Chicago, IL
April 2022	Present completed Leadership Prize findings at SURF 2022; submit final project to the Elon College Fellows program

Part V: List of Sources

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