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Milwaukee Queer Writing Project

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Logo designed by Conor Scruton

Earlier this semester during one of our think tank sessions, we brainstormed our associations for the terms “classroom,” “spaces where learning happens,” and “activities for learning.” For “classrooms,” I listed physical objects: desks, windows, whiteboards, static configurations, doors that are hard to open. But for “spaces where learning happens,” my terms shifted to more of a creative, craft-based space: airy, atrium, dirty hands, messiness, music, collaboration, sharing work without judging. My responses for “activities for learning” were in the same vein: sharing, discussing, reading aloud, listening, mapping, staying lost.

As a creative writer, I often return to the strengths of creative writing pedagogy as a resource for possible solutions to the composition issues we discuss in class. For Krista Ratcliffe, the practice of rhetorical listening is comprised of four moves, the first of which is “promoting an *understanding* of self and other” (26). Ratcliffe cites Alice Rayner’s definition of this type of literacy as “perhaps a borderland more than a boundary between the capacity to hear and the obligation to listen to what one cannot immediately understand or comprehend. And it leads to the *learning* of community” (30). Creative writing programs, especially those that take place outside the evaluative structures of school, allow students the time and space to learn about themselves and gain empathy for other people, to spend time together in the borderland of hearing and understanding.

One of my colleagues, David Kruger, has recently started a new program in Milwaukee that offers students a community space to write and share their stories. The Milwaukee Queer Writing Project (MQWP) is a program that offers free creative writing workshops to LGBTQ+ youth in the Milwaukee area. I asked David some questions about MQWP’s beginnings and future.

Q: What inspired you to start MQWP?

A: I had just passed my prelims, which was a really solitary and concentrated endeavor, and I wanted to find a way to reconnect with the community around me. I more or less took it as an opportunity to reset and reorient and to embark on new projects.

I don't know what spurred the initial thought. I queried a handful of other graduate students at the UWM English Dept., and as we began collaborating a lot of things sort of clicked. On the one hand, there are a lot of LGBTQ+-identified creative writing teachers at UWM who were interested when we started. Additionally, I know a good number of LGBTQ+ high school teachers (I bartend at a gay bar).

So, while I am not exactly sure why I thought to do it, as soon as we got a group together and began working through some of the logistics, things began progressing at a fairly steady rate. The puzzle pieces were there in front of us (so to speak), and all we had to do was sit down and begin organizing.

Q: Why do you feel it is important to connect young queer writers with more seasoned writers?

A: Someone asked me once *why LGBTQ+ students and why not just students in general?* And, I think answering this first might help me better answer your question. Currently, we are interested in working with [Gay Straight Alliances](#) (the pilot program we launched this fall is with Riverside High School's GSA). So, anyone and everyone is welcome to attend. However, I wanted to create a space that is markedly queer and specifically *for* LGBTQ+ students because writing creatively often requires a degree of emotional vulnerability and honesty. And, in straight and cis spaces, LGBTQ+ people tend to self-censor as a survival mechanism. I think this is incredibly prevalent in the high school setting (at least it was for me and a lot of people I know). So, I didn't want to make a creative writing program that "made room" for LGBTQ+ students. Rather, I was interested in making a creative writing program that was for LGBTQ+ students to safely express themselves in writing.

So, I think that this is a space that affords LGBTQ+ students opportunities for expression that are plausibly unavailable elsewhere. Speaking directly to your question, one of the qualities of the space MQWP creates is that it enables LGBTQ+ MPS students to interact with LGBTQ+ UWM instructors. I think this goes a long way in modeling the fact that queer kids can grow up to be happy and healthy queer adults. This serves to demystify the process of growing up for LGBTQ+ kids. When I was a kid (granted I grew up in a small town), the lack of queer role models was extremely isolating. I don't think this is as prevalent today because of mass media's embrace of the LGBTQ+ community, but this vision of the community is fairly normative.

Two final notes: 1) creative writing (poems/short stories/creative essays) is a really useful tool for discussions of identity. We do bring in examples by published authors, but primarily we are focused on getting the students to generate work. And, affirming student's work through positive feedback is one way we affirm the validity of that student's identity, which might be particularly critical if that sort of affirmation isn't happening elsewhere. And 2) hopefully this program gets high school students thinking about college and gets them excited about the kind of spaces and teachers they might encounter there.



Flyer designed by Alexa Nutile, Education Director, Woodland Pattern

Q: What is your goal for MQWP in the future/ where would you like to see the program a few years down the road?

A: We launched our pilot program with Riverside High School this fall, which we are using as an opportunity to fine-tune some of the logistical and operational facets of MQWP. We are very interested in expanding this organization both in terms of the number of institutions but also the kind of institutions we partner with. We are primarily interested in building more bridges between additional area high schools and UWM (and are currently in contact with a few). Partnerships with other kinds of organizations are also hopefully in our future. Currently, MQWP is formed in partnership with the UWM English department and [Woodland Pattern Book Center](#) in Riverwest. Our collaboration with Woodland Pattern has been immensely helpful in terms of their support and getting us off the ground (shout out specifically to Alexa, their education coordinator for her invaluable support). We have contacted a few local organizations (such as the [Courage House of Milwaukee](#) and [the UWM LGBT+ Studies program](#)) who have expressed interest in working with us, and we are excited about the possibility of these collaborations in the future.

Q: What else would you like to share about the program?

A: If you are reading this and want to know more or if you work at a local high school and are interested in a partnership, please reach out! Our email address is milwaukeequeerwritingproject@gmail.com

David Kruger is a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee English

department. He teaches English literature, creative writing, and LGBT+ studies. He is also a poetry editor for cream city review.