“Like a Slap in the Face, But a Good One”: A Service-Learning Project and a College Student’s Agency and Vulnerability in an After-school Fifth-Grade Writing Club

Laurie MacGillivray
University of Memphis

Bryan Walker
University of Memphis

Sarah Burson Langley
Germantown, Tennessee Municipal School District

Kimberly Owens-Pearson
Memphis Shelby County School District

Wideline Seraphin
University of Texas, Arlington

Jasmine Worthen
University of Memphis

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on a pivotal discursive interaction with a university instructor and “Roseanna,” an undergraduate situated as a writing mentor in a service-learning course centered around an after-school writing club with Black fifth graders. Course instructors sought to humanize pedagogical practices by establishing an asset-based writing club. University students and instructors regularly reflected on their interactions with fifth graders to explore how unconscious assumptions can impede one’s ability to affirm children's writing identities. The guiding question is, “How did an undergraduate writing mentor in a service-learning literacy course negotiate the positions made available by instructors in an asset-based after-school writing club?” We grounded our investigation in positioning theory (McVee et al., 2018) and mutual vulnerability (Brantmeier, 2013) to analyze Roseanna’s discourse in relation to her social identities and privilege. Our findings capture how a dialogic exchange was pivotal to her ability to reflect and act from a more humanizing and asset-based position with children in the writing club. Next steps include moving students toward a deeper understanding of systemic racism.

We live in times when social injustice and systemic racism diminish the role education can play in creating opportunities for Black and Brown students to thrive (Baker-Bell, 2020; Diehm & Hendricks, 2021; Haddix, 2009). Students in higher education have been known for being unconcerned, insular, and not committed to addressing the needs of the neighborhoods in which they are situated (Foulis & Garcia, 2022). There have been calls for college students to spend time with minoritized communities to prepare graduates to strive for equity and social justice (Mitchell, 2008).

Service-learning courses are one vehicle used to extend students’ perspectives and develop an understanding of divergent communities (Aplin-Snider & Vossos, 2022; Hallman & Burdick, 2018; Mitchell, 2008). Colleges of education have sought to address the on-going negative impact of predominately white teachers teaching predominantly Black children by

extending clinical settings beyond the walls of traditional schools (Hoffman et al., 2019). These sites for service-learning can shed light on social justice (Asghar & Rowe, 2017), reciprocity (Khiatani & Liu, 2020), and transformative learning (Christaldi-Sullivan & Bodzio, 2022; Goi et al., 2019)

Writing clubs can be rich grounds for service-learning due to the social nature of the composing process. These sites can scaffold analysis of interpersonal interactions across age, class, and race (Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2017;). As Exposito and Barillas (2009) assert, “The best writing programs challenge students to meet their potential by teaching them not only about writing but also about building caring relationships and networks inside and outside the community” (p. 63). Unfortunately, writing instructors in higher education often “forget the importance of two impulses that compel writers: the desire to speak out of [their] most intimate experiences and to connect with communities in need” (Goldblatt, 2017, p. 442). As a result, the primal power of writing is routinely dismissed in much of the college curricula.

To intentionally disrupt normative deficit practices and assumptions embedded in K-16 writing instruction, we created an undergraduate service-learning literacy course and an after-school writing club with fifth graders. The college students acted as writing mentors and as writers themselves to foster humanizing interactions with the younger students. Rather than being identified as tutors, the mentors (Hoffman et al., 2019; Sailors & Hoffman, 2019) composed alongside fifth-grade club members to foster positive writing identities. We created an intergenerational community (Haddix, 2020) which required reframing writing as a social process and prioritizing the development of writers over written products (Graves, 1983).

In the service-learning course, we explicitly discussed: (un)conscious biases (Baker-Bell, 2020), the power of vulnerability (Brantmeier, 2013), the importance of reciprocity to create a space for mutual learning (Johnson, 2014) and asset-based interactions (Frankel et al., 2018; Vetter, 2010). As instructors we [three of the authors were instructors] also analyzed our own and others’ compositions. We positioned the mentors as responsible for listening to young writers share their self-selected topics, recognize elementary students’ positive writing identities, and amplify their voices. The role of reflection is an essential component of critical service-learning, so we drew upon Schon (1983;1987) and Zeichner’s (1981) classic works on reflection. We centered “deliberate reflection” (Salam et al., 2019, p.581) by attending to agency (e.g., positioning) and mutual vulnerability (e.g., co-learning/co-disclosure) (Khiatani & Liu 2020). There was particular attention to the ways club members (undergraduates/writing mentors and instructors) positioned themselves and were positioned through the course’s community discourse as taken up by its members.

Positioning theory enabled us to examine how assumptions by and about writers can restrict and/or nurture their ability to exercise agency. Writing for some K-16 students can be “socially and emotionally risky” (Bomer & Laman, 2004, p. 456) due to the personal nature of writing and the vulnerability of sharing one’s personal compositions with others. The vignette of a pivotal interaction between Wideline, a current teacher education professor and one of the course instructors and an undergraduate writing mentor acts as the key data point presented in this paper. The research question guiding our work is, “How did an undergraduate writing mentor in a

service-learning literacy course negotiate the positions made available by instructors and community in an asset-based after-school writing club?"

Related Literature

Humanizing Pedagogy

Throughout K-16 education, a humanizing pedagogy recognizes students' personal stories and identities as fundamental to education (Flint, 2022; Salazer, 2013; Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). Humanizing pedagogical practice is a process of becoming through a shared critical consciousness (Salazar, 2013). When teachers and students strive toward this state, they intentionally consider how they themselves along with societal forces preserve social injustice (Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022; Salazar, 2013). More specifically, Johnson and Sullivan (2020) define humanizing writing pedagogy as "a lens to view Black students' individual lives and creates opportunities for them to make personal critical connections to a world where they share a collective struggle" (p. 422).

Culturally responsive writing instruction like those associated with a humanizing pedagogy "offers teachers ways to resist and push back against deficit ideologies" (Flint, 2022, p. 85) particularly related to Black and Brown students. Whether these pedagogies are constructed in higher education or K-12 settings, "teachers and students must negotiate between the humanizing and dehumanizing discourses that circulate within their school context" (Taylor, 2019, p. 213).

Mutual vulnerability (e.g., mutual risk of exposure to failure; admitting a lack of knowledge) is considered a facet of a humanizing pedagogy which (Francis & Le Roux, 2012) "is central to educational efforts aimed at reconciliation" (Keet, et al., 2009, p. 109). Therefore, mutual vulnerability and humanizing pedagogies are intertwined. Brantmeier (2013) conceptualizes a pedagogy of vulnerability as a series of five explicit acts, "open yourself, contextualize that self in societal constructs and systems, co-learn, admit you do not know, and be human" (p. 96). In this paper, vulnerability is understood as "an act of dialogue in dialogue and through dialogue" (Brantmeier, 2020, p. 25). This perspective contrasts with the majority of afterschool programs in which the emphasis is on a one-way teaching model of tutors helping students rather than mentoring (Hoffman et al., 2019, for exception, see Goi et al., 2019) with an emphasis on co-learning.

Service-Learning

Service learning can be defined as a "mechanism for offering learning opportunities with populations they [college students] would not generally have access to in traditional courses" (Aplin-Snider & Vossos, 2022, p.1). It is typically associated with a course which values equity (Hallman & Burdick, 2018), reflection (King, 2004), and reciprocity (Asghar and Rowe, 2017 & Rowe, 2017). These courses can motivate undergraduates to position self and others in new, agentive positions as co-learners (Assaf & Lopez, 2015; Langley & MacGillivray, 2024). For example, Foulis and Garcia (2022) placed language majors into a Spanish-speaking community setting with the explicit goal of "building empathy and practicing social justice" (p.1). The college students came away with improved interpersonal competence and were able to share in the community's successes. In Aplin-Snider and Vossos (2022), nursing

practitioners visited an Appalachian community to offer health services. The students were reported to have increased critical thinking, humility, and concern for others. Drawing from aspects of critical service learning (Gardner, 2021), Kinefuchi (2010) strove for students' individual growth and an awareness of structural inequities. Their students were in traditional settings like schools, but the course time emphasized a critical perspective of service learning and on the acknowledgment of power difference, mutuality, and deliberate collaborative effort" (p. 79). They found that their students "accepted cultural differences between themselves and community members but failed to question inequities that stem from structural limitations" (p. 77). Shifts in perspectives are difficult since everyone functions in the structural inequities of society.

In education, service-learning is often situated outside of schools in "pedagogical third spaces" (Hallman & Burdick, 2011) and "hybrid spaces" (Goi et al., 2019) with many preservice teachers working in non-traditional settings striving toward "transformative practices" (Sailor & Hoffman, 2019). There is commonly a continued emphasis on instruction, although not necessarily from a prescribed curriculum (Hoffman et al., 2019). There has been a range of goals with service-learning in education ranging from envisioning curricula in new ways (Sailor & Hoffman, 2019); to teacher identity development with an emphasis on "becoming" (Hallman and Burdick, 2011); "problematizing the server-served dichotomy" (Hallman, 2018, p. 2); and "reciprocity," (Hallman and Burdick, 2011, p. 344) that focuses on the benefits for the community members as well as the preservice teachers.

Service learning potentially creates an experiential learning environment in which vulnerability and humanizing pedagogies are implemented (Gardner, 2021). These studies recognize reflection as essential to learning particularly when working with participants from marginalized backgrounds. In a metanalysis, Kurt (2018) found "reflective practice is more comprehensible, functional and productive. [yet] Only very few [studies have] attempted to define what learners (thinkers) actually produce as reflections or to explain the functions of reflections" (p. 249). We have not found service-learning courses examining humanizing pedagogy in a cross age, after-school writing club as is the focus of this research.

Theory

Positioning Theory

Positioning as a metaphor is an intricate social construct that represents the mechanisms one draws from to produce self and other (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991). This production is evident in "discursive practices such as oral and written discourse, language use, and speech and other acts" (McVee, 2011, p.4). As Davies and Harré (1990) note, "One lives one's life in terms of one's ongoingly produced self, whoever might be responsible for its production" (p. 49). This evolving construction of self is fluid within one's discursive habits and represents one's social power within any given conversation or conversational context (McVee, 2011).

The term 'positioning' (Davies and Harré ,1990) addresses how written and oral language symbolize the agentive nature of an individual's social positions and attends to the ways discourse morphs depending on context. The emphasis on fluidity is a reaction against roles which suggest staticity. "While not deterministic, the power and

agency to take up or refuse positions is influenced by a person's lived experiences" (McVee et al., 2021 p.297). For example, in a school community there are a range of positions from which members can choose to take up or not. If one's speech and other acts do not adhere to the "locally acceptable cluster of the types of behavior that define a persona, that person is bound to be treated with reserve or even suspicion" (Harré & van Langenhove,1999, p. 8). This partly explains why reflecting upon discursive practices is critical in the advancement of student agency within K-16 writing and service-learning instruction.

The implicit and explicit use of discourse in learning settings can promote or constrain student agency or students' ability to function in autonomous capacities in front of teachers and class peers (Langley & MacGillivray, 2024). Further, the identities, values, and beliefs of teachers' impact "identity constructions, instructional decisions, student engagement and learning in the classroom environment" (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018, p. 8). When restrictive in nature, teachers' positioning moves (e.g., language) often: (a) disproportionately affects marginalized students (Martin-Beltrán, 2010; Yoon, 2008), (b) reflects institutional power dynamics and shapes deficit-oriented perceptions about student proficiency (Baker-Bell, 2020) and (c) could become static in nature, which threatens to counteract the inherent fluid nature of positioning (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). These limiting and dehumanizing effects are important to consider because the positional identities of learners correspond to the quality of support made available to learners by those in power (Dutro et al., 2013; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). This paper responds to Frankel et al., (2018) calls for future research to examine the language moves of literacy teachers as explicit acts of positioning that promote, limit, or deny student agency.

Context

University Literacy Mentoring Course

The service-learning course had multiple interwoven goals (See Langley & MacGillivray, 2024; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2024; MacGillivray & Worthen, 2024; Seraphin et al., 2021). One of our priorities was to create a safe, encouraging atmosphere to nurture students' (college and fifth grade) writing confidence. Our second priority as education instructors was to develop undergraduates' understanding of the possibilities and responsibilities of community work. In this case we sought to position undergraduates to nurture positive writing identities and amplify the fifth graders' voices. The third priority was to create a relationship with a public school to partner in the creation of an after-school writing club with college students and elementary students. The school was interested in increasing test scores and students' interest in writing. However, it is important to acknowledge that they did not request a focus on writing skills or any test preparation. Our partnership was driven by a desire to develop students' confidence as writers and offer an opportunity to write for non-test-related purposes.

Using culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995), we attempted to create a space grounded in anti-racism by addressing implicit bias and social inequities through a humanizing pedagogy that recognizes and uplifts the contributions of Black and Brown fifth-grade students (Seraphin, et al., 2020). We emphasized the agency of

the undergraduates and fifth graders and instructors to co-construct a shared community/course discourse (Shiller & DeShields, 2022).

The first four course sessions took place on the university campus because there was specific emphasis placed on providing education about the community prior to entering the school. (Aplin-Snider & Vossos, 2022). During this time, instructors and undergraduate/writing mentors participated in several writing exercises to get them composing and contemplating what it means to be a writer. The focus was on the act of writing; articles and activities replaced the use of a textbook. Another focus of these sessions was to counter master narratives by examining deficit discourse, anti-Blackness, and decentering the mentors' assumptions about "good writing." We framed a "writer" as one who explores the writing process by disrupting the ubiquitous nature of whiteness as normative within writing instructional practices as well as stressing the development of positive writing identities through specific actions. The instructors created a place for vulnerability by sharing their social identity categories including "cis-gendered," "lesbian," "Black," "Female," "Christian," and "being from what Trump called a shit-hole country." Students responded with labels representing what could be considered vulnerable positions: "divorced," "Muslim," "bi[sexual]," and "Asian not Indian." These types of conversations sparked deeper discussions related to social injustice with a goal of understanding how our identities shape the assumptions we make about others and their writing (Yazen, 2019).

We drew on strategies such as valuing students' use of African American English (*AAE)* and emphasizing the position of mentors to protect the fifth-grade authors' voices and writing identities (Baker-Bell, 2020; Haddix, 2009; Muhammad, 1914). Two common conversation stems were emphasized to support mentor interactions with elementary writers. First, "I noticed..." encourages active listening and discourages generic responses such as, "Good job" and second, "I wonder" (MacGillivray & Worthen, 2024; Roller, 2019) acknowledges the primacy of the student as author and discourages mentors from assessing the nature of a child's message/text/writing identity (e.g., positioning other in a deficit-based discourse). These stems encouraged nonjudgmental conversations with students and peers about their writing. We modeled and practiced these asset-based strategies with attention to a pedagogy of vulnerability with the mentors a) before, during, and after writing club sessions, b) in online discussion boards, and c) when providing written feedback to mentors' course assignments (Langley & MacGillivray, 2024). Additionally, we explored our own experiences with racism and privilege to understand inherent biases before working with students of color (Davies, 2008; Jewell, 2020). In order to enrich the undergraduates awareness of their own role in writing club, they completed a profile of themselves as writers at the beginning of the semester; wrote and revised "self-as-writer" creative short stories and poetry~~;~~ participated in online discussions; and wrote a reflection at the end of the semester. Once the writing club began to meet, writing mentors continued to gather before and after writing club to examine writing processes, uncomfortable interactions, culturally situated practices, and ways to intentionally enhance students' positive writing identities by practicing strategies to disrupt their own preconceptions of Black students (Barnes, 2017).

The After-School Writing Club

The writing club met once a week over a ten-week period for an hour and a half at Evergreen Elementary (pseudonym) in which ninety-six percent of the students were on free/reduced lunch. English was the first language for the 11 Black writing club elementary students. All but one student was male. Unlike most university tutoring/mentoring programs, the ten undergraduate mentors were diverse (see Hoffman et al., 2019), self-identifying as Black, Hispanic, Latino/a, South Asian, and white. Two were full-time teaching aids in nearby public elementary schools. Most writing mentors were education majors averaging in age between 19 and 25. The writing mentors met before and after club sessions to review plans, discuss issues, and reflect.

Before writing club began, course instructors met with fifth graders interested in joining the club to discuss their ideas and suggestions for the after-school experience (e.g., positioning other with agency). Each writing club started and concluded with call and response affirmation chants. The instructors offered communal practice, created a shared discourse, and stressed creativity and freedom in a non-school/after school setting. Writing club members composed, discussed, and shared their writing as individuals and as a community. At the end of the semester, students shared the piece they selected to publish in the club's anthology during a "Writers' Expo" where guests including teachers and parents, listened to and celebrated each fifth-grade author.

Participant: Roseanna, a Writing Mentor

Roseanna, a 24-year-old college senior who identified as a white woman, is the focus of this paper. She agreed to participate, as did all the other students, through the Internal Review Board of the university. Roseanna was seemingly unfamiliar with introspection in relation to identities, privilege, and whiteness although she would initially assert that she was not racist (we did not ask this directly, so this is our assumption). We became particularly interested in Roseanna because of an interaction with an instructor during a routine course debriefing. Recognizing this touchstone moment and the related growth as central to humanizing pedagogy, we focused this paper on her. The depth and breadth of her data (connecting privilege to deficit-based perspectives) further supported this decision.

The hegemonic nature of white supremacy requires we explore the dynamics of selecting a white student when there were peers of color who could have been selected for this research paper. Working to avoid "re-centering whiteness," we drew on Casey's (2022) notion of "invisibilizing whiteness [which] captures more of the actual risks and speaks to more of the actual violence that academic work can do to further limit what is possible for antiracism" (p. 6). By addressing Roseanna's whiteness and topics related to white supremacy and racism, we disrupt scholarship that continues to invisibilize whiteness (Casey, 2022).

Methods

This case study focuses on one semester of an on-going investigation over several semesters. Six researchers were involved in the data collection, analysis and/or the writing of this paper. Three of us identify as Black and three as white. Two are

graduate students in literacy, one has completed her doctorate and is an RTI coach ~~teaching elementary school~~ and two of us are teacher educators. We believe equity, inclusiveness and joy are integral to P-16 education.

The data for this semester included ten undergraduates, also called writing mentors. Initially, we read through all the data from the first semester of the writing club service-learning course. This included 14 weeks of researcher observation notes and reflections, weekly online discussions, and mentor writing samples, reflections, and writing conferences. At this point we decided to focus on Roseanna because of a striking, impactful exchange she had with one of the instructors. We also had more data on her because of the degree of her participation in class, in person, and the online discussions. For Roseanna specifically, the data included nine online discussion boards, 10 self-as-writer assignments with written instructor feedback, the writing profile she submitted, field notes, post-writing club instructor reflection memos, and audio transcriptions of writing club debriefings between the instructors and undergraduates over the 14 weeks.

Once we decided to focus on Roseanna and the pivotal exchange she had with one of the instructors, three of the authors read through the transcript of the interactions separately and wrote our first reactions to the data without focusing on coding. A comment might be, “I think she is trying to bring up emotions here.” Then we used descriptive coding including “reciprocity,” “analyzing behaviors,” and “striving to amplify” as we worked together and separately, reviewing our developing choices as a collective with “dialogical intersubjectivity” (Saldana, 2016, p.37).

Framing our inquiry within positioning theory, we analyzed the rest of the data sources iteratively with attention to how Roseanna and ourselves were “located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p.7). Drawing from Milner (2007), we continuously thought through how our own and the participants’ “racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they [and we] experience the world” (p. 395). In the final coding stage, we noted narrative positioning analysis and considered how Roseanna was positioned within the course in relation to others, how she positioned herself in relation to others (fifth graders, instructors and the other mentors), and how she positioned herself in relation to herself.

Taking up the discourse modeled by the instructors, Roseanna used, “I notice…” and “I wonder…” in her interactions with peers, instructors, and students in the writing club. After the pivotal interaction captured in the featured vignette, Roseanna used the language of Wideline, one of the course instructors, in several contexts including when retelling writing club experiences, in online group discussions, and written assignments. Also, we completed a member check with Roseanna presenting preliminary findings and receiving her feedback in which she agreed that the findings were representative of her experience.

Our analysis of the community discourse serves as a backdrop for making sense of Roseanna’s cultural identity and positioning of self and other in relation to reflection, agency, and vulnerability. It is important to note that the writing club and course afforded an opportunity to practice a range of positions. We document these positions assuming their fluidity. In other words, they are contextual snapshots of *being* rather than

becoming. Since we gathered data in one semester, we do not know the lasting impact of the course and writing club experience.

Pivotal Interaction

This case study focuses on a pivotal interaction between Roseanna and Wideline which relates to reflection, agency, and vulnerability. When Roseanna retells an interaction with one of the fifth graders asking for input, Wideline encourages her to recognize the strength and agency of a fifth grader, Jayson (pseudonym) rather than positioning him as a victim. These insights occur during a routine debriefing with instructors immediately after one writing club session, which opens with the query, "What did you learn today? Anything make you uncomfortable?" Roseanna shares her experience writing and sharing drafts with Jayson that day.

Roseanna: Um, I noticed working with Jayson, um, his story is very personal. Um, his house got shot up. Um [inaudible] so his dad went to jail and, um, the person, I can't remember, if he got away or not. And then um so just hearing his story, and how confident he seemed- he was not afraid to share the story at all. Um it just made me so, like aware like I was just-- it almost just like I guess like a slap in the face but like in good way, like eye-opening, I guess. And so I guess like even though I live 30 minutes away, [inaudible] kids here- just everywhere- around [this town] and [this state] and everywhere- it's just they're all being affected by something. And you take your own life for granted and so ever since working with him, I have been thinking about, you know, just [inaudible] I've just been thinking about like other people, I guess. I'm more aware of how I should judge other people, and so- yeah.

Wideline: So, we're at a really powerful moment...at a juncture where we're learning a lot about our students. Some of us are learning that they have very different experiences than what we had as kids and we can go one of many ways. We can go to the route of "aw man those poor kids." And it can turn into uh- very limiting pity. Or we can go the route of "How do I continue to humanize this person and not let these narratives, um, or experiences limit um my understandings of them? Limit my imaginations for them? Limit my expectations for them?" Cuz um in my work, in my experiences with young teachers is that your heart genuinely gets broken when you hear any child experience, um, really hard things, um, particularly Black or Brown children. Your heart is just like "Ah". But we don't want that to turn into pity because they are loved, they are in a place where they can exercise agency- so we want to continue those sorts of practices with them. We don't want to start to feel sorry for them.…

Roseanna with affirming nod: Yea, yea.

Wideline: ...So, I want us to continue to think about knowing what we learn about our students, how can we continue to pull out all the pieces of them in writing. How can we continue to humanize them and not, um, characterize them by their circumstances? Not that their circumstances don't contribute to who they are, and that's uh that's the- the trick, the really rough thing to do, that balance of, "yes, this is happening to you- this is part of who you are, and this is why you're writing about it, but this is not a limitation of

you. This is not my only understanding of you. Um, you are so many other things,….." But we have an opportunity for them to exercise so many iterations of themselves, so we want to make sure of that.

Drawing on her agency, Roseanna positions herself as reflective and vulnerable by sharing a moment that she was learning about. The instructor modeled reflection and agentive actions as related to the writing mentors, fifth graders, and herself.

FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss three ways that Roseanna is taking up the class discourse, by: being reflective, being agentive, and being vulnerable. The positionings are difficult to tease out because they are fluid and interconnected, however we report them separately to offer a sense of their essence. Each section analyzes facets of the interaction and ways Roseanna continued to take up these ways of being throughout the rest of the course.

Being Reflective

Roseanna's interaction with Wideline is multilayered. With the traditional opening questions "What did you learn today? Anything make you uncomfortable?" the instructor is positioning the writing mentors as reflective. This practice reveals how reflection is embedded in the course structure. Roseanna's opening line, "I noticed..." emphasizes a listening stance. She is not officially asking a question, but rather publicly (re)thinking an interaction from a writing club session. We see her create a storyline in which she hears a fifth grader's story and gains a new awareness about her own deficit assumptions. Positioning herself as being in the act of reflecting, she concludes with, "so ever since working with him, I have been thinking about, you know, just [inaudible] I've just been thinking about like other people, I guess. I'm more aware of how I should judge other people, and so- yeah." Through tentative phrases, "so," "you know," and "I guess," she demonstrates a processing of ideas.

Clearly, being reflective does not necessarily eradicate deficit thinking. We see the perpetuation of Roseanna's implicit biases. She makes the generalization that "kids here- just everywhere- around [this town] and [this state] and everywhere- it's just they're all being affected by something." Potentially she is editing herself, wrestling with her cultural identity and realizing that her instructors and peers might perceive "kids here" as othering. She then rewords to a more expansive view to include "everywhere" with the implication that something is wrong beyond this community. Her phrase "I've just been thinking about like other people" speaks to the privilege of not having to previously think of "other" people. At one point during the instructor's response, Roseanna jumps in with an affirming, "yea, yea" agreeing to be part of the "we," part of a reflective community.

Wideline encourages the reflection by explicitly inviting the writing mentors to reflect by encouraging a metacognitive process. She shares, "We" can ask ourselves, "How do I continue to..." The communal "we" is yet another way the instructor positions Roseanna and her peers as being reflective.

Later in online discussions, Roseanna continues to practice reflective thinking through issues related to the pivotal interaction. In one written response, Roseanna contemplates, “I have learned to set aside my judgments towards the students and learn from them. One way was to not have self-pity on them. They are all wonderful and bright student who come from very different backgrounds.” In her end of semester reflection, she shares, “I have learned not to only focus on what they [the fifth-grade writers] went through but to focus on how that makes them stronger.” Roseanna’s language echoes the Wideline’s agentive language presented in the pivotal moment. As a mentor, she is expanding the way she talks about her positioning-of-self and other during personal reflection.

Being Agentive

Next, we see the practicing of being agentive. That day Roseanna is the first one to address the query, “What did you learn today? Anything make you uncomfortable?” She agentively thinks aloud about her developing understandings.
Then she listens as her instructor exercises her own agency as an advocate/social actor (Francis and Le Roux, 2012) and models explicit, intentional reflection.

Wideline names the moment as “powerful” particularly because it is at “a juncture” of future interactions with students. The introduction and continued use of “we” in the pivotal interaction positions Roseanna, her peers and herself, as part of a community with shared goals. In a sense, the author explains that as a “we”, as a collective and as individuals, there is agency to reflect, examine, and strive to understand how implicit bias can restrict the agency of others. Wideline also explicitly names the potential of fifth graders when she shares, “They are in a place where they can exercise agency- so we want to continue those sorts of practices with them.” The writing mentors and the fifth graders have agency.

The instructor also positions Roseanna and her peers as agentive by naming this discussion as an opportunity to take a decisive position with Jayson~~,~~ specifically. ~~The Instructor~~ Wideline ~~-~~asserts the importance of “balance” and how it is a “really rough thing to do,” rather than minimizing the difficulty of agency. She also refers to different “routes” for the mentors’ reactions. Potentially to stress individual responsibility and her own authority, she references “my” personal experiences with “young teachers.” Rather than calling mentors’ deficit assumptions, she frames limiting our “imaginations for them” as a tendency for novice teachers of Black and Brown children. The instructor continues to stress the shared goals of the writing club and affirming the mentors current work with phrases such as, “I want us to continue to pull out all the pieces of them in writing.” The use of “continue” can be interpreted as both an affirmation of what has been occurring and a gentle challenge of what could be happening.

As the semester progresses, Roseanna takes up the agentive position encouraged in the course. She shifts her positioning-of-self and other to better understand the ways students and herself are critical decision makers in their own lives and as mentors, saying, “I have grown to be vulnerable and not mentally criticize people based on their looks or educational background.” In another instance, Roseanna explains that one student helped her spell a word for her own piece. By “allowing” the students to “help” her, Roseanna positions self and other in terms of agency and power

by disrupting the conventional narrative of mentor as “expert” and student as “novice” (Hoffman et al, 2019).

Being Vulnerable

In the pivotal exchange, Roseanna is being vulnerable when she talks about her developing insights. In fact, her naivete regarding violence positions her as privileged. She reports being struck by Jayson’s “confidence... to share the story at all” which could be interpreted as her judging him and his family for being in a tumultuous situation. Juxtaposing Jayson’s confidence and her own judgmental assumptions, she reveals how much she was taken unaware of the contrast of their experiences. Her admission that it was like a “slap in the face” names the pain of insight and she asserts, “I'm more aware of how I should judge other people.” We found Roseanna developing a sense of vulnerability that fosters reciprocal learning and ways to disrupt power dynamics in traditional mentor-mentee relationships. She negotiates positioning-of-self and other in relation to vulnerability in her online written discourse/retellings.

In an online discussion the night after Roseanna’s and Seraphin’s conversation, she writes she appreciated when her peer asked the instructor a question, offering, “I feel that it shows the students that it's okay to ask for help no matter who or how old you are.” Again, Roseanna’s discourse counters traditional academic tutoring power dynamics when she recounts How you can still be vulnerable and ask for support regardless of role/age This action reiterates to writing club participants that adults/mentors are learners too.

In her final course reflection, Roseanna wrote the following when asked what insights she would apply in future interactions:

> *Throughout this semester, I have learned to set aside my judgments towards the students and learn from them... I have grown to be vulnerable and not mentally criticize people based on their looks or educational background. This course has helped set that reminder.*

This quote reflects both insight about her growth and naivete that she has “learned to set aside [her] judgements.” She identifies the problem with generalizing, citing the instructor’s words. Roseanna’s words could be read as a contradiction. She claims to have acquired the ability to “not mentally criticize” others- unaware that this singular experience is part of an ongoing process in understanding her white privilege. This quote captures the tenacity and complexity of privilege.

Overall, in the interaction, Wideline responds to Roseanna’s experience positioning Jayson, the fifth grader, with agency. She offers an explicit and humanized response to Roseanna when she positions Jayson with agency outside of a “pity” perspective- and simultaneously positions Roseanna and by proxy her peers to consider how viewing the traumatic life events of others can either limit or amplify how we imagine what is possible for others.

Discussion

Our discussion considers the interrelatedness of pedagogies of humanity and vulnerability and how they can be successfully situated in a service-learning course. Human connections can act as catalysts for seeing the world differently. Drawing on mutual vulnerability and emphasizing co-learning has the potential to move individuals toward positioning themselves as willing and eager to participate in their own new imagining of society.

Humanizing Pedagogies and Vulnerability

Humanizing pedagogies connect vulnerability (Dutro, 2019; hooks, 2014) to critical consciousness (Brantmeier, 2013). Within the framework of the after-school writing club, asset-based positions were available to Rosanna and her peers to humanize social interactions between and among the mentors and fifth graders. Keenly aware of the many of the barriers within writing instruction for Black children (Brown, 2006; Seraphin, 2021), the instructors (Frankel, et al., 2018) created an environment for Roseanna and her peers in which to exercise agency (Vetter, 2010) and discuss vulnerable topics.

The instructors strove to develop an asset-based writing club with writing mentors rather than literacy tutors to reflect a critical stance as educators (Flint & Jaggers, 2021). Alternative mentoring models shifted the power dynamics associated with traditional tutoring approaches (Sailors & Hoffman, 2019; Tanaka et al., 2014). We defined writing as a non-linear and social process (Graves, 1983) to create space for mentors to support the development of fifth graders' positive writing identities and confidence.

The "I noticed..." and "I wonder..." sentence stems (MacGillivray & Worthen, 2024; Roller, 2019) (e.g. class discourse) further encouraged asset-based discourse and encouraged co-learning to disrupt typical power dynamics (Goi et al., 2019). Roseanna strives to recognize her implicit, deficit-based assumptions through listening and wondering. Making wondering statements based on attentive listening appears to have given Roseanna a deeper sense of understanding how to recognize and affirm the sources of strength and agency-the fifth-grade writers possessed (Brown, 2006; Exposito & Barrillas, 2009).

Service-learning

This course served as a vehicle to extend students' perspectives and develop an understanding of divergent communities (Aplin-Snider & Vossos, 2022; Hallman & Burdick, 2018; Mitchell, 2008). We created an environment in which mentors increased understandings of their assumptions about cultures other than their own (Aplin-Snider & Vossos, 2022 Hallman & Burdick, 2018; Mitchell, 2008), specifically implicit biases related to Black and Brown elementary children. However, in contrast to traditional service-learning courses which emphasize the power of serving as helping undergraduate students become more aware and insightful (Mitchell, 2008), we also focused on reciprocity. By acknowledging the power dynamics, we sought to keep the experience from being based on paternalistic and codified hierarchal power relations (Mitchell, 2008).

An explicit social justice framework (Asghar & Rowe, 2017) guided the structure and content of the course with an emphasis on reciprocity (Khiatani & Liu, 2020) and transformative learning (Christaldi-Sullivan & Bodzio, 2022; Goi et al., 2019). The instructors positioned writing mentors as learners with the expectation that they would have insights about themselves while nurturing the fifth graders' positive views of themselves as writers. The nature of a writing club lends itself to creating co-learners sharing a community discourse. Like Kinefuchi (2010), we found that the undergraduates were able to have authentic conversations about deficit models and identify personal bias, however she did not demonstrate an ability to articulate her role in the "structural conditions that under gird social problems" (p. 79).

Positioning theory and mutual vulnerability pedagogy

Positioning theory allowed us to analyze a white student's interactions (McVee et al., 2004) as a writing mentor in an afterschool asset-based writing club. We were able to notice the ways Roseanna positioned herself and others in relation to agency (Kayi-Aydar, 2015), vulnerability (Bullough, 2005; Tanaka, et al., 2014), and by listening and wondering (Roller, 2019) when she was situated as a writing mentor in a community-based course and after-school writing club.

Pedagogy of Vulnerability helped us establish a space for P-16 students to have a degree of writing autonomy rarely experienced in academic settings (Johnson, 2014; McKenna & Brantmeier, 2020). To encourage the reciprocal exchange of learning and counter traditional notions of power dynamics of mentoring (e.g, expert/novice) (McBride & Rentscher, 2020), instructors disclosed our sense of self as writers, shared compositions about our lives (Dutro, 2019; Goldblatt, 2017), discussed our memories of being writers, and revealed intimate details related to our social identity categories and privilege. Upon reflection, we could have talked more about systemic structures and modeled our roles in structural inequities in the stories we wrote.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the emerging field of humanizing pedagogy in higher education (Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022) through empirical examination of a service-learning course situated in a writing club focusing on empathy and social justice (Foulis, et al. 2022). A mentor explains that realizing her own deficits was "like a slap in the face but like in a good way." She recognizes the potential violence of learning of one's own biases even when we perceive it as "good" growth (hooks, 2014). In this paper, we analyzed how a white undergraduate enrolled in a community-based literacy service-learning course negotiated her positions as a writing mentor in an afterschool asset-based writing club with Black students. We suggest the mentor, Roseanna, tried on a more ~~human~~ empathetic position by making herself vulnerable during routine reflection and by taking up the language her instructor modeled. In the course, instructors used the structure, content, and course community of co-learners to disrupt traditional power hierarchies. We assert the importance of studying how institutions of higher learning use power to build more humanistic, critically conscious, vulnerable citizens. Next steps include moving students closer to an understanding of systemic racism and the role it plays in their own lives and interactions with others.

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Author Information

Laurie MacGillivray, Ed.D. Laurie is a professor of Literacy in ICL at the University of Memphis. Email: lmcgllvr@memphis.edu

Bryan Walker, Doctoral candidate. Bryan is a middle school ELA teacher and a doctoral candidate in Literacy in ICL at the University of Memphis.
Email: bwalk901@gmail.com

Sarah Burson Langley, Ed.D. Sarah is an RTI coach at Farmington Elementary School in Germantown Municipal School District. Email: sarah.b.langley@gmail.com

Kimberly Owens-Pearson, Ed.D. Kimberly is a 20+ year high school English educator with the Memphis Shelby County Schools District.
Email: Kimberlyowenpearson@gmail.com

Wideline Seraphin, Ph.D. Wideline is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies in Teacher and Administrator Preparation at the University of Texas, Arlington.
Email: widelineseraphin@uta.edu

Jasmine Worthen, Doctoral candidate. Jasmine is a doctoral candidate and an adjunct instructor in the Literacy program in ICL at the University of Memphis.
Email: jwrthen1@memphis.edu