

# Reciprocity and Power Dynamics: Community Members Grading Students

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*This article explores the dynamic practice of inviting community members to grade college students on their work in community-engaged partnerships. The authors articulate theories of writing assessment with theories of reciprocity to argue that community-based student evaluations can be a valid and ethical form of assessment, and discuss a case study in which local youth graded college students to offer eight best practices for implementing community-based assessment. As reciprocity is often underemphasized in practice, community evaluations provide a strategy for shifting power toward community members, potentially reinvigorating applications of reciprocity to make them more substantial and meaningful.*

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Historically, the field of community-university partnerships has turned to the concept of reciprocity as a guiding light to avoid doing harm to community members (Kendall). The ethical standard of reciprocity aims to ensure that both university and community are benefiting, influencing, and being changed by a partnership (Dostilio et al.). Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in reciprocity and attempts to

call community-based educators and researchers toward a greater focus on assessment of community impact. Scholars and community collaborators have worked to develop richer models and principles of reciprocity (Community-Campus Partners for Health; Dostilio et al.; Saltmarsh, Hartley, Clatyon), gather community perspectives of university-community partnerships (Shah, “Courage”; Stoecker and Tryon; Wetzel), and develop rubrics for ensuring ethical, “Fair Trade” exchanges in international partnerships (Hartman). However, as emphasized by Robbin Crabtree and echoed by multiple scholars, “We need more than an ethos of reciprocity as a guide; we need to learn the . . . on-the-ground strategies” that enable material changes—not just abstract theorizing (Crabtree 26).

Concrete strategies for reciprocity are critical, as service-learning carries real risks of harm for community members. For example, in a community literacy partnership between university students and Spanish-speaking Latinx immigrants in Boulder, Colorado, one English-speaking student made a habit of adding the word ‘taco’ to various sentences and ignoring community members by texting. The behavior of this student and three additional students made an impact on the community members who worked with them. As one woman explained, “*Ósea yo me sentía incomoda...Me desagradaba trabajar con ella. Y ya no después ya no me gusto. Incluso, si te fijaste, ya falte varios días...*” [I mean I would feel uncomfortable...I disliked working with her. And then after I didn’t like it. I even, if you noticed, I didn’t come for some days...]” (d’Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer 10). Two adult literacy students stopped attending the class entirely because of this cadre of four cliquey and disengaged university students; irresponsible and disinterested behavior on the part of even a few college students can have substantial negative consequences for community members. This danger is exacerbated by the unequal power dynamics that commonly exist between students and community members, especially when students are from privileged or elite backgrounds. Social, cultural, racial, economic, and educational inequalities make it difficult for instructors to bring the ideals of reciprocity into practice.

In this article, we explore one experimental strategy for enacting reciprocity and shifting the locus of control in community partnerships: inviting community members to grade college students. The field of

technical communication has emphasized the usefulness of service-learning client feedback for assessing student writing (Redd), but involving community members directly in grading seems to be a rare occurrence, and seldom if ever extends to community members who are not professionalized, middle class, and college-educated non-profit staff. Our case study stems from the Wildcat Writers program, a writing collaboration initiative at University of Arizona that links high school and college classes for shared curriculum, joint field trips, and writing exchanges. The program works with high schools that are primarily Latinx, with around 85% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Now thirteen years old, Wildcat Writers aims to support college access for underrepresented students and connect university students with the vibrant community of Tucson, offering opportunities for students to write to audiences beyond the classroom and building a network for justice-oriented writing teachers across educational contexts. Several similar programs exist at other institutions (Faulkner-Springfield; Warren). Rachael was the coordinator of Wildcat Writers for seven years, and Jessica has been a long-time teacher participant who initiated the experimental grading structure in collaboration with her high school teacher partner, Kurt Fischer.<sup>1</sup> In this piece, we first articulate theories of reciprocity in community engagement with theories of writing assessment to suggest that student grading structures can serve as a possible site for fostering reciprocity. Next, we offer the case study of Jessica's attempt to bolster reciprocity, outlining the efforts Kurt and she made to involve the high school students in grading the college students on the quality of their feedback to the youth. We identify eight key principles that engaged writing teachers may consider when they are weighing the possibility of tying students' grades to assessments from community members, and conclude with reflections on next steps for community-based grading.

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<sup>1</sup> Community coordinator Kurt Fischer reviewed a draft of this manuscript to ensure his perspectives were represented accurately. Kurt was also interviewed for this piece, with IRB approval. Kurt and Jessica continue to co-teach and collaborate.

## **BRAIDING THE THREADS OF RECIPROCITY: EXCHANGE, INFLUENCE, GENERATIVITY**

At first glance, reciprocity may seem like a relatively simple concept: both university and community representatives “get something” out of the partnership. However, the field of community engagement has theorized reciprocity in much more robust ways that have the potential to intersect with conversations the field of rhetoric and composition is having about writing assessment. Through an extensive literature review, Lina Dostilio, Sarah Brackman, Kathleen Edwards, Barbara Harrison, Brandon Kliever, and Patti Clayton have articulated the meaning of reciprocity in service-learning through three threads: “exchange (parties benefit), influence (parties impact the work) and generativity (together the parties produce systemic change, create new value, and/or undergo transformation in their way of being)” (21). These definitional threads can be interwoven in understandings of reciprocity, and together, the threads offer a map of how reciprocity is currently understood in scholarship on engaged pedagogies.

Exchange reciprocity suggests mutual benefit, a back-and-forth giving of resources. Here, the focus is on outcomes. Dean Elson, Lauren Johns, and Jessica Taisey Petrie use a definition from this thread, stating: “One of the fundamental characteristics of [service learning] is the element of reciprocity whereby students and community members both benefit from their participation in the experience” (66). An example of a partnership that draws on this understanding of reciprocity might be a program that invites college students to tutor high school students in writing, receiving experience teaching writing and one credit of experiential learning on their transcript in exchange for the tutoring hours they provide at the school.

Influence reciprocity indicates that the process as well as the outcomes of the partnership are influenced by the ways of being and knowing of both community and university participants. In Lorilee Sandmann, Brandon Kliever, Jihyun Kim, and Anthony Omerikwa’s words, “Reciprocity can be defined as the negotiated process of working with a partner as opposed to doing something to or for a partner” (5). Particularly important here is what John Saltmarsh, Matt Hartley, and Patti Clayton have identified as the “epistemological shift” that must

occur for community knowledge to be valued alongside the privileged, technocratic discourses and epistemologies of the university. Returning to the example of the high school tutoring, influence reciprocity might involve both high school and college students in tutoring at the school, with high school and university representatives collaborating to design and facilitate the tutor training.

Generativity in reciprocity involves university and community partners as co-creators of something that might not otherwise exist. Individuals might change their understanding of something, or systems might be altered through collaborative community leadership. This understanding of reciprocity aligns with Audrey J. Jaeger, Jessica Katz Jameson, and Patti Clayton's depiction of "thick" reciprocity, a form of reciprocity that "emphasizes shared voice and power and insists upon collaborative knowledge construction and joint ownership of work processes and products." Furthermore, it involves "mutual transformation" as the collective insights that arise from the partnership spark new projects, classes, or research questions (264). The tutoring program approached with this form of reciprocity might involve the creation of a grant-funded high school writing center, or it might prompt the college instructor to change her mindset about how to teach peer review.

In sum, reciprocity can be more than the simple back-and-forth exchange of resources—rather, those involved in the exchange can work to deepen the reciprocal relationship, involving collaborative processes and mutual transformation (see table 1 for an overview of the various threads of reciprocity).

Table 1: *Definitional Threads of Reciprocity*

THREAD	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Exchange Reciprocity	Mutual benefit, exchange of resources	Tutoring program that allows college students to receive experience and youth to receive academic support
Influence Reciprocity	Community and university partners both influence process and outcomes	College students and youth work together to tutor and co-create tutor training
Generativity Reciprocity	University and community partners collaboratively create or become something that might not otherwise exist	New high school writing center established in collaboration with youth and college students

*Adapted from Lina Dostilio, Sarah M. Brackman, Kathleen Edwards, Barbara Harrison, Brandon Kliever, and Patti Clayton. "Reciprocity: Saying What We Mean and Meaning What We Say." Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning 19.1 (2012): 17-32.*

One aspect of reciprocity we would like to stress, however, is the critical nature of questioning whom—exactly—this reciprocity involves. A high school teacher and a university professor may feel that the writing collaboration between their classes is reciprocal, as both instructors are influencing, benefitting, and changing from the collaboration, but do the high school students have any influence on the partnership design, any meaningful way to register and communicate the extent to which they have benefited and contributed? How often does reciprocity trickle down to community members themselves? In other words, as Nadine Cruz and Dwight Giles identified in “Where’s the Community in Service-Learning Research?”, the field of community engagement has a definition crisis around the word “community.” When scholars or instructors say that a partnership was reciprocal with the community, are they referring to the non-profit staff and professionals who plan the partnership—the director of the LGBTQA+ center, the volunteer manager of the nursing home, and the instructor of the adult literacy class—or community members themselves—the youth at the LGBTQA+ center, the residents of the nursing home, the participants in the adult literacy class? Too

often, we contend, questions of reciprocity remain in the hands of the instructors and community professionals.

Furthermore, while theories of reciprocity abound, community-based teachers may struggle to bring these theories to the level of practical use (Hartman). Hence, these theories may remain anemic because they are not grounded in *practices* that grow organically from doing community-based work. In many ways, this relative lack of strategies for applying reciprocity stems from service-learning's historical need to justify itself as a pedagogy in the service of the higher education system, fueling scholarship on strategies for student and faculty engagement, rather than techniques for community impact or leadership (Cruz and Giles). We assert that inviting community members to grade students could be one such technique for deepening reciprocity with community partners. Next, we turn to theories of writing assessment to examine the rationale for community-based student evaluation.

## **“GOOD ENOUGH” EVALUATION?: VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN COMMUNITY CONTEXTS**

Writing assessment has historically been concerned with two interlocking terms—validity and reliability—and contemporary conceptions of both terms, we suggest, can support the practice of inviting community members to grade students. Ed White's well-circulated framing of validity defines the concept as “measuring what you say you are measuring, not something else” (10). Therefore, an essay test is a more valid measurement of writing ability than a multiple-choice grammar test, because it involves producing writing, and portfolios are more valid still, as they allow for revision and demonstration of ability over time. In community writing contexts, therefore, a valid measure of students' ability to write and communicate effectively with community audiences might involve input from community members, rather than only instructors' observations or students' written reflections on the skills they learned or capacities they acquired.

Furthermore, as many scholars have noted (Huot; Moss; Messick), validity is a highly complex concept that is contextualized to each use,

theoretically grounded, and linked to the *impact* of an assessment.<sup>2</sup> Ecologies can be a useful construct for considering a broader conception of what makes a valid writing assessment (Haswell; Inoue; Lucas; Wardle and Roozen).<sup>3</sup> Catharine Keech Lucas was one of the earliest to make such a point, arguing for “ecological validity,” which: 1) requires that an assessment have a positive impact on the learning environment, 2) reports results “from the whole writing environment of the learning,” and 3) produces useful, quality information from observing the learning process (5). We address each of these three components of ecological validity and their value, usefulness, and desirability in service learning.

First, what might be the *impact* of various assessment practices in community engagement classes? In his theory of antiracist writing ecologies, Asao Inoue stresses how ecologies are bound up in political activities, that power always plays a role in shaping relationships among people and their environments. He argues that assessments are not only to be judged by the intention of the designer, or “proven” bias in the assessment itself, but by the assessment’s *impact* on various groups of people, with particular attention to racism. Therefore, a large-scale writing assessment that regularly fails students of color to a much higher degree than white students and should prompt us to ask why and to act to challenge that system.

This focus on impact and power in writing ecologies might lead community-engaged instructors to consider how assessment might impact the power dynamics among students and community members, especially in programs such as Wildcat Writers in which a greater number of community members are minorities. As scholars in community engagement have noted, university representatives frequently exercise more agency in partnerships, controlling money, setting schedules based on university timelines, privileging student over community outcomes, speaking with discourses and epistemologies tied to power, publishing about community members, and holding more institutional clout and resources (Stoecker and Tryon; Hartman; Mathieu). Traditional student assessment practices may exacerbate these imbalances. If students are only graded on their

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2 See Huot for a thorough treatment of contemporary understandings of validity.

3 See Davis and Hall for a discussion of how the concept of ecologies intersects with community literacy.

reflective writing about the community project, or the instructor's perception of the student's performance in the partnership, this may lead students to focus only on instructor needs and values rather than also considering community perspectives, and to be primarily concerned about community interactions that are directly observed by the instructor. How might dynamics shift if community members themselves were involved in grading students? What impact would such a change have on the interactions and outcomes of the partnership—particularly the outcomes for community members?<sup>4</sup>

Second, in community-based writing classes, the community partnership stands as a key part of the “whole writing environment” that Lucas argues must be taken into account for an ecologically valid assessment. Therefore, reporting from the community context (i.e., an on-the-ground perspective, connected with material application and embedded in concrete relationships) might support greater validity. In identifying writing assessments as an ecologically complex unity, Inoue similarly draws attention to the interconnectedness of all elements of a system. Inoue posits that students, teachers, discourses, rubrics, peer review activities, classroom spaces, racial power dynamics, and all other components are dependent upon, affect, and influence one another. A student's success is influenced by interactions with community members even as those community members are also impacted, just as a rubric might shape and be shaped by other power dynamics in the classroom. Critically examining and fostering interconnectedness becomes significant in a writing classroom shaped by an ecological vision. As Inoue writes, “[W]hen any student is left behind or fails in some way, the rest of the class fails to some degree, and an integral part of the ecology withers” (93). He encourages pedagogies and assessment practices that help students realize and appreciate this interconnectedness. Inviting community members to assess students is one approach that can disrupt the

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<sup>4</sup> Huot reminds us that validity requires consideration about whether decisions made on the basis of the assessment are adequate. In the specific case reported here, we posited that it was adequate to raise or lower students' final grades 2% based on community member feedback. This small percentage allows for an impact on the students' final grades, but a small one. A higher percentage devoted to community member assessment—say 50%—would be less valid, given the experimental nature of this grading approach and the need to teach and assess a student's understanding, knowledge, and skill beyond the community partnership.

status quo within university-community partnerships. Such a move suggests that community members are vital participants within the interrelated learning ecology, built into the grading structure itself, and their experiences of learning with college students are valued.

And finally, Lucas's ecological validity calls for *quality* information that is *useful* to instructors, students, and other stakeholders. Responses from community members might be immediately useful for community engagement coordinators, instructors, and administrators looking to understand community impact and improve programs in order to deepen reciprocity. These responses can also be instrumental to the learning of instructors and students. John Dewey, a foundational theorist to both composition and community engagement, argues that learning comes from experience, which involves both an action and seeing "the return wave of consequences which flow from [the action]" (64). In other words, we do something to a thing, and then it does something to us in return. Reflection seeks to connect the doing and the undergoing: it is when we think critically about why our actions produce certain consequences that we are learning. Explicitly inviting community members into the assessment process allows for the work students do in the community to have additional, meaningful consequences that may help students learn things about themselves and their communities that are grounded in experience.

Inviting community members to contribute to student grading might therefore have the potential to be both a valid form of assessment and a method for better incorporating all three kinds of reciprocity: exchange, influence, and generativity reciprocity. When students know that community members will assess their work, they are held accountable for their interactions, which may shape student investment in community outcomes—raising the potential for stronger community benefit in exchange reciprocity. As community members assess students, power dynamics are shifted so that community representatives have a greater impact on the partnership, and their knowledges are valued—exemplifying the agency of community member voices that grounds influence reciprocity. And while the links to generativity reciprocity are less direct, we hope that this restructuring of assessment ecologies disrupts traditional

university-community dynamics and opens the door to the creation of new partnership ideas, systems, and mindsets.

Most of the concerns about the practice of inviting community members to grade university students, however, stem from the assessment concept of reliability. Ed White defines this as “fairness and consistency” (17), and the term often focuses specifically on scoring, ensuring that no matter who scores the piece, the score will be the same. This quantitative measure is referred to as “interrater reliability” (O’Neill). We can imagine that students, administrators, or instructors involved in partnerships where community members are grading students might have questions about reliability—is it “fair” if two students who put in the same quality of work receive different scores from two different partners? Are community members qualified, consistent, and objective enough to score reliably?

Reliability has been a thorny issue throughout writing assessment history, but the field has developed several frameworks and approaches for responding. White would argue that we can make progress on the issue of reliability using strategies such as scoring guides, student “anchor” work that exemplifies various grades, administrative oversight, and norming discussions among graders. While these strategies have been tested on assessments such as timed essay prompts and portfolios—rather than community engagement contexts—it is possible that similar strategies may improve the reliability of community members grading students, or at minimum mitigate student and administrator concerns. In the partnership described here, for example, a scoring guide was developed and models of effective peer review were distributed to participants.

Other scholars have raised questions about the traditional notion of reliability itself as a foundational value of assessment (Broad; Elbow; Lynne; O’Neil; Moss). As Patricia Lynne argues, obsession with positivist ideas of reliability frames writing as a “technical activity with objective outcomes,” and “ignores the complexities of written literacy valued by compositionists, including the influence and importance of communicative context, the collaborative and conversational aspects of the process of writing, and the social construction of meaning” (Lynne 3). Reliability, Lynne argues,

limits our understanding of communication and forces a positivist paradigm on the constructivist field of composition. Concerns about reliability create an undertow pulling us toward formulaic student work and simplistic criteria so graders can scan for easy, consistent scoring—avoiding more complex and worthwhile assignments and criteria because they are difficult to assess consistently and efficiently. In this way, criteria involving community perspectives is in danger of becoming a casualty of reliability.

Yet other approaches to assessment are afoot. Bob Broad proposes a framework of assessment, Dynamic Criteria Mapping, that minimizes the focus on reliability, centering instead on stakeholders in conversation. Rather than creating pressure for assessors to have identical reactions to student work or privileging detached objectivity, Broad's framework celebrates how different opinions can be discussed, "insider knowledge" can be valued, and complex criteria made visible to students. Similarly, Pamela Moss suggests a *hermeneutic* approach to evaluation involving "critical conversations" among a "community of interpreters" about "multiple and varied sources of evidence"—similar to how hiring committees debate applicant files in academia (7). Particularly relevant here is Moss's interrogation of the call for detached, objective assessment, which "silences the voices of those who are most knowledgeable about the context" (10); community members, as those who have directly interacted with students, often hold important insight into the context and student performance. Furthermore, Brian Huot has offered a thorough treatment of how new approaches to reliability are expanding our understanding of the term, arguing that "[t]ranslating 'reliability' into 'fairness' is not only inaccurate, it is dangerous, because it equates statistical consistency of the judgments being made with their value" (88). Huot emphasizes that issues of reliability can be "bypass[ed]" (98). Instead we should pursue contextualized assessment that judges a writer's skill in communicating in a particular rhetorical situation with concrete audiences. And Lynne goes so far as to argue that the field is obligated to consider rejecting the terms of reliability and validity altogether for our own assessment terms *meaningfulness* and *ethics*.

In other words, perhaps reliability traditionally understood as consistent scoring does not have to be the touchstone of assessment.

Perhaps there is space in our theories of assessment for a teenager from the South Side of Tucson to pick up the grading pen.

Peter Elbow may be helpful to us here. He suggests that we strive for what he calls “good enough evaluation”—situations where “the need for a verdict is pressing enough and the danger is reduced enough that it is worth getting a verdict that is only somewhat trustworthy” (“Good” 305). In other words, making a decision to use a particular assessment calls for weighing the benefits and urgency of an assessment with the potential harm of results that may not be exact. We have suggested that involving community members in grading may provide a significant benefit in fostering reciprocity—particularly as holding students accountable to community evaluations may encourage better community outcomes (exchange reciprocity) and honoring community member perspectives in grading increases the influence community members have (influence reciprocity). These moves can provide a corrective to historical power imbalances in community partnerships and highlight the impact on community members who may often be members of marginalized groups. We weigh this benefit with the potential harm that may come to students if a community member assesses in a way the instructor finds erratic or imbalanced. In the case study presented here, community member evaluation accounted for 2% of the student’s final grade, so the chance that important scholarships may be lost or graduate school applications may be denied based on an untrustworthy assessment is improbable. Given what we know about validity, reliability, and effective writing assessment, we suggest that having community members grade students in this way is “good enough”—with all the ethical implications that “good” implies.

## **A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY GRADING: SHIFTING POWER DYNAMICS**

While a theoretical rationale for community grading may be helpful in providing an academic justification for community assessment, we know community writing practitioners will also be curious about what community grading looks like on the ground. To that end we offer an examination of a community writing experiment, implemented by Jessica and her long-time community collaborator Kurt Fischer,

in which Kurt's high school students participated in evaluating Jessica's college students as part of a final course grade. Informed by interviews with Kurt and analysis of partnership documents, we tell the story of this venture into community grading and reflect on questions raised and potential implications for others interested in applying and theorizing the practice of community grading.

*Implementing Community Evaluation:*

*Participants, Context, and Impetus*

Jessica and Kurt's community learning partnerships have been ongoing since 2011 and have involved AP Language and Composition and AP Literature high school students and 100-level required honors composition and 300-level elective rhetoric and digital storytelling college students. In their collaborations, Jessica and Kurt have co-designed curriculum on topics such as "Where I'm From" poetry performances and digital stories, public argument showcases, dramatic readings, written exchanges about college life, Studs Terkel-style oral history interviews, student-led queer movie nights, and the attendance and analysis of musicals and plays (Shumake 14). Jessica and Kurt have organized field trips to the college and the high school in addition to field trips for their students to experience live theatre, typically co-applying for grants to pay for these trips and inviting students to co-curate post-show discussion forums over pizza. The collaboration is based on individual partnerships between high school and college students. Early in the semester, Jessica and Kurt meet over coffee to assign partners based on shared interests, qualities, and personal attributes the college and high school students self-identified. The barista at the coffee shop Kurt and Jessica frequent for meetings once laughed that he initially thought they were assembling fantasy football rosters given the length of time it took them to decide on their "dream team" lineup and "backup" player list. Kurt's roster has been known to fluctuate during the semester; additionally, some of his students are undocumented and face challenges that impact their consistent participation within the program. In terms of Jessica's roster, a large number of her honors students hail from elite educational backgrounds or private schools, high levels of parent educational attainment, and affluent households. It is uncommon, but not unheard of, for Jessica's students to stop attending class and to stop communicating with their high school partners. Careful pairing of high school and college students is critical to Jessica and Kurt's

partnerships, which involve extensive back and forth dialogue and peer review feedback on writing between the partners.

It is within a context where the subtext of the service-learning relationship positions the college students as “helpers” and the high school students as “helped” that Jessica and Kurt decided to experiment with high school students assessing their college partners, in an effort to improve student interactions and shift the power dynamics that can too easily settle into place when college students are framed as writing “mentors” for their partners. Jessica and Kurt were particularly concerned about how to shift dynamics in the partnership in order to honor the knowledge and expertise of the high school students. A common refrain among Wildcat Writers participants and service-learning scholars is the need to work toward increased reciprocity and equity, through counteracting tendencies that would position the community members as in need of charitable acts from those who are more privileged (Smith and Cannen; Wetzel).

One of Kurt’s high school students, who is bilingual and self-identifies as Latina, shared a story with one of the authors about her experience at a Wildcat Writers event. The story focused on a pivotal moment that occurred when the student was sitting next to her college writing partner from Jessica’s class and waiting for a live performance of the *Glass Menagerie* to begin:

The college student turned to her, holding a smart phone, and said, “You speak Spanish, right? Would you mind proofreading this email I’m sending to my Spanish professor?” Up until that point the high school student had been shy about sharing her writing with the college student and uncomfortable speaking out during class discussions. (Shah, “It was Sort of Hard” 171)

As this subtle shift in power dynamics evinces, one’s willingness to take risks in any collaboration changes when one occupies the position of expert. Even though most service-learning practitioners are keenly aware that unequal power dynamics, uneven socioeconomic status, and a host of other inequitable social structures condition who participates and with what authority, how would the partnerships change if the community youth occupied the role of “expert” in a

more structural way? Kurt and Jessica began to consider how inviting the youth to grade college students might offer such an opportunity.

Furthermore, in 2011, Rachael and a team of five high school students shared the results of a participatory action research project on perceptions of how reciprocity was structured within the Wildcat Writers program (Wendler, Altuna, Crain, Perez, Sanchez, and Vidotto 4–10). One question the research team asked high school participants concerned students' perceived enjoyment of and gains from the partnership. An important recommendation that came out of high school participants' survey and focus groups was the need to link Wildcat Writers "assignments to a course grade for accountability" and the need to implement measures to ensure college students responded to their high school partners in a "timely manner" (Wendler, Altuna, Crain, Perez, Sanchez, and Vidotto). The research team's findings prompted action. Jessica and Kurt began exploring evaluation criteria and practices within the partnership that demonstrated that they were responsive to high school participants' recommendations for structural changes to hold the college students more accountable by linking assignments to a course grade.

It is within the context of this larger Wildcat Writers ecosystem that Jessica and Kurt engaged in conversations about the lack of assessment rubrics, equitable participation, and reciprocal grading to support accountability on the part of college students to their high school partners. After observing college student participants in previous semesters at points when they were less engaged than desired, failed to communicate with their partners in timely or mutually beneficial ways, or expressed frustration and confusion about how much the partnership "counted" toward their final course grade, Jessica and Kurt devised a structure to reward high quality and reciprocal interactions between the college and high school students. The goal was to strengthen reciprocity and to make it more substantial by tying community outcomes and perspectives to implications for the college students, rather than allowing reciprocity to remain abstract, meager, and unsubstantial.

*Designing and Implementing the Evaluation: Benefits, Drawbacks, and Questions*

After three years of a traditional grading structure, with each instructor determining the full grades for his or her own students, Jessica and Kurt decided to invite the high school and college students to participate in grading one another. Jessica and Kurt elected to devote 2% of the total course grade in Jessica's class to the community-determined grade. The question of how much of percentage weight to commit to community assessments was a challenging one, because Kurt and Jessica wanted to honor the labor the high school students contributed to carefully grade the college students, but on the other hand, the experimental nature of the practice of community grading suggested starting with a low percentage. As Kurt reflects, "Two percent of a final grade is a significant responsibility for [the high school] students, but not so weighty as to cause them to feel anxious about their assessment of their partner's overall final grade or to cause them to inflate grades" (Fischer, Personal Interview). This percentage is enough to give participants a sense of investment, but not so much that college students react negatively or express fear of their partner having excessive power over them.

That 2% was folded into a larger 20% of the course grade devoted to the community partnership in Jessica's class. The remaining 18% was allocated to teacher-graded Wildcat Writers peer review letters, online discussions with one's partner, sharing preliminary drafts of projects with one's partner, and reflective writing on shared activities. Said differently, the college instructor assessed 98% of the overall grade and the community partner assessed 2%.

To guide the high school students in evaluating the college students, Jessica and Kurt co-developed criteria to assess students' contributions to the partnership and collaboratively drafted an evaluation sheet. On a scale ranging from excellent, good, fair, and does not meet expectations, Jessica and Kurt required students to assess, via a checklist, the following elements: 1) the quality of partner responses to assigned writing projects; 2) the cooperative and thoughtful tone of the writing exchange; 3) the quality of useful advice offered toward meaningful revision of written work; 4) the partner's overall attitude and investment in the partnership; and 5)

the timeliness of the communication exchanged (that is, replying to one's partner within a 72-hour period). The other elements students were required to comment upon, in narrative form, included how they benefited from the partnership, how their partner might improve in future collaborations with others, and what numerical grade they assigned and why. In an effort to curb grade inflation or a paradigm where everybody gets 100%—regardless of the work invested—there was an explicit directive on the evaluation form asking for an *honest* assessment. The full evaluation sheet can be found in Appendix A. It was completed by both the college students and their community partners at the high school.

Jessica and Kurt decided early on in the implementation of this assessment plan that it would be important for their students to know that partner evaluations would be collected at the same time in both of their classes and shared with one's partner at the end of the semester. The peer assessment sheet was distributed to all students at the beginning of the semester so that everyone knew the criteria their partner would use to assess the work completed. As the community assessment centered on the strength of college student peer review, it is important to note that students in Jessica's classes were explicitly trained in effective peer review methods so they knew how to offer constructive suggestions; moreover, they practiced with one another in the college classroom before they began responding to high school students' drafts. It is also worth noting that explicit training in effective peer review was not uniformly successful and at least one student made a decision to disregard this instruction and instead to delete the majority of her partner's words and to rewrite the essay.

Jessica and Kurt worked to ensure that they would have ample evidence collected over the course of the semester to use in case of discrepancies or questions about youth-awarded grades. Jessica and Kurt required that they be included on all email correspondence and added to shared Google Doc working groups, and they had instructor access to view all discussion threads and posts on both learning management sites used in their collaboration (Edmodo and Desire2Learn were used to track students' community writing).

As the semester progressed, Jessica and Kurt monitored student partnerships and intervened where necessary in order to provide formative feedback to the college students to help them be successful. There was significant graded and informal assessment—from both teachers—throughout the semester to support students to make improvements along the way. In other words, the community evaluation sheet administered at the end of the semester was not the only feedback on the partnership students received.

For example, Jessica had to intervene in one partnership because a college student deleted nearly all of her high school partner's words and wrote a new essay for the student after using the strikethrough feature of Microsoft Word's Track Changes. Kurt contacted Jessica by email to say that even though his student's college partner may have had "good intentions," his student (a senior in AP Literature) was hurt by the "slashes used through her writing" (Fischer, "Partner review"). According to Kurt, his student came to him because she felt like she didn't have "anything to say at all" and was "discouraged" to return to the essay to revise it because it didn't feel like her writing any longer (Fischer, "Partner review"). Moreover, Kurt's student didn't want to address her concerns directly with her college partner and requested teacher intervention because she preferred not to "create any conflict" and expressed being "appreciative of her partner's corrections and concerned that her writing was not college-level" (Fischer, "Partner review"). Not only did this incident prompt Jessica to revisit the lesson on how to provide constructive feedback to high school youth by teaching parts of it again, Jessica met with the college student individually, and responded with marginal comments and an endnote for the high school student to praise what was working in the draft and to encourage her to keep up the great writing and thinking.

As the example of the college student who blue-penciled through the majority her high school partner's words illustrates, mistakes can and will happen in the context of community partnerships. It is for this reason that teachers must be available for and invested in sustaining ongoing communication. It is also essential to intervene quickly when something unexpected, urgent, or hurtful arises. When Jessica met with the college student, the student articulated she thought she was "helping" her partner by rewriting the draft. She did not intend to take

over or appropriate her partner's work. The partnership survived this rough patch and the two students worked well together, in a spirit of mutual respect, for the remainder of the semester. The error in the college student's approach to responding to her community partner's writing could have ruined the partnership and resulted in a harsh community evaluation, a distraught college student, and a grade appeal, but it didn't turn out negatively because of timely teacher intervention, good communication, and a willingness to admit and attempt to correct mistakes.

The final evaluations the students filled out at the end of the semester featured, by and large, helpful feedback. Particularly important to note is the more holistic approach to writing feedback that the community youth offered their college counterparts. Evaluation comments from the youth focused on the following attributes of the college student's work in the community writing partnership:

1. Patience with regard to the revision process, namely patience in responding to weak first drafts, and a willingness to encourage the development of evolving ideas;
2. Useful and easy-to-apply feedback;
3. Help in expanding ideas through posing questions in the margin;
4. Comments that exhibited a 'fun' attitude toward the writing process;
5. Concrete support to build an argument through connecting the main idea in the thesis to the ideas in the essay's body and to relevant textual evidence;
6. A sense of openness, relatability, friendliness, kindness, enthusiasm, positivity, and a welcoming attitude toward the writer in face-to-face meetings;
7. Dedication to closely reading drafts and timely feedback to the writer;
8. Assistance with college planning from an insider who has been there;
9. Expressions of human warmth by emailing to check in just see how one's partner is doing and to see how the revisions are coming along;

10. Insight into the youth's potential as a writer from a more mature writer;
11. Sentence-level feedback designed to support stylistic gains so the youth would sound more sophisticated and mature as writers;
12. Support in better understanding the level of commitment expected in college writing.

(Fischer, Personal Interview)

As this robust set of feedback points illustrate, the youth emphasized a capacious range of important skills and dispositions for community writing. For example, as Kurt recalls, one high school student remarked in his final evaluation that he wished his college partner could have been “more warm” and made an effort to “point out strengths in his writing rather than only seeing weaknesses” (Fischer, Personal Interview). Rather than simply focusing on accuracy, timeliness, or length of feedback, this high school student highlighted the affective dynamics involved with responding to writing, echoing scholarship on the importance of relationality and affect when communicating in community contexts (Dipardo and Schnack; Holmes; Skilton-Sylvester and Erwin; Shah, “Courage”). The student also emphasized the crucial nature of an asset-based approach when interacting in communities that have historically been framed by their deficits (Kretzmann and McKnight; González, Moll, and Amanti). This is important feedback for the college student to receive, to support stronger rhetorical awareness in future professional, civic, and community contexts.

Furthermore, the evaluation sheets high school and college students completed at the end of the semester revealed aspects of the partnership that neither Jessica nor Kurt were fully aware of as problematic. Kurt explains, “Some college students articulated frustration in their evaluations because their high school partners would send blank emails with an essay attached, but not ask any questions or write a personal message describing the attachment or addressing their partner by name” (Fischer, Personal Interview). In hindsight, Jessica and Kurt could have been more explicit about teaching the conventions around emailing one's partner with a document attached. Several high school students had not yet mastered commonly accepted

professional practices for communicating through email, which in some cases gave the false impression that they were not interested in having email exchanges about writing with their college partners.

In sum, the feedback forms usually offered useful responses to both the partnership coordinators and the college students themselves, but perhaps most important was the attempt to reposition the high school students as not just “mentees,” but intellectual partners. The evaluation forms, Kurt suggests, offered a vehicle for students to articulate “what they value in a college-level writing partner” and that 2% they decide served as a tangible reminder that “they hold some of the power, too” (Fischer, Personal Interview).

The college students, by and large, accepted the power that the high school students held over their grades. Because of the clear grading criteria, teachers’ early interventions into problematic partnerships that could result in a poor community grade, and the emphasis on evidence, student resistance to community-awarded grades was relatively rare. However, it did occur. In the case of a grade complaint, both teachers held the right to review and revise the grade awarded by the student grader in the event that there is a significant oversight or an error in judgment. It is worth noting that Jessica and Kurt have not found it necessary to revise any community-awarded grades, though they have received grade complaints and requests from college students to review grades awarded by community members.

### *Troubleshooting Grade Disputes*

When community youth, who are ostensibly in the position of subordinates who are being “served” by college students due to their age and level of intellectual development, assess their college partners—who are often framed as volunteer “service providers”—and one or more of the college students challenge the assessment, what is the process for resolving a grade dispute? It goes without saying that when community youth share the power of grading with their college partners, the act of assessment carries significant risk for the youth because there is social pressure to be polite or nice in an effort to maintain a good rapport with one’s partner. In other words, formal assessment presents unknown and even potentially negative repercussions for the youth because they must conceptualize

themselves as experts, or at least as relative equals, and assume their own competency to judge a college partner's contributions to the partnership in the face of having that assessment challenged or rejected. While not all community partnerships have the same power dynamics as partnerships between college and high school classes, the particular power imbalances in Wildcat Writers call for careful interventions to support community grading.

In situations where the assessments offered by community youth have been challenged by their college partner, the first step was to seek more information by contacting the teacher at the high school to check in regarding the grade and to ask the high school student to articulate why he or she assigned the grade. High school teacher Kurt Fischer shared a story of a grade complaint that occurred in his partnership with Jessica. He explained that his student Mordy<sup>5</sup> was initially quick to inflate the grade he gave his college partner after hearing the partner had initiated a grade complaint with Jessica, but once he received some validation that he would be supported in his assessment—and upon more considered reflection of the partnership throughout the semester—he affirmed his initial assessment. Kurt explained:

I asked Mordy about the grade. At first he thought it might have been a little low because he remembered how helpful Tad was when they met in person, and how he took the time to thoughtfully reply to the first project. Then he recalled the brevity of their subsequent communication, looked at the partner evaluation checklist again, and recalled that Tad never replied to his second project. He told me he ultimately thinks his initial assessment of 85% was fair. (Fischer, "Grade complaint")

As a result of the discussion with his teacher, the high school student praised what his partner did well and also clarified his college partner's problematic performance areas, which he identified quickly with the backing of the partner evaluation checklist co-designed by the high school and the college teacher. In other words, Mordy was neither too lenient, nor did he err on the side of being too strict in his assessment of Tad's work within the partnership. Jessica communicated with Tad that she had reviewed the grade with Mr.

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<sup>5</sup> This and all student names are pseudonyms.

Fischer and that both teachers agreed that Mordy's assessment was reasonable, appropriate, and considered. She was supported with the evidence that had been collected over the semester, as she had access to all email correspondence, the Google Doc working groups, and all discussion threads and posts on the learning management sites. She was able to verify Mordy's claim that Tad had devoted inadequate time and attention to his replies and never submitted a response to Mordy's second project, despite her reminder that Mordy's draft was awaiting Tad's feedback. Moreover, Jessica was able to use her institutional authority to stand behind the judgment of the community assessor.

It is worth mentioning that in community-based grading, troubleshooting grade disputes and other problems that arise between partners can be time-consuming labor for all involved, especially for community coordinators. While Kurt reports that he "did not feel [he] had to invest more labor or time on troubleshooting student issues than [he] would have over the course of any other semester" (Fischer, Personal Interview), there can be significant ethical concerns with adding additional labor to already overburdened community partners through community-based grading. In this case, the rewards to the community youth and to himself as a teacher, at least from Kurt's perspective, outweighed any extra time or labor involved due to designing, implementing, and troubleshooting the community grading experience, though we recognize this may not be true for many community partners. For Kurt and Jessica, the community assessment component of their partnership afforded a lens into important ethical, relational, and reciprocal elements of their partnership, ultimately creating a space to reflect together on ethical co-teaching, shared labor, difficult dialogue, and collaboration.

Through their experience, Jessica and Kurt have learned that specific strategies can be invaluable in the successful implementation of community-based grading. In the final section, we outline tentative best practices for others interested in exploring community evaluation of students.

## CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE COMMUNITY MEMBERS START GRADING COLLEGE STUDENTS: EIGHT RECOMMENDATIONS

Individual instructors may have little or no on-the-ground experience with community members assessing college students. We developed the following list of recommendations to assist in designing an assessment plan to fit one's unique institutional context and project initiative or idea:

- **Undertake this kind of assessment once your relationship with your community partner is established, the institutional context supports it, and your positionality makes sense.** In some institutional spaces, the assumption that “mentors” and “mentees” have fixed roles may not be easily changeable, and experimental grading structures such as this work best in stable partnerships where the college instructor is not in a vulnerable institutional position. In this case, Jessica and Kurt have a longstanding history of successful collaboration, Kurt is the chair of the English department at his high school, and Jessica is a full-time faculty member with the support of her administration. This grading structure would have been much more difficult had Jessica been a graduate student who must have her syllabus scrutinized and approved before the semester began, or within a partnership where extensive trust had not yet been established.
- **Consider questions of community partner labor when deciding to pursue community grading.** Implementing a community grading system will mean additional work for community members, so proceeding without careful reflection may actually make the partnership *less* reciprocal. In Kurt and Jessica's partnership, Kurt was able to integrate community grading into his students' workload with relative ease, and the documents he designed with Jessica could be reused in future semesters. He also felt that community grading contributed to stronger college student feedback, which was beneficial both to his grading load and the students' revision work (Fischer, Personal Interview). This labor balance may be different in other contexts, for example when community grading would require community participants to attend additional meetings to complete evaluations.

- **Design specific evaluation criteria in collaboration with the community partner.** The process may take several meetings to establish to the satisfaction of all parties. Careful consideration will be needed to move toward ecologically valid assessments: work to align the evaluation with the key skills and course goals, anticipate the impact particular criteria will have on various areas of the learning environment, and strive to create an evaluation that will produce helpful information.
- **Discuss the assessment or evaluation criteria early in the semester with all stakeholders (students and community members)** to promote transparency and a sense of confidence in one's ability to do the task well.
- **Model and teach the community-based work students will be expected to perform and allow them to practice together to master the task.** For example, in this case study, students were participating in peer review with community youth, and students had to be explicitly taught how to do peer review effectively before they were assessed on it. They also had opportunities to practice peer review with their college peers before working with youth.
- **Create an environment to foster ongoing communication, to enable quick intervention on the part of teacher and community coordinator, and to actualize the ability to work through challenges.** When problems or misunderstandings arise, students must be able to feel confident about their work, to recover from communication blunders, and be successful in the partnership. Intervening early in problematic interactions will also increase the chance that major issues can be resolved before the assessment takes place, lessening the frequency of low community-based grades, the number of college students irate at their community evaluations, and the number of grade appeals.
- **Keep the community-graded percentage of the course fairly low-stakes when experimenting initially and stipulate that the grade may be modified by the instructor in cases where there is a perceived error in judgment.** For example, Jessica and Kurt set the grade weight for the community evaluation

at 2%, supplemented with an additional 18% devoted to the community partnership but graded by the instructor. They also communicated to students that the community assessment could be altered by the instructor, though in practice, there has not yet been a need to overrule a community member. Ultimately, they both felt this was an appropriate weight for their partnership in order to create investment, as 2% can mean the difference between a lower grade and a higher grade in borderline situations, but not provoke stress or fear. Other community writing practitioners may choose to increase the assessment percentage to honor the labor of community partners or fit particular institutional contexts and community-engagement needs.

- **Collect and retain documented evidence of students' contributions to the partnership in the event of an informal or formal grade appeal.** For example, Jessica and Kurt had access to all written communication between partners through the centralized site of an online learning management system. Be prepared for some community members to need reassurance that they will be supported in the reasonable assessments they make about their partner's performance. Be prepared for pushback from some college students who do not regard their community partner as having the requisite expertise or intellectual development to grade their performance. Collection of evidence will be helpful both in reassuring community members and responding to student pushback.

## **CHANGING VALUES, VALUING CHANGE**

As Huot argues, "Because assessment is the site where we marshal evidence about what we will value globally as a society and more locally as teachers, researchers and administrators, we can, by changing assessment, change what we will ultimately value" (8). For years, community-based instructors have struggled to give reciprocity a valued place in partnerships. All too often, exchange reciprocity may be thwarted when community members end up giving more than they receive, or worse—experiencing harm; influence reciprocity may be difficult to enact, as inviting community members to shape the partnership can be challenging in contexts centered on the power of the university and its public relations messages which almost

always position community members as in need of “service” from the university; and generativity reciprocity may never come to fruition, as mutual transformation of partners can only occur when influence and exchange reciprocity are thriving. At a deep level, reciprocity is not sufficiently valued in university-community partnerships; it often remains a weak ideal that is unable to have a material impact. Yet as Huot argues, we can change what we value by shifting what we assess. Assessment may be one avenue for redirecting values toward community control, outcomes, and insight.

In this article, we theorized the practice of community members grading students and suggested tentative best practices for involving community members in student evaluation. One recommendation we wish to underline is the importance of context in community-based assessment: this type of assessment is only viable in particular situations, where the instructor, students, and community partners are ready, the institutional context is supportive, and the *kairos* is right. Ultimately, we leave it up to community-engaged instructors and their partners to find their comfort zone regarding when to experiment with new grading practices.

The case study presented here of community youth grading college students is one experiment in the direction of community-based student assessment, and many questions remain to be taken up by further research. Validity theorist Lee J. Cronbach defines validity as argument: “Validation speaks to a diverse and potentially critical audience; therefore, the argument must link concepts, evidence, social and personal consequences and values” (4). We have made an exploratory pass at the argument that community assessments of students are valid in some contexts, but further evidence to support this argument, such as additional evidence from community graders and the college students themselves in the form of qualitative interviews or ethnographies, is still needed. We hope that others will contribute to this argument and counterargument. The continued growth of the civic engagement movement in rhetoric and composition makes urgent the need for additional strategies to foster and renew forms of reciprocity that are attentive to power dynamics.

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## APPENDIX A: WILDCAT WRITERS PARTNER EVALUATION

Name of person completing this evaluation (your name):

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of partner: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please answer the following questions as truthfully as possible. Your partner will see your evaluation at the end of the semester.*

1) How would you rate your Wildcat Writers partner for her/his responses to you, as well as the quality of the responses s/he gave? Check one.

Gave excellent responses; the responses were always superior in quality and exceptionally helpful	
Gave good responses; the responses were usually helpful	
Gave inconsistent responses; the responses were not always helpful or s/he didn't always respond to me	
Barely responded to me or did not respond at all; responses quality lacked	

2) How well did this person cooperate with you on revision of your writing? Check one.

Took the initiative in communicating with me; always participated thoughtfully and enthusiastically	
Worked agreeably with me; consistently participated in our exchanges	
Could be coaxed into communication; participated sometimes, but not always	
Did not communicate with me very well or at all	

3) How would you rate this person in the area of feedback and collaboration? Check one.

Provided many ideas for the development of my writing, including giving me useful feedback	
Participated during our exchanges about my writing; offered me good feedback	
On some occasions made suggestions to me about my writing	
Seemed bored or disengaged; did not give me feedback when I needed it	

4) How would you rate this person's overall attitude and willingness to work with you? Check one.

Assisted me helpfully and consistently displayed a positive attitude in all of our exchanges about my writing	
Offered some encouragement to me about my writing; his/her attitude mostly positive throughout	
Seemed preoccupied with other assignments, classes, work, etc.; attitude was okay	
Took little pride in working together; displayed a poor attitude or showed disregard by lack of communication	

5) How would you rate this person's timeliness? Check one.

My partner's responses to my writing were sent on time and sometimes even earlier than I expected	
My partner's responses were sent very close to the 72-hour response time deadline set by his/her teacher	
My partner's responses were usually late, but s/he was apologetic and communicated well	
Some or all responses to me were never completed; thus I had to seek support for my writing elsewhere	

6) Please comment on how collaboration with this person has benefited you and/or what you have learned.

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7) Please comment on ways this person can improve on collaborative efforts in the future.

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8) What grade (e.g. 75%) are you assigning to your partner and why are you assigning this particular grade?

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