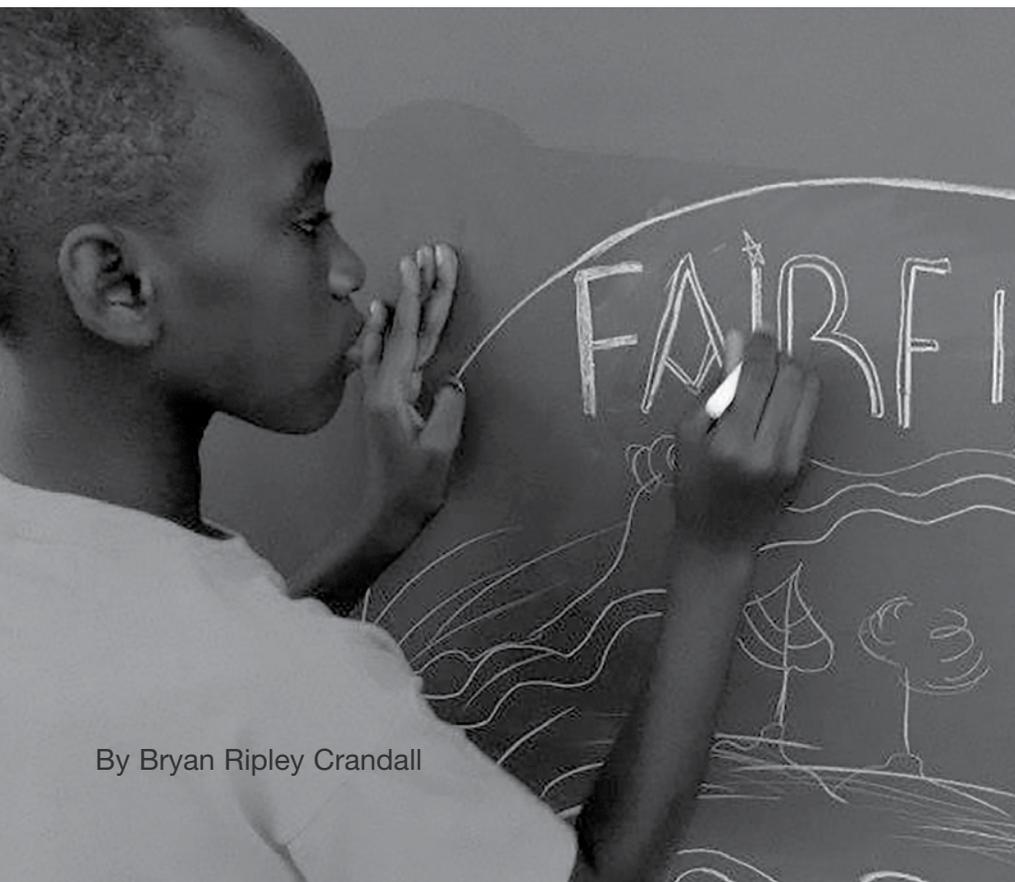


WRITING WITH UBUNTU IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT YOUTH



By Bryan Ripley Crandall

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Abstract: Begun as a formative experiment, the Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield University offers Young Adult Literacy Labs for youth to write, including Ubuntu Academy—a program for immigrant and refugee students. This article highlights a public commitment to Ubuntu, a sense of community and human

relations, while reflecting on what became possible when new spaces were designed to bring youth and teachers from urban, rural, and suburban school districts together to write. Teachers in a National Writing Project summer institute collaborate with youth in young literacy labs, while revisiting and rethinking their own writing instructional practices to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Keywords: diversity, English language learners, literacy labs, National Writing Project, refugees, professional development, Ubuntu

I have taught over a thousand students since my professional career began as an English teacher. No population has influenced me more than English language learners, however, especially those relocated to the United States through refugee services. Although I taught mainstream

"I Am, Because We Are"

i.
arriving, unread,
unwhite and blue
from a journey of sandy solitude,
with travel, to unravel
their own syncopation of history,
blistered, calloused, yet alive ...
... their drive without wheels or temperate tears,
nor stolen years of boyish fears,
driven forward,
only trusting
a forgotten reason to cope. ...

an irish kennally once said,
i love /
to believe /
in hope,
and this dope repeats him, here,
before he's six feet under, dead,
still living alive on this page.

(from "Sudanese Song for Lost Boys, Opus I,"
penned in a writer's notebook, 2002)

secondary English courses, a personal interest for working with English language learners evolved when demographics changed in my own classroom (Crandall, 2010). I learned, like Roxas (2010), that working with refugee youth “should be seen by both teachers and members of the local community as a shared and public commitment to the great and sometimes unfulfilled promise that public education often holds for many refugee students and their families” (p. 72).



Figure 1. Youth in Ubuntu Academy participate in a team-building activity.

This article highlights my “public commitment” to relocated populations of youth through my directorship of the Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield University (CWP–Fairfield), a National Writing Project site (Applebee & Langer, 2013; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2013). In this role, I advocate for immigrant and refugee youth who attend Ubuntu Academy, a Young Adult Literacy Lab hosted on our campus each summer (see Figure 1). To date, 60 young people have attended and been given opportunities to collaborate with 450 American-born youth and 37 teachers who also participated in our summer programs (see Table 1). Investing in English language learners, I feel, makes me a better teacher, researcher, and human being.

Arriving—Context for Ubuntu Academy

I participated in a Louisville Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute during my fifth year teaching English at an urban, K-12 public school in Kentucky. At the time, Louisville was in the process of relocating 200 young refugee men commonly referred to as Lost Boys of Sudan (Bixler, 2005). A poem sketched in my writer’s notebook that summer (one referenced at the beginning of



Figure 2. Ubuntu Academy is part of Fairfield University’s commitment to local communities.

this article and originally written to help a group of Sudanese men studying for their GED) eventually led to a doctorate program at Syracuse University and my career as a National Writing Project site director. Similar to experiences of other educators who have attended National Writing Project summer institutes (Whitney, 2008), my experience with the teachers teaching teachers model was transformative.

Fairfield University is 58 miles east of New York City and slightly north of the Long Island Sound. It is a Jesuit institution with a mission to educate for social awareness and moral responsibility (see Figure 2). My primary job as CWP–Fairfield’s director is to advocate writing instruction. Through professional work with the Jesuit University Humanitarian Action Network, I began to see additional ways to advocate for populations in our schools that are too often overlooked. Jesuit institutions, like Fairfield University, have a long history of working with refugee populations and believe, “With access to a quality education, individuals can better fulfill their own potential and fully contribute to the growth, strength and stability of their society” (McPherson, 2016, p. 5). Because of a commitment to community partnerships and justice, CWP–Fairfield became successful in creating opportunities for teachers and students from urban, suburban, and rural school districts, including English language learners, to come to Fairfield University to write together.

In the tradition of National Writing Project sites (there are 9 in Texas), CWP–Fairfield hosts a leadership institute every summer for teachers to create professional writing portfolios and to participate in workshops for teaching writing effectively. Unique to CWP–Fairfield, however, has been our Young Adult Literacy Labs—summer writing programs for school-aged youth. These labs began as a formative experiment (Bradley et al., 2012) after I asked, “How might a redesign of a National Writing Project summer institute benefit with an increase in youth participation?” Having knowledge of co-planning and co-teaching during a summer writing institute (Chandler-Olcott et al., 2014), I became interested in how youth involvement might enhance the teacher professional development we offer each summer. A teachers teaching teachers model benefits from opportunities when students teach students and students teach teachers as well.



Figure 3. Youth participate in a dialogue circle to promote togetherness.

From a Journey of Sandy Solitude—Writing with Immigrant and Refugee Youth

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (2016) reports that global displacement of individuals is at a record high with approximately 65.3 million uprooted as result of civil conflict and natural disaster. Stated differently, 1 out of every 113 individuals today is a refugee; 50 percent are children (McPherson, 2016). For young people granted asylum in the U.S., especially those arriving with limited and/or interrupted formal education (Decapua & Marshall, 2010), schools are primary locations for enculturation and developing language brokers (Njue & Retish, 2010; Perry, 2009). Texas currently leads the U.S. in refugee resettlement (Price, 2016; Refugee Services of Texas, 2016) and has similar English language learners in their schools.

Roy and Roxas (2011) warn, though, there is “an urgent need to revisit and rethink the instructional practices used with refugee children and to seriously consider how best to meet their needs in the mainstream classroom” (p. 545). Research specific to immigrant youth and literacy (e.g., Campano, 2007; Fu, 1995; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007) emphasizes an importance for fusing in- and out-of-school communities (Hull & Schultz, 2002). For these reasons, Ubuntu Academy was designed to offer immigrant and refugee youth a location to work with American-born peers and teachers during the summer.

Driven Forward—Defining Ubuntu in CWP-Fairfield Programs

Ubuntu, a Nguni Bantu word, emphasizes allegiance and the importance for human relations (see Figure 3). It translates, “I am, because we are,” and according to Swanson (2009), it “is borne out of the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, and that dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment” (p. 10). With few reading and writing opportunities for English language learners available in southern Connecticut beyond school, I contacted superintendents, colleagues, deans, teachers, and friends with an idea to build a summer program that would enhance reading, writing, and speaking skills. According to Miller (2016), “our collective has infinite possibility to support and cultivate a more compassionate society” (p. 197), and I believe that the generosity of many, who we are together, was an important first step to take.



Figure 4. Youth read with Jessica Baldizon, a teacher in Ubuntu Academy.

Ubuntu Academy provides opportunity for immigrant and refugee youth in Connecticut to interact and write with American-born peers and teachers during summer months (see Figure 4). These are young people from Rwanda, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Benin, Honduras, Burundi, Tanzania, Guatemala, Ecuador, Eritrea, Sudan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Rules established for our summer programs are simple: (1) Write every day, (2) Speak every day, (3) Read every day, and most importantly, (4) Have fun—it is summer, after all! Each week begins with teachers and students attending genre-specific workshops and brainstorming possible ideas for writing. As much as possible, adults and young people write and think together, and by midweek, teachers and youth share first drafts. By week’s end, the writing is polished and revised for possible publication and exhibition.

As an example, youth attending this year’s Ubuntu Academy and teachers enrolled in CWP-Fairfield’s Invitational Leadership Institute participated in workshops for exploring Rick Shaefer’s



Figure 5. William King, Ubuntu Academy teacher, analyzes art with students.

Refugee Trilogy (<http://www.rickshaefer.com>), a series of large charcoal drawings scheduled for exhibition at Fairfield University's Walsh Gallery. The artist's drawings were analyzed, interpreted, discussed, and used for inspiration (see Figure 5). Teachers and young people had an opportunity to share relocation histories and how lived experiences sometimes leave impressions on our humanity. Poems, essays, and opinion pieces resulted (see "Refugee Trilogy: Inspired by Rick Shaefer and Writing Our Lives with Ubuntu" at http://www.blogtalkradio.com/nwp_radio). Student and teacher writing, too, was edited and recorded into podcasts (<https://cuseum.com/web-app/?fuam>) that were used by Fairfield University Art Museum to accompany Rick Shaefer's drawings at the exhibit.

Further, the teachers and youth who attend summer programs with CWP-Fairfield also submit written work for publication in *POW! Power of Words*, a journal for collaborative writing. Juma, inspired by Refugee Trilogy, wrote about his memories in a refugee camp before relocating to the U.S., including one of his scar:

Back in Tanzania, east Africa, one of my friends came up to me and said we should show our allegiance and loyalty by cutting parts of our skin with a knife. The arms were the best place for leaving a mark. I foolishly accepted the challenge. Be careful what you do. I should have talked with someone wiser before I made such a decision.

Before he submitted work for publication, though, Juma shared drafts with his writing group and received feedback from teachers and peers. His writing was a location for teachers in the institute to discuss how they offer feedback on student writing, and it sparked dialogue about changing demographics in Connecticut schools.

More recently, however, support for youth attending Ubuntu Academy has extended to the academic year through service-learning courses supported by Fairfield University. Now, preservice teachers have opportunities to learn alongside immigrant and refugee during the school year. To date, students and preservice teachers have read Kwame Alexander's *Booked*

(2016) and *The Crossover* (2014), Warren St. John's (2009) *Outcast's United*, John Dau and Martha Aruel Akech's (2010) *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan*, and Katherine Applegate's (2007) *Home of the Brave*. The preservice teachers have created curriculum to accompany these texts and have been given opportunities to work on campus and in local schools in support of student language acquisition.

There's a Reason to Hope—Providing Writing Support for Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Ubuntu Academy resulted from personal teaching experiences, the expertise of National Writing Project colleagues, and what eight African-born male English language learners taught me when I set out to learn how schools could better support their writing achievement in the U.S. (Crandall, 2012). These young men reinforced many ideas that should be important to educators who work with English language learners:

- Writing instruction needs to be practical for gaining real-world skills: translating letters in the mail, filling out doctor forms, and applying for jobs.
- Coaches on athletic fields and teachers in the classroom who provide opportunities to stretch, to participate in drills, to scrimmage, to reflect, and to simply play, are most effective.
- Poetry and oral traditions are universal. Teachers who promote conversation, dialogue, and performance in school enhance writing processes.
- Programs such as Gear Up, Upward Bound, and Boys and Girls Clubs provide additional language support for students.
- Teachers of writing must be open to global history and lessons of colonialism. Exploitation of populations, sometimes violently, resulted in the emigration, relocation, and border crossing occurring today. History matters (and not just the version told in North American textbooks with Western slants).
- Some teachers disrespect cultural differences and do not differentiate instruction for English language learners. These teachers need support and professional development.
- American streets are powerful and can be distracting. Sometimes helping a family at home requires school to become a second, third, or even fourth priority.
- A love for one's family is enough to excel in school, despite how long it might take to achieve a degree.
- Writing is everything, so having opportunities to write in school should be abundant.
- There is tremendous need to be heard by American audiences. The stories of immigrant and refugee youth must be shared and uplifted.

These young men shared admiration for teachers who write with

students, who deconstruct and demonstrate writing processes, who provide models of what is expected, who compose with them, who allow students to compose with each other, who offer choice in assignments, and who create safe spaces to explore personal experiences through writing.

Living Alive on This Page

Applebee & Langer (2013) acknowledged that young people who write “need to learn that knowledge in the 21st-century workplace does not rest with an individual, but in the collaboration of a group” (p. 11). Writing is a community act and teaching young people to write empowers them to access communities they wish to inhabit. When I first wrote about my teaching experiences at the Louisville Writing Project 14 years ago, I did not foresee the numerous communities I would be introduced to as a result. Writing enhanced my world, and the seeds planted in my writer’s notebook grew into trees and forests. Youth deserve the same.

I have learned through 23 years of teaching that writing is meant to be collaborative. A writer becomes a writer in the company of other writers. This, I believe, is Ubuntu and what CWP–Fairfield has set out to accomplish. Supporting relocated and immigrant youth requires us to acknowledge the power in bringing communities together. Schools, universities, and community organizations that collaborate around the needs of immigrant and refugee youth establish spaces for them to grow within our democratic traditions. Such youth warrant more locations in which to write.

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| CWP-FAIRFIELD'S SUMMER PROGRAMS | | |
|---|---|-------------------|
| Year | Literacy Labs & Teacher Institute | # of Participants |
| 2014 | Little Lab for Big Imaginations | 21 |
| | Dark & Stormy Night (Novel) | 33 |
| | Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Poetry) | 5 |
| | Graphic Novel Writing | 12 |
| | Stop The Presses (Journalism) | 9 |
| | eStories | 6 |
| | Who Do You Think You Are (College Essay) | 9 |
| | Ubuntu Academy (Immigrant & Refugee Youth) | 15 |
| | Invitational Leadership Institute for Teachers | <u>14</u> |
| | | 124 Total |
| 2015 | Little Lab for Big Imaginations I | 24 |
| | Little Lab for Big Imaginations II | 18 |
| | Playwriting & Poetry | 12 |
| | Dark & Stormy Night (Novel I) | 35 |
| | Dark & Stormy Night (Novel II) | 27 |
| | Stop The Presses (Journalism) | 6 |
| | Ted Talks | 5 |
| | Project Citizen | 13 |
| | Who Do You Think You Are (College Essay) | 10 |
| | Ubuntu Academy (Immigrant & Refugee Youth) | 23 |
| Invitational Leadership Institute for Teachers | <u>8</u> | |
| | 181 Total | |
| 2016 | Little Lab for Big Imaginations I | 18 |
| | Little Lab for Big Imaginations II | 24 |
| | Digital Communication (Journalism) | 7 |
| | Dark & Stormy Night (Novel I) | 38 |
| | Dark & Stormy Night (Novel II) | 35 |
| | Sports Writing | 8 |
| | Project Citizen | 8 |
| | Who Do You Think You Are (College Essay) | 16 |
| | Playwriting & Poetry | 19 |
| | Ubuntu Academy (Immigrant & Refugee Youth) | 25 |
| Invitational Leadership Institute for Teachers | <u>15</u> | |
| | 198 Total | |

Table 1: Three Years of Young Adult Literacy Labs at Fairfield University