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Tobi Jacobi

The Zine Project: Innovation or Oxymoron?

The Zine Project helps students and teachers consider the assumptions and expectations we have about how literacy functions in school and community contexts. In this article, Tobi Jacobi examines the relationships among composition theory, community literacy practices, and service learning, taking into account the complex possibilities and implications that arise when zines are incorporated into the classroom.

If teachers can become aware of who their students really are, and what motivates them to read and write, and learn how adolescents develop, practice, and refine their literacies outside of school, educators will be better equipped to connect those out-of-school literacy practices to the work students do in school.

—Barbara J. Guzzetti and Margaret Gamboa, "Zines for Social Justice: Adolescent Girls Writing on Their Own"

On a bright spring evening, approximately eighty adolescent zinesters, friends, and family joined students in my upper-division university literacy course for our annual zine reading and celebration. Writers stood up, tentative at first, clutching their pages, and read in progressively louder voices. They spoke of lost pets, teen love, the tragedy of war, drugs, alcohol, the pull of reform, and the struggle to make change. Parents and teachers gaped at the young writers, uncertain whether to reproof or praise these young adults for their language in writing about decidedly adult issues. Younger siblings clutched their college desks and cupcakes scrawled with poem, story, and words. One young woman took the stage and announced that she had no affiliation with the writing groups. She had intended to be a spectator, uninvolved, reserved, claiming her private history with the genre. "I've written zines before," she began. "I didn't want to be part of this project, but I'm really proud of the work that my friends have done. I want to read something I wrote."

As we stretched the limits of our two-hour celebration, this group created a "zine wall" full of visual and literary insights, cheered as writing groups shared their words, and wondered at the diversity of voice and design that had emerged from an eight-week community literacy collaboration called "The Zine Project."

This article aligns the world of zine writing with current research on out-of-school literacy practices and argues that community literacy projects such as The Zine Project make space for students and community partners to embody what Anne Ruggles Gere has called "the extracurriculum of composition," dynamic spaces for exploring the relationship between composition theory and community literacy practices. Although some teachers have successfully adapted zines within college and high school writing classrooms, another hybrid approach is to organize collaborative zine writing workshops. Such practice, I suggest, allows teachers to introduce the genre across diverse communities, provide opportunities for students to serve as zine workshop leaders and writers, and value the "underground" origins of zines by creating contexts for learning beyond the classroom. The Zine Project I describe here could be adapted by secondary school teachers interested in engaging students in ethically sound community-service learning. In addition, the zines themselves and our understanding of the youth writers shed...
light on students’ out-of-school literacy practices, practices that teachers should understand for the ways they affect in-school literacy.

Defining Zines

Zines are typically single-authored, handmade, do-it-yourself, creative publications centered on themes and issues that explore the personal and the political, the extraordinary and the mundane. As countercultural artifacts, they are often situated in direct opposition to canonical literature and dominant discourse and work to celebrate difference through multigenre creative expression. Zines land somewhere between largely uncirculated personal writings and avant-garde literature by operating through underground distribution networks that are (mostly) under the radar of the mainstream publishing world.

While there is some debate about when the contemporary zine movement was born, many cite the convergence of fanzines in the 1930s with the political underground of the 1960s and 1970s. The contemporary zine scene can be found through independent bookstores, cafés or, more recently, online distribution centers, making hundreds of zines visible and available for a few dollars, the cost of postage, or another zine. Zines are particularly attractive to adolescent writers—mostly girls—who feel disenfranchised by peer pressures and societal expectations to conform to physical, emotional, and linguistic social norms. Barbara J. Guzzetti and Margaret Gamboa also suggest a democratic purpose for zines: “Zines have also been . . . referred to as an act of civil disobedience; a tool for inspiring other forms of activism; and a medium through which girls effect changes within themselves, including confronting their own weaknesses, such as racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice” (411).

In many ways, then, zines can be characterized as a curricular antidote to the current pressure teachers face to teach to the test. And yet, zines are not school genres. Many zines emerge in direct opposition to the real or perceived constraints of school literacy practices and intend to transgress such barriers through creative rebellion. Given these origins, it is important to consider how alternative methods of using what Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear call “the etch of zines” (184; italics in original) might encourage students to experiment with the genre without appropriating it into the conventions of school writing. I offer The Zine Project as one example of a community writing project that attempts to embody such an ethos by adapting some of the dynamic conventions of the zine world to a multiauthored collaboration.

The Zine Project as Community and Civic Engagement

The Zine Project is a community literacy partnership that engages university students with youth writers in an eight-week creative writing and publishing project. It was first developed in two sections of my upper-division English course called Literacy in Gendered Contexts in 2004 and 2005. Each spring, twenty-five students worked in triads with groups of local youth to write, revise, and publish the eight zines that emerged from our project. The zine workshop groups collaborated with four community organizations and collectively wrote each week with forty-five to fifty adolescent writers.

My approach to creating successful community writing experiences for students draws on the best practices of contemporary service-learning pedagogy, primarily establishing shared needs, creating reciprocal relationships, and constructing opportunities for reflection.

Community Need

This project emerged from conversations with coordinators in several education-based community groups (e.g., the Boys and Girls Club, a local residential recovery facility for juveniles). Together we recognized the potential for writing projects to function as collaborative space for literacy work and mentoring across our communities. Although reading and arts programs were available, there was not yet a program in place with an emphasis on writing for community publication. We also recognized that adolescents and young adults regularly turn to writing as a method of expression and identity formation. A community writing program, specifically zine workshops, could utilize that affinity for private writing as a starting point and potentially transform it into a dynamic public forum. University students
bring an additional “need” to our collaboration. While they certainly share some of the same demographic characteristics as youth zinesters, many have plans to teach or work in the publishing sector after graduation. This project provides them with an opportunity to write collaboratively and gain experience facilitating a literacy project that requires active and ongoing negotiation, enthusiasm, patience, creativity, and a willingness to experiment with standard publishing conventions.

Reciprocity
Co-inquiry lies at the heart of The Zine Project, and students became co-inquirers as workshop facilitators and as contributing zine writers. After an introduction to the genre of zines and some training, students spent six weeks working with youth writers to fill notebooks with rants, lists, stories, reviews, poetry, and artwork inspired by their creative prompts and workshop activities. They simultaneously contributed to online journal discussions to reflect across the various zine groups and sites. Several students also formed a research team to assess the project and its efficacy. In weeks seven and eight, the zine groups worked to revise the writing, develop a theme, and create an overall visual design for their final, polished writings. Once the zines were printed, writers, community partners, friends, and family were invited to a community reading on the Colorado State University campus where each group presented excerpts from its final project and participated in other activities that highlighted creativity and writing. These scaffolded activities encouraged reciprocity throughout the project and across constituencies.

Active Reflection
To maximize student learning, I designed several layers of reflection. Each student participated in a weekly online forum, which was in turn accessible by any classmate. The online forums also allowed students to record their participation (allowing me to document that participation for assessment purposes), review peer observations, and make visible the project’s challenges and successes. Another group functioned as the “meta-zine” group each week by reading all entries and posting a general analysis to let the class know what common issues and concerns were emerging. At the end of the project, students also delivered a group letter to the community program coordinators as a method of providing feedback and self-assessment.

These three core tenets of service learning contribute to students’ growing sense of engaged citizenry and community investment. Their responses to weekly prompts, including the following examples, demonstrated this engagement as well as their deepening understanding of how literacy functions in alternative contexts:

Community zinesters are taking away from this project the knowledge that writing does not have to always be academic. That writing can be profound, even if it just deals with how near Geese are. I see that kids are exploring their minds and are able to convey those intricate facets of [their] hearts through writing. This effect can be extremely powerful because communication stems from language and if a child can get an early start on expressing herself, then she can easily take charge in other elements of life. To know yourself helps you to get to know others and your place in the community. (JA)

I have always been a proponent of traditional education and literacy, but this showed me that literacy comes in different forms. It showed me that there is power in creative writing. The girls in our group felt better about themselves and therefore more empowered when their Zine was published. I also see how writing can build communities and relationships. (LP)

As these zine workshop leaders attest, The Zine Project makes visible our assumptions and expectations about how and where language functions. Future community zine writing collaborations could easily be extended beyond after-school programs as groups of two to four students lead zine writing workshops with organized groups (e.g., veterans associations, youth groups such as Girl Scouts or 4-H) or in designated spaces (e.g., local YMCA, senior centers, community centers). Workshops could also be organized around a social issue relevant to a community (e.g., environmental issues, homelessness, economic concerns) to engage students and invested community partners in a social action project.

What does it mean to assume an ethos of zines without disrupting the ebb and flow of the zine community? How can we avoid (over)institutionalizing a potentially democratizing form of writing and communication?

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The Zine Project as Democratizing Literacy

Community writings such as zines and community writing projects such as The Zine Project also challenge us to consider how and why we value certain texts and certain forms of authorship. As Michelle Cornstock suggests, “In many writing classrooms, we have already begun to recognize how traditional notions of literacy, authorship, and the text marginalize viable alternative forms of writing and communication” (387). Teen zinester Kimma McPherson corroborates: “zining has taught me about the way I communicate, and, perhaps more importantly, how to be really honest in communication. Zines have also given me a chance to experiment with different styles of writing” (150–51). After six weeks of writing in The Zine Project, each writer examined her work and selected several pieces for a revision workshop and possible publication. Groups also began negotiating the design and tone of the collaborative zine, a process that makes visible the joys and challenges of collaboration. This engages students in multiple discourse communities as they grapple with issues of audience, editorial privilege, and the process of preparing the writing of multiple authors for public consumption.

A decade of research on literacy practices beyond school\(^3\) suggests a strong relationship between literacy and power, context and learning; as a community writing collaboration, The Zine Project offers teachers a way to make visible how literacy functions in contexts beyond the expectations of standardized exams and college applications. It also makes space for students to experiment with discourse and power as they simultaneously navigate the roles of collaborative zine leader and zine writer. The following students’ reflections demonstrate their shifting understanding of how literacy and discourse function in contexts beyond the classroom:

I think the kids are starting to understand that writing does not have to be academic or boring. One of the girls in our group passionately said she would not come if it was a class. (JG)

What I see happening with our groups is that they are getting their feet wet in other writing styles. Even if they aren’t doing a certain kind of poem right they are still getting familiar with the notion of writing under different situations. I also see them struggling; some of them have already discovered the damnable creation known as writer’s block. (JM)

Taking on the dual role of workshop facilitator and contributing writer provides students with valuable experience in the ethics of collaboration and opens dialogue on the politics of publication: Which work is included? What order will writings appear in? How will the title be chosen? Who will write the introduction? Where will the zine be distributed? Questions such as these offer students and teachers opportunities for dialogue about the socioeconomic and cultural roles that textual artifacts assume in our lives in and beyond the traditional classroom as the following student reflections demonstrate:

I think letting them speak about what was going on in their lives and then using that to invent writing prompts was a good tactic. For example, the kids were all upset about CSAP [Colorado Student Assessment Program] testing, so we wrote about it a few times just to give them an opportunity to rant. The rant genre actually was really popular with them. I think this was because they never really considered that writing but we let them know that we have a rant section in our school newspaper and that got them thinking. (JG)

One girl shared with me during the production process that she was afraid to put any of her stuff in
because she was a poor speller. I revealed to her that I struggled with the same problem and the next session she was asking me to rewrite her work and eventually she was writing it out herself. Literacy became a collaborative effort as well as an outlet for these girls to express who they were. (LS)

The Zine Project created space for students to grapple with literacy in alternative contexts and participate in a civic engagement project that allowed them to take on collaborative leadership roles. It is with this possibility of community engagement and literacy learning in mind that teachers must also recognize the paradox of a “zine project.” What does it mean to assume “an ethos of zines” without disrupting the ebb and flow of the zine community? How can we avoid (over)institutionalizing a potentially democratizing form of writing and communication?

The Zine Project as Genre Exploitation?

Although the zines that emerge from collaborations such as The Zine Project hold much possibility for challenging some of our exclusionary beliefs about language and power, their use also poses significant problems. Since texts exist and circulate beyond the academic year, teachers have to consider the implications of the products we assign. The Zine Project has raised some compelling questions that push this course project (and me!) into the larger realm of textual production and the ethics of representation: genre appropriation, sustainability, and circulation.

**Appropriation:** How will zines and the process of zining be defined? Will students have access to contemporary zines? How will the weekly workshop avoid the conventions of a class? What criteria will be used to assess the project and the zines?

**Sustainability:** How will this project open and close? What will happen to the community writers when the support of the weekly workshop is withdrawn? Will the project be ongoing? Annual? Will any zine ever have a second issue? (Most do.) Who will “own” the zine once the project is over?

**Circulation:** Where will the collaborative zines circulate? How will at-risk populations be represented? Most zinesters want feedback. Will contact information be circulated? If so, for whom? Who will fund the printing and distribution? If sponsorship is sought, does it further violate the zine world?

While I respect the enthusiasm of educators who have incorporated zines into their curriculum, I also recognize the risk of institutionalizing a set of literacy practices that developed beyond formal school settings. Like Knobel and Lankshear, who argue against “a temporary ‘zines publication center’ in the corner of the classroom” (165), I worry about the potential for an alternative literacy such as zine-making becoming appropriated by the conventions of school and assessment. Are we doing violence to a potentially revolutionary set of literacy practices? Am I perpetuating the cycle of “ridicule and marginalization that [zinesters] are writing to escape” (Dutro, Sinor, and Rubinow 141; italics in original) by constructing a space where zines are consumed and produced? Should I “stop calling them zines,” as one student chides?

I believe this project does more right than wrong. It works because of the chaos it inspires, and “zine” terminology has come to symbolize the kind of exploration, collaboration, and debate I want to encourage in students. They need to be mired in conversations about wordplay, document design, and context just as I need to have my expectations about Standard English and genre challenged. Such issues inevitably deepen our classroom conversations and our collective understanding of what it means to be writers whose words circulate in the public sphere.

To reconcile my complicity, then, I have developed several project design guidelines that work toward ethical relationships and meaningful learning experiences for my students, our community partners, and the larger zine world:

> Design an alternative evaluation method (no grades on the zines). Although assessment criteria should be negotiated by students and community partners, zines, by definition, intend to operate outside of traditional school-based evaluations. One approach is to evaluate the project, not the product, by establishing shared goals and expectations rather than genre expectations.

> Encourage negotiation and shared leadership between students and community writers.

> Train students to facilitate zine workshops.4
> Encourage collaborative writings. Although zines are traditionally single-authored, hybrid community texts can make visible the process of writing and negotiating content and purpose through a collaboratively authored introduction or other collective texts.

> Experiment with alternative forms of writing in multiple contexts (in line with the current trend toward multigenre writing).

> Create space for dialogue on the ethical issues surrounding the co-optation of zines into the classroom.

> Circulate the collaborative zines beyond the writers. Extra copies can be distributed at public libraries, in local coffee shops, and through online distribution sites.

> Encourage writers (students and community partners) to learn more about the zining community. I donated most of my zines to the resource library in our Center for Community Literacy so students can check them out. Ideally, a public library would be the host site so the zines are publicly accessible. Project zines could also be archived at one of the many collection sites around the country; for example, the Denver Zine Library has over 6,900 zines (http://www.denverzinelibrary.org).

**Zines and Hope**

Zines demonstrate a critical literacy in which writers are more than passive consumers of social expectations and late capitalism, more than quiet participants in traditional school curricula increasingly driven by test scores and contextually empty/ignorant mandates. As Julie Chu argues, zines offer youth writers a critical space for offering critique of the larger culture by “articulating a place where those on the margins of power and, particularly, ‘outcasts’ are central to the vitality of the space” (78). As writing teachers, we have a responsibility to recognize the breadth and depth of literate activity around us, and the adoption of an ethos of zines is a step in the right direction. By situating a zine project both in and beyond school, teachers can find ways of “stimulating students’ wit, critical interpretation, and creative subversion” (Guzzetti and Gamboa 411) without shifting the production and consumption of zines from the underground consciousness to the relative rigidity of school conventions. JA encourages future workshop leaders in the following:

Don’t rush, let them embrace the Zine on their own. Learn about them, take time to compliment them at every chance! Every chance! Compliments do not grow tired with kids, unless they’re redun-

**ZINE RESOURCES**


This is a good resource for interviews with zinesters, sample texts, distribution sites, and reflective and analytic essays on the zine world.


This political text anthologizes excerpts from girl zines that offer critical responses to the political, body, and social issues confronting women and girls in today’s culture.


In one of the few book-length studies of zines, Duncombe offers a history of zine subcultures and questions the possibility of textual rebellion in contemporary consumer-driven society.

*Zine Scene* by Francesca Lia Block and Hillary Carlip (n.p.: Girl Press, 1998)

In this fantastic zine writing resource, the authors explain zine genres ranging from lists and poems to reviews and rants as well as dynamic formats to inspire the budding zinester.

*Zines* edited by V. Vale (San Francisco: V/Search, 1996)

This book highlights zinesters’ insights on the craft and process of zining through interviews conducted across the United States.
dant. Have each compliment be individual to that person. Pick out specific details of what they did well and heighten and emphasize them. Let them be heard, never turn someone away when they want to share. If they are monopolizing sharing time, then work around it, but do not silence them. Show them that you care and are eager to hear what they have to say. Be enthusiastic. Good grief...I feel like I could ramble about this forever.

Notes

1. See Christie “CJ” Bott’s enthusiastic essay on the use of zines in the high school English classroom and Dan Fraizer’s piece on zines in the two-year college for ideas on curriculum and classroom practice.

2. The zine workshops were facilitated in tandem with our class, complementing the course content (in this case, gender and literacy) but working to avoid situating the community writers in an ethnographic fishbowl.

3. See Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz.

4. To prepare students to facilitate zine workshops, we spent several days in class discussing their expectations and assumptions about working with a group of writers outside of their daily discourse community. I also developed a training manual with writing prompt ideas, a statement on professionalism, tips for conducting workshop sessions, and so forth. This manual and a tip sheet are available at EJ on the Web at http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/Extensions/extensionsmain.htm.

5. Special thanks to the 2005 Zine Project assistants, Renee Rallo and David Redus, and to the students of E406 (Spring 2005) for their contributions to this community literacy effort.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Jacobi discusses how zines can be used in and out of the classroom to motivate students and celebrate their accomplishments. Increasingly, students’ out-of-school literacies are coming into the classroom, expanding our definitions of literacy. The lesson plan “Defining Literacy in a Digital World” asks students to identify the many texts that they read and compose—including books and magazines, television shows, movies, audio broadcasts, hypertexts, and animations. Students begin to recognize the multiple literacy demands in contemporary society and create a working definition of literacy that they refine and explore further as the school term continues.

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=915

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT