



## CHAPTER 12

# Creative Acts, Critical Insights: Adult Writing Workshops in Two Chicago Neighborhoods

Hal Adams and Janise Hurtig

### ◆ INTRODUCTION

*Only a literacy that associates the learning of reading and writing with a creative act will exercise the critical comprehension of that experience, and without any illusion of triggering liberation, it will nevertheless contribute to its process . . . . And of course this is no task for the dominant classes. (Freire, 1985, p. 17)*

This chapter describes two partnerships entered into by the Community Writing Project (CWP) of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) in order to, as Freire says, promote critical insight through creative acts. One partnership was with an employment training program in cooking at the Chicago Community Kitchen (referred to here as the Kitchen), located in a neighborhood community center on the border between African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods on Chicago's West Side. The other partnership (referred to here as the Village) involved a parent education program of Project Hope, a community-based organization serving the Mexican neighborhood of Little Village, also on Chicago's West Side, and UIC's Center for Research on Women and Gender. Both partnerships incorporated community writing workshops into existing programs that serve poor people living in ethnically and linguistically diverse neighborhoods. The Kitchen workshop was composed of English- and Spanish-speaking men and women of diverse national backgrounds, and the Village workshop participants were all monolingual Spanish-speaking Mexican women. We taught the writing workshops: Adams, the Kitchen workshop; and Hurtig, the Village workshop. Although the two workshops differed in several important specifics, they were linked by a shared method and a common stance toward the relationship among individual creative expression, group responsibility, and social change. In discussing each workshop, we pay particular attention to the impact of language on the quality of the writing, the group discussion, and the group's evolution into a community of writers.

The CWP hosts writing workshops for people who ordinarily do not consider themselves writers or artists and publishes their reflections on everyday life in *Real Conditions*, which is then distributed free to the writers, their families, and their communities. We develop the workshops by forming working relationships with public institutions or community organizations serving ordinary people in a variety of neighborhood settings. The partnerships and the workshop method derive from

the central goal of the CWP: to create a context in which ordinary people, by thinking and writing together, face the real conditions of their lives and reconsider their relationship to each other, their communities, and the world. We operate on the assumption that the seeds of social change are to be found in the artistic and intellectual renderings of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including poor people and immigrants. Marginality silences ordinary people by denying the value and legitimacy of their knowledge and experiences. Our intention is to provide an opportunity for those who have been marginalized to break the silence and find an audience for their intellectual work and creative products. The approach we take to community writing is based in our understanding of literacy and its relationship to art and social change. We consider literacy to be not an individual skill but a social act. When literacy is a shared, creative act, it holds the potential to produce knowledge for change.

## ◆ CONTEXT

In the two programs we describe here—the Kitchen and the Village—the participants were poor people in the throes of major life transitions. For the participants in both workshops, writing about their pasts, present situations, and dreams for the future allowed them to describe and understand in their own terms a moment of apparent rupture in their lives.

### The Kitchen Workshops

The Chicago Community Kitchen is located in a former hospital that is now owned by Association House, a long-time, highly respected nonprofit social service agency. Association House operates several programs for low-income people in the building, and the Kitchen uses the large, well-equipped cafeteria to prepare breakfast and lunch 4 days a week for hungry people who drop by. The Kitchen also offers 12-week employment training programs in cooking to people who are unemployed, underemployed, or unhappily employed. They come to the training program seeking paid work in the restaurant and food industry. We offered our writing workshop to this employment training group.

The Kitchen staff welcomed the writing workshop as part of the employment training program. They agreed with us that the move toward economic self-sufficiency entails a major life transition that involves developing new skills and new social roles; they agreed, too, that learning should build on already developed personal strengths, cultural values, and community identities. We suggested to the Kitchen staff that the writing workshop program would provide trainees with a supportive group context in which to write and discuss stories about their histories, and that developing these stories would allow them to see that their pasts could help them get where they wanted to go. Furthermore, the writing workshop would increase group cohesion, increase participants' enthusiasm for the program, and build confidence in their abilities to complete it.

Generally, the goals and approaches of the Kitchen and the writing program were a good match, but in one area they were not. The aim of the employment training program was to move people into an institutional setting that took English for granted and often discriminated against non-English speakers; meanwhile, the

aim of the writing workshop was to create a group context for creative self-expression in which the cultural background and identity of each participant was respected and in which Spanish thus was considered a legitimate means of self-expression and self-representation. A vivid example of this difference surfaced in planning for the trainees' graduation ceremony. The writing program planned to recognize both languages by having speakers of both read their work at the ceremony. Although in other areas the training program had accommodated Spanish speakers (of the four Kitchen staff members, two were completely bilingual), the Kitchen informed us that at the graduation only English would be spoken, as a demonstration that all graduates were encouraged to learn English.

Though all participants in the training program were eager to learn, many faced important distractions. The women who had been homemakers with primary responsibility for their children or grandchildren wondered who would take care of those children. They asked themselves whether an entry-level job, even one with benefits, would offset the inconvenience and worry of leaving their children with someone else. The Spanish-speaking mothers often thought their time could be better spent learning English than learning a new trade. Sometimes they considered scrapping both ideas and staying home, speaking Spanish, and raising the children. The two young men not long out of high school needed the money from regular employment but were not sure they were ready to exchange their freedom for a rigid work routine. Some of the women trying to get off public aid lacked confidence in their educational background and worried about their limited work-for-pay experience. The Spanish-speaking men seemed willing to try the world of wage-paying work with their passable English. One English-speaking woman, abused and homeless until recently and still in contact with her abuser, was deeply committed to being a cook but often was preoccupied with the welfare of her children. Underlying these doubts and motivations was the reality that all the trainees were in a program that required high performance standards in the kitchen, challenging written examinations for health department certification, and careful adherence to attendance and behavior rules. Those who fell short in any of these areas as the training program progressed were dismissed or left of their own accord. Of those who started the program, about half finished.

### The Village Workshop

The Village is a family education program sponsored by the community-based organization Project Hope in the neighborhood of Little Village, located 4 miles due south of the Kitchen. Little Village and the adjacent neighborhood of Pilsen (Chicago's principal port of entry for Mexican immigrants since the early 1960s) together form the largest, most concentrated, and most segregated Mexican American community in the Chicago metropolitan area and one of the largest Mexican American communities in the United States.

At the northern end of Little Village is Cermak Avenue, a lively commercial street dominated by locally owned businesses whose Spanish language signs adorn the turn-of-the-century buildings once occupied by the neighborhood's Eastern European immigrants. Rising above the street's modest shops are the steeples of Our Lady of Tepeyac parish. Tucked away behind the parish building, in the rectory's basement, are the rooms housing the Village program. Although Project Hope came

to occupy the rectory building through its affiliation with a Catholic hospital, it is not a religious organization; nonetheless, its location in a sacred and culturally legitimate space has certainly made it both personally comfortable and socially acceptable for neighborhood women who attend its programs.

Around the same time one of us (Adams) was meeting with the staff of the Kitchen, the other (Hurtig) was meeting with the staff of Project Hope to plan the incorporation of a writing workshop into the Village. The director of Project Hope had approached her with the idea of collecting the life narratives of the women in the program. All the women had made the difficult journey from Mexico in recent years, and few of them had returned home since. Their journeys involved hardship and bravery, personal losses and newfound possibilities, all of which emerged as stories-in-passing in the course of discussion among the women participating in Village programs. With the program staff, we decided to develop a program that would serve three purposes at once: provide the Village's participants with a structured context in which to share their stories and support each other in their common struggles, create a setting in which the women's personal narratives could be recorded and compiled, and involve the women in turning their stories into curriculum materials for the Village's developing family literacy program.

Four mornings a week, neighborhood mothers came to the Village, preschool-aged children in tow, to participate in its various programs and workshops. Although the Village offers programs to men and women alike, its participants have been exclusively women: all mothers with children ranging in age from newborns to high school graduates, all immigrants from Mexico, all monolingual Spanish speakers, and all struggling economically. Most of the women came to Chicago from Mexico reluctantly. Some accompanied their husbands; others came alone or with their young children, joining their husbands, who had arrived months or years earlier. Only a very adventurous few came on their own. Few of the women who participate in the Village programs have paid work outside their homes, and few have extended family in Chicago.

For most of the women, leaving Mexico meant leaving their families, the place of their childhood memories, their communities, and the social and moral life that made sense to them. Nonetheless, because they settled in Little Village, a transnational neighborhood in which the movement of people, products, and capital between Chicago and Mexico is central to family and community life, Mexico remained a tangible part of the women's lives. In conversation, the women were constantly evaluating their daily experiences through comparisons to Mexico. If Mexico was always a distant desire, it was never far away in their thoughts. The place of Mexico in the women's lives was reflected in the themes they chose to write on: "An Imaginary Visit to Mexico," "When I Was a Little Girl," "My First Days at School," "My Native Town." Less often they chose to write about their daily lives in Chicago, and only once, early in the workshop, were they moved to write about the traumatic move to Chicago—when given the prompt "When I Arrived."

## ◆ DESCRIPTION

In this section we discuss the methodological approach that ties the two workshops together and describe the steps that lead from the workshops to the publication of an issue of the magazine *Real Conditions*. Because the writing themes emerge through the

group's discussion of their daily experiences, each workshop session is unique. To convey the spontaneous and collaborative nature of the workshops, we supplement our description of the workshop method with short vignettes from particular workshop sessions; we include sketches from the Kitchen after describing the method and then offer a more detailed story from the Village.

## The Workshop Method

The writing that the workshop participants submit becomes the content of the workshop. Sometimes people write during the workshop; at other times they bring writing from home. People always have the option of writing on a topic of their own choosing, but often they prefer a prompt to get them started, and the possibilities are limitless. We prefer prompts that help writers be specific about their experiences. The group discussion or previous writing from the group often generates the best prompts. For instance, in the Kitchen workshop participants come from all over the city to the meeting place. Because they arrive early to prepare breakfast for the cafeteria line, they often talk about the difficult arrangements they make at home before starting their arduous journeys to the Kitchen. The prompt suggested here was "Describe what you go through to get here."

After each session, the workshop teacher reads, types, and responds to the writing. Everyone gets a copy of each person's writing at the next meeting. At this point the writing becomes public, and the group assumes the responsibility of responding to it, a step that is as important to the workshop approach as the writing itself. The purpose in this process is for group members to encourage each other with praise and ideas, and to identify aspects of the stories with broad, even universal relevance to the participants and their communities. In this phase the group assumes the collective responsibility for putting out a good product, namely, a magazine that will be of interest to the communities where the writers work and live. As the workshop progresses and the publication deadline for the magazine approaches, the participants give more and more attention to the product. The description of the debate at the Kitchen about the magazine's subtitle (see the section *Mixing It Up: Language Choice*, below) is an example of how the magazine takes on increasing importance as its publication nears.

Because many people attended schools in which only the teacher's response to work was considered important or valuable, we often remind the group about the value of each person's response. We also give suggestions on how to respond. We might ask, for example, "Were there any key words in the writing that caught your attention?" "What did you especially like about this piece?" "What in it would you like to know more about?" "Is there anything in this piece that relates to your experience?"

Writing for the first time is often hard, and the group itself needs to help its members overcome their hesitancy to write. The group can do so by calling on its best tendency, namely, to take care of its members. Responding with care is one way to demonstrate this collective concern for the individual. Another way is to treat every submission with respect and encouragement. For instance, one mother at the Kitchen workshop submitted this two-sentence essay: "I gave my daughter her eighth birthday party last week. I wish I hadn't." The group responded: "Where did you have the party?" "Why do you wish you hadn't?" "I knowww what you mean,

girl, last time I did that . . . ." "Being a parent is impossible sometimes." "You should've gone to Chuck E. Cheese." The responses evolved into a long discussion about parental responsibility and its frequent conflict with the pressure to take a paying job. The group eventually decided to write about "What I'm Responsible For," and the author of the two-sentence essay knew she had started the whole productive process.

### Mixing It Up: Language Choice

Because the aim of the writing workshop was to create a group context for creative self-expression in which the cultural background and identity of each participant was valued, issues of language use and language choice have been key in the workshop method. In the Kitchen, which included both Spanish and English speakers, language differences initially seemed to define subgroups within the writing workshop. All the Spanish speakers sat on one side of the table, and the English speakers and bilingual speakers who were proficient in English sat on the other. Each group's shared language reflected certain shared experiences: Most notably, the monolingual Spanish speakers were all immigrants, many from rural backgrounds, whereas all of the monolingual English speakers were native to the United States and were from urban backgrounds. The few bilingual speakers were the exception, varying as to whether they were immigrants and whether English or Spanish was their first language.

At first we were concerned that the group members would not communicate across their language differences and that this would limit the group's cohesiveness and productivity. There is no question that the bilingual character of the workshop slowed the discussion significantly at the beginning. Consequently, we provided at least one translator for the group at all times to do simultaneous or intermittent translation as needed.

Everyone was remarkably patient with, even interested in, the laborious translation process. Often the work of translation became central to the discussion of the writing. People sometimes joined in to help clarify the meaning of a passage when they suspected the translator was giving short shrift to a translated idea. For example, on one occasion several weeks into the workshop, the writers were discussing possible subtitles for the magazine that we would be publishing after the employment training program ended. One of the English speakers suggested *Mixing It Up*. The phrase, with its obvious reference to cooking, also contained more subtle, colloquial references to jazz, to the intense interaction between the workshop participants about their writing, and to the confusion ("mixed-up feelings") many members were experiencing as they struggled to make it through the program. The suggested name was an instant hit among those who spoke English.

As an English speaker pantomimed the title suggestion with an imaginary spoon and mixing bowl for the benefit of the Spanish speakers, the translators offered *Mezclándolo* as the best translation. The Spanish speakers were baffled. They conferred with each other, then objected. *Mezclándolo* did not have the multiple meanings in Spanish that *Mixing It Up* had in English. "Our writing is not only about cooking," they objected. "We have written about many things. If we call our magazine *Mezclándolo*, people will think we only write about cooking." Initially, the English speakers could not believe that *Mixing It Up* did not have the multiple

connotations in Spanish that it did in English. But the African American man who proposed the clever title was the first to grasp the point the Spanish speakers were making. He then did a turnabout and took the lead, against his own suggestion, in convincing the English speakers that *Mixing It Up* in Spanish translation would mislead the Spanish readers into thinking that the magazine would be about cooking only, thereby diminishing the magazine's impact in Spanish. In the end, we gave the magazine the subtitle *Writings From the Community Kitchen of Chicago/ Escritos de la Community Kitchen de Chicago*.

Unlike the Kitchen, where the workshops were conducted bilingually and the use of English was encouraged, at the Village all activities took place in Spanish. The Village is a program within a community organization that aims to support its participants in their existing situations and does not set learning English as a condition. Moreover, because Spanish is the predominant language of the neighborhood and community, including such institutions as the parish and the school, parents can be active in the community without speaking English: One of the Village mothers was the parent coordinator for her children's school's bilingual program; another was a parent volunteer at her child's school; and several were active members of their religious organizations. Nonetheless, the ability (or lack of ability) to speak English hovered as a symbol of the possibilities available to these women in Chicago, and using Spanish to write and talk about life in Mexico symbolized an ongoing relationship with their communities of origin.

The Village writing workshop was held exclusively in Spanish except during the first 6 weeks, when the program's director, a non-Spanish speaker, participated as well. During those weeks Hurtig translated for her. As with the Kitchen workshop, the process of translation slowed down the pace of writing and discussion, but it also encouraged the group to focus attention on the meaning of their words and reminded everyone not to take our choice of wording for granted. In a sense, the bilingual dynamic enhanced the group's awareness of the creativity of language. The sensitivity to word choice and the subtleties of meaning encouraged by the translation process diminished once the director stopped attending and the group became monolingual.

### "I Defend Myself": How Workshop Themes Emerge

The following account of one Village workshop session demonstrates how workshop themes emerge in response to participants' discussions of their experiences.

It was a rainy November Monday, so the mothers and their children began to trickle in a bit late, around 9:30 a.m., hovering in the nursery to chat and help the young children get settled with the nursery staff. By 10:00 a.m. Hurtig and the four mothers had coaxed each other to the back room, where they gathered around a long table with coffee, juice, and snacks. As they settled in, Hurtig distributed word-processed versions of the participants' writings from the previous week. Conversation slowed as the women began to focus on reviewing the writing, which on that day was a response to the prompt "My House, the Good and the Bad." The theme had emerged in the course of conversation about their home environments, with issues ranging from the pleasure they got from cooking a good meal or playing with their children; to conflicts with their in-laws, with whom many of the women shared a home; to their weariness over the constant cleaning up after the children.

As we were about to begin reading, Elvia González<sup>1</sup> preempted the usual routine by launching into a discussion of her current domestic plight. Her husband had told her that he was planning to move the family to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where his extended family lived. His rationale was that there were more work opportunities and a greater likelihood of buying a house there. Mrs. González was upset by the prospect of the move. She had lived with her husband's siblings in the past, and their relationship was conflictual at best. In addition, she had been in Chicago for only 3 years. She was just beginning to put down roots and make a nice home for her family. To make matters worse, she had heard that no one spoke Spanish in Fort Wayne, a situation that heightened her fear that the move would lead to isolation and helplessness. Mrs. González was visibly distraught and could not stop talking about her plight. Eventually, the group encouraged her to write a letter to her husband. The idea appealed to her, and while we moved on to read the previous week's pieces, she wrote.

It was clear, however, that the group was distracted by their concern for Mrs. González's situation, and the women's hearts and minds were not on their writings. As soon as the four women had read their work, we turned to Mrs. González and asked her to read her letter. It was a heartfelt but hesitant, sometimes apologetic, plea for her husband to understand her situation and that of her children and to consider what was best for them. When she finished, there was a moment of silence. Finally Marta Rivas spoke up. "It's all right, Elvia [*está bien*]," she began. "But it sounds as though you are apologizing to your husband for asking for what is best for you and your children. You have to defend yourself [*tienes que defenderte*]." And with that statement Mrs. Rivas told the story of how she had defended herself and her children to her husband when she discovered that one of his brothers had been hitting one of her children.

Mrs. Rivas's story provoked a chain of similar stories from the other women, one following quickly and passionately after the other. In most of the stories the women told of situations that had prompted them to defend themselves for the first time. Eventually Hurtig broke in, suggesting that they might write about the first time they had stood up for themselves. In the past Hurtig's suggestions of prompts that addressed difficult emotional issues or conflictual situations were not well received. But in this case the women were enthusiastic. The title for their writing that day was *Yo me defiando* (I defend myself).

## ◆ DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

The workshop method we follow in the CWP is based on the potential for social criticism and change that abides in the relationship between literacy and art. This relationship has been discussed by the Caribbean social critic C. L. R. James (see Adams, 1995, pp. 396–397; Grimshaw, 1992). James thought the artistic expressions of ordinary people contained truths essential for social change. If ordinary people recognize the truths within their art, James concluded, they are more likely to trust their capacity to make a better world. As discussed in the Introduction, the

<sup>1</sup>Names of workshop participants are pseudonyms.

principal aim of the CWP is to provide a context in which ordinary people can discover and share these truths. Through creative writing and group discussion, participants come to appreciate their own and others' knowledge and gain a greater understanding of the real conditions of their lives. By writing for each other and for a larger community that will read their work, the writers come to appreciate the public value of their artistically rendered insights.

## Individual Struggles Viewed as Historical

It is characteristic of our approach to the writing workshops to treat expressions of individual struggle not as psychological matters but as historical ones that can be addressed through creative expression rather than therapy. For instance, in the Kitchen workshop participants wrote about the stress of failing performance tests in the employment training program, and in the Village workshop participants wrote of their isolation in a new country. In both instances the members worked with each other to express the stories elegantly, accurately, and truthfully. They did not attempt to fix the writers' personal problems. Only in the context of deepening the stories and clarifying the writing through group discussion did the members offer psychological support to each other as individuals. That support was a fortunate by-product of the process, not its primary focus.

## Writing Taught in Groups

We teach writing in groups for two reasons: first, because the real measure of one's success should be one's capacity to influence others and be influenced by them, and, second, because marginalized people have a better chance of realizing their potential to make a better world in a group than they have alone.

We frame our work as building community through creative expression rather than as teaching literacy or ESL. This means that at times groups with different linguistic or educational backgrounds participate in the same groups. In mixed-language groups, we see linguistic differences as resources for the group's work and help participants negotiate understanding.

## A Locally Published Magazine

The magazine we publish, *Real Conditions*, is an important element of the program. We publish an issue about every 4 months for each workshop and distribute it primarily in the neighborhood where it is written. Following the publication of most issues, we host a public reading, also in the writers' neighborhood. The magazine and the reading serve notice to the writers themselves and to their families and neighbors that ordinary people have important stories to tell and that they are the best ones to tell these stories. The magazine is a locally made cultural product that surfaces publicly in a society that usually requires public displays of intellect and art to come from outside the community.

## Writing Workshops Held in Public Places

We host writing workshops in public places that serve ordinary people. The two programs described in this chapter met in an employment training program in a community kitchen and in a social service agency in a church. We also have held

workshops in public housing complexes, libraries, public schools, jails, and community centers.

## ◆ PRACTICAL IDEAS

### Get to Work in the First Session

People will understand the workshop better through practice than through explanation, and they will see that you are serious. Be relaxed but energetic. Have people write something toward the end of the session. Ask them to give it to you, but leave them the option not to. Read what is submitted to you carefully before the next session, and make encouraging comments. Pick out some interesting phrases, and type them on one page. Hand them out at the beginning of the second session. Make them the focus of the discussion during the second session. Let the group take responsibility for carrying the discussion.

### Never Miss a Session

Never be late. Carry on if only one person shows up; people will notice.

### Wait for Others to Respond to Writing

Do not always be the first one to jump in with a response when the group discusses a piece of writing. Wait until others start.

### Respond Thoughtfully

Be kind and thoughtful in your responses, and encourage others to do the same. Let the group know how you think the responses can improve the writing and deepen the discussion.

### Type and Copy Participants' Writing

Type as much of the submitted writing as you can. Make copies for everyone. Having copies focuses people's attention on the writing and puts the authors in the spotlight.

### Share Your Own Writing

Occasionally submit your own writing to the group, and ask for responses.

### Take Notes and Summarize

Let the discussion range far and wide, but keep notes so you can summarize before everybody writes at the end of the discussion. Point out themes that emerge from the discussion; they give people ideas for further writing.

### Encourage Specificity and Detail in the Writing

Have some writing prompts ready in case people get stuck, but phrase them to encourage specificity. Say things like, "Don't simply tell us you were angry; describe for us the situation that made you angry." When someone submits a vague piece of writing, on "friendship," for instance, ask the writer to tell a true story that will make

the point. Read something to the group that will demonstrate the appeal of clear, detailed writing.

### Use Photography

Place photographs of the neighborhood around the table. Ask if anyone would like to write about them. Take a walk around the neighborhood with the group. Have someone take pictures, and have the group write about them.

### Address Language Differences in a Multilanguage Group From the Beginning

Distribute as many typed translations of the writings as possible. After an oral reading in the original language, have a translator read the piece aloud in at least one other language represented in the room.

### Talk About the Publication

From the beginning, talk about the publication and the event you will have at the end of the workshop. Be straightforward about any limitations on the publication. Incorporate as many of the writers' suggestions as possible. In dual-language groups, let participants know that everything will be presented in the magazine in both languages, if possible. This piques people's interest in seeing how their words will appear in translation.

### Bring in Sympathetic Guests

Occasional guests give the group a chance to show off in front of an outsider who will be dazzled by their writing and discussion.

### Keep the Workshop Adult-Focused

Children visit the workshop to marvel at and emulate the accomplishments of their talented elders. When outside observers say, "Wouldn't it be just great if you could include children?" tell them, "That's for another program. This one is for adults creating a culture for the kids to grow into—to rebel against or accept. The adults are the heroes here; they are the thinkers, artists, and activists."

## ◆ CONCLUSION

Charles Washington (a pseudonym), a student in the employment training class and a member of the Kitchen workshop, wrote in a piece for *Real Conditions* entitled "Sauce of Life":

Being in the kitchen makes you feel like you are going somewhere, which is good, because we, not just me, but all the people who I love in this class, are at the top of their game. [They] make the kitchen come alive. I thank them for being a part of my sauce.

Later, in his speech at the graduation ceremony, Mr. Washington did something astonishing. He honored those who entered the program and stayed for varying



periods of time but failed to graduate. He said they deserved to be part of the ceremony despite having failed to meet the graduation standards of the employment training program; they had made contributions in other ways to the success of the graduates by being a key part of the team that cooked and served the meals.

Mr. Washington's tribute to those who had not succeeded in conventional terms puts success in a new light, or at least in one that is rarely considered in U.S. educational settings (see Varenne & McDermott, 1999). His writing and graduation comments show clearly that he does not consider success and failure to be a simple matter of dividing people into those who have mastered certain prescribed tasks and skills and those who have not. Instead, he recognizes that people contribute in different ways to the group's success and prefers to measure it in those broader terms. He also implies that people should judge their individual progress on an array of criteria, including how they contribute to a group and manage their continually shifting relations with others.

The *Real Conditions* mission asserts, "Only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world." However, to develop creative solutions to conditions that oppress them, ordinary people need the opportunity to liberate themselves from conventional ways of thinking, reading, and writing. Through their discussion and writing, Mr. Washington and the other workshop members strive to represent the reality of their lives; they collectively put out a magazine that they can distribute with pride in their communities; and they measure progress by how well this process happens. In the process they implicitly reject notions of literacy that reduce it to little more than individual skills or techniques. Literacy is a social act, an act of knowing the world engaged in by creative subjects. When people collectively make a cultural product that tells the truth about the real conditions of their lives and put it out for public discussion, they have become literate.

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## ◆ CONTRIBUTORS

Hal Adams directs the Community Writing Project at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in the United States, and is editor of the project's magazine, *Real Conditions*. He founded the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, which he edited or coedited for 9 years. Formerly, he was a faculty member of the College of Education at the University of Iowa and a teacher and counselor in the public schools.

Janise Hurtig is a research associate at the Center for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in the United States, and associate editor of the magazine *Real Conditions*, published by the Community Writing Project. She received her doctorate in anthropology and certificate in women's studies from the University of Michigan in 1998. She has conducted ethnographic research focusing on the politics of education, literacy, and gender in Venezuela and the urban United States, and leads writing workshops in schools and other community settings in Chicago's Latino neighborhoods.