

# A Brief History of Students at the Center

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In the fall of 1996, my English III students used their creative writing and literary studies to examine the ideals and realities of American democracy. Our readings of such writers as James Baldwin, bell hooks, June Jordan, Ishmael Reed, and Alexis de Tocqueville culminated in intense dialogues about the purpose and structure of public education. What began as an abstract discussion grew into something decidedly more personal. "Why," they asked me, "are some teachers, like you, more willing to devote time to their students, while others are not?" This was the first of many questions my students plied me with.

They discovered that one simple reason I had time to work so closely with their writing and build curriculum with them around their concerns, experiences, and passions was that I had chosen to teach on a part-time basis. In 1994, after ten years of teaching full-time, I had come to the realization that I could not teach effectively with 150–180 students per day—the teacher-student ratio that still exists at McDonogh 35 and other public high schools in New Orleans and throughout the United States. Having approximately 30 students in a class made it impossible to read and discuss each student's writing as a class. For me, this meant spending four to five hours a day responding in writing to the weekly essays my 150 students submitted. For my students, it meant having one response (rather than multiple ones) to their writings and relying on the authority of the teacher rather than building the capacity to respond to each other's work.

In the conversations that ensued, I was struck by how savvy their thinking was. They knew with the accuracy of a finely tuned Geiger counter which teachers were (or were not) concerned about them as human beings. I soon realized that they'd learned early how to dodge the bullies and con artists who daily confronted (and tried to hustle) them inside and outside of the classroom. They'd developed all sorts of evasive techniques to avoid physical harm and/or incarceration by the very police whose responsibility ought to have been to protect them. In many, many ways my students were far more realistic about their educational situation than I was. Indeed, they discussed how it was only in the most exclusive private schools and in programs for gifted students that teachers enjoyed the sort of working conditions that allowed me to respond so fully to their writing. They knew full well that in New Orleans most profits (notably, in the hotel and tourism industry) leave the city, and that white and middle-class flight to the suburbs has eroded much of the economic base for public education. They challenged me to act upon their notion that teaching well necessitates political action, saying that it was not enough for me to just close my classroom door and teach well. Real education means improving both teaching and learning conditions as well as fighting against the conditions in the community that hinder quality education.

Two students from English III, Erica DeCuir and Kenyatta Johnson, joined me in writing funding proposals to structure Students at the Center (SAC), an elective program that would embody our ideals. Following the model of civil rights activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and their mentor Ella Baker (an African-American woman still too little recognized in American classrooms), we decided to start with the resources we had at hand, to work from the "bottom up." In every school, the essential resource is the students. The initial SAC proposal included the following fundamental tenets, which we continue to stand by:

- Limiting classes to 15 students—a number made possible by external funding—so that students can develop their writing and become true resources to their schools and the communities with which they identify.
- A flexible curriculum rooted in the experiences and issues that students identify in their schools and communities.
- An emphasis on developing pedagogical and curricular strategies that give voice to the voiceless—such as student-led writing workshops and community-based literacy projects.
- Assisting overworked teachers by developing a critical mass of students in the school who act—and perceive themselves—as literacy workers.

The following year, funding from a local bank allowed us to initiate our first two pilot classes. Our motto, "Start with what we know, in order to learn what we don't know. Start with where we're at, to get to where we want to go," is indicative of the strategies and values we put into place. Since its inception, SAC's goal in creative writing has been to help students move from stories that rely on personal experience to stories that integrate a wider and wider awareness of family and community history, and the use of literacy as a tool for social action.

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One vital tool in the SAC process has always been the story circle—a technique developed by John O’Neal and others in the Free Southern Theatre. Sitting in a circle, we take turns telling a story about a selected topic. To be successful, we teachers must actively listen to our students—we can’t ask our students to spill their guts to us while we silently sit in judgment. And we teachers tell our stories when our turns come. We then encourage the students to write, and we write along with them. Again, we do not stipulate any one-to-one, write-the-story-you-told process. Rather, we ask them to write about a variety of topics, and even encourage them to write on a completely different topic if there is something else they strongly want to express. When we combine the story-circle technique with prompts and inspiration from the reading assignments, invariably students produce a richer body of literature and arrive at a deeper level of understanding of literacy as part of a collective work of social justice. We read and discuss Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* alongside the writings of Toni Morrison and Frederick Douglass; we read Sandra Cisneros and Birago Diop as well as Alice Walker and Langston Hughes. We not only read these authors, we discuss how the texts relate to the students’ lives, by following up with assignments that, for example, ask them to write about their own “cave” experiences. Here is an excerpt from LaQuita Joseph’s cave essay, written when she was a senior. In it, LaQuita continues the SAC tradition of analyzing the quality of her education—indeed, we even invite our students to critique and shape the SAC process itself.

When I was 14, I walked into the school with eyes wide close, not knowing where I was going or what I was going to do. For three years I went from room to room, not having a clue of what I was going to do. The work I received seemed very easy. Was this the way things were going to be through my stay here or were things going to change? I guess this is why I was stuck in this cave of ignorance. [...]

In these moments, I stop and take a good look at my cave, and I see it for what it really is. The floor is made of books unread and unheard of. Books with pages missing and writing that does not have anything to do with the subject. “7th Ward Hard Head.” “Baby D luvs TeeTee.” Then they have the nerve to spell *love* wrong. My walls are class cutters, the ones who don’t care about their education or school. My walls are formed by future arsonists of America, who from time to time try to burn down my cave. For what reason? For a laugh. [...]

All these thoughts gave me an idea. “I will write a poem about this place,” but I did not have any paper. I wrote on the wall over all the things that were already on it. I wrote about the pain of being in a school that had students who were so rude that the good students did not know what to do. A school where some teachers did not care, so the teachers who taught had an extra burden to bear. When I wrote, this roof crumbled. There was now silence when I walked. My walls came falling down, and now I was the only one in the hall. I then looked around and the only thing I could see were books. I picked up one book, *The Republic* by Plato. It was only then that I was free from this cave, when I started to read.

We encourage SAC students to let their creative writing lead them beyond the written page—to take action in their own lives and in their communities. And we find that this in turn leads them to value their writing that much more. In one story circle, for instance, Adrinda Kelly told us about her cousin who attended Frederick Douglass High School, one of the lower performing schools in the state. She recalled how after middle school many of his fellow students left for selective admissions schools (such as McDonogh), and, because youth learn as much from their peers as they do from their teachers, the absence of these talented students substantially reduced the quality of his education. She was frustrated by this remnant of “segregation”; she knew that he was a capable student and thinker who deserved the very same stimulation and engagement that she was receiving through SAC. From that story circle, she used her writing to develop an advocacy initiative to bring SAC to neighborhood schools. At the same time, the Crescent City Peace Alliance (CCPA), which operated in the neighborhood surrounding Douglass, also pushed for SAC to begin offering classes at the school. These affiliations have helped the SAC students and me to understand what it is to educate as part of a broader social justice movement.

Almost ten years later, the program my English III students initiated is alive and evolving. The continued momentum comes from the SAC students and the work they have been able to do, not from educational policymakers. Indeed, the latter’s policies have tended to make things worse, tended to silence rather than to empower students. Over the past few years, factory models have been compounded by actuarial approaches—in which students are tested on broad, one-size-fits-all measures, and these tests determine their futures. These developments have also spawned a handful of national education reform models, affiliated with universities or educational corporations, which place the onus on local school districts to raise funds to bring in their expertise. In the process, the local expertise of teachers and students—those who have worked valiantly and successfully in conditions that the so-called “experts” have not experienced—is brushed aside.

But I remain encouraged. This encouragement comes from the fact that SAC students see themselves as agents of change, as young people who can use their minds, language, and experience for public purposes. It also comes from a broad collective of individuals and organizations willing to engage in deep, long-term struggle to improve the quality of public education. A leading example is the Douglass Community-School Coalition, a collective of organizations working to improve Douglass High School and its feeder schools. In addition, graduates such as LaQuita and Damien Theodore plan to teach in the neglected schools and communities in which they grew up. They have joined current SAC students in producing the newspaper, *Our Voice*. They are collaborating with CCPA to develop the New Orleans Civil Rights Park at the corner where Homer Plessy was arrested in 1892. They work with Kalamu to produce videos on social issues. They have combined forces with a neighborhood health clinic and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies. But perhaps the best testament to our approach is the writing of our students, which measures their heart and ability far better than any test score. Erica DeCuir and Adrinda Kelly, whose essays follow, are very much a part of our story. Just as they keep learning and growing by reflecting on their experiences, learning from ancestors, and writing their identities into existence against the grain of the dominant American culture, so too SAC keeps learning and growing.