A Collaborative Practitioner Inquiry into Societal and Power-Relational Contexts of an Activist Writing Community's Textual Events

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Abstract
This article describes experiences with a community literacy approach to writing instruction in a cultural studies and literary criticism workshop in Tehran, Iran (2009-2014). The writers narrate the process of writing a book undertaken by a group of Iranian feminists, who chose to write about and critique dominant discourses in Iranian hip hop, in an attempt to start a conversation with young underground Iranian rappers. Adopting collaborative practitioner inquiry, the researchers discuss different steps of the process of writing and publishing the book, and also the pitfalls and challenges that they encountered in the project and the ensuing interventions. In the course of sharing their reflections, the writers highlight the sociocultural and power relational contexts of their writing process to sensitise writing instructors to the often invisible social and political layers of the act of writing.

Keywords: community literacy, community publishing, writing studies, practitioner inquiry

Una indagación practicante colaborativa en contextos societales y relacionales de poder en eventos textuales de una comunidad de escritores activistas

Resumen
Este artículo describe experiencias con un enfoque de alfabetización comunitaria para la instrucción de la escritura en un taller de estudios culturales y crítica literaria en Teherán, Irán (2009-2014). Los escritores narran el proceso de escribir un libro por parte de grupo de feministas iraníes, que eligieron escribir y criticar los discursos dominantes en el hip hop iraní en un intento por iniciar una conversación con jóvenes raperos iraníes del underground. Adoptando la indagación practicante colaborativa, los investigadores discuten diferentes pasos del proceso de la escritura y publicación del libro y también los escollos y los desafíos que encontraron en el proyecto y en las consiguientes intervenciones. En el transcurso de la socialización de sus reflexiones, los escritores resaltan los contextos socioculturales y relaciones de poder del proceso de escribir para sensibilizar a los instructores de escritura sobre las capas sociales y políticas a menudo invisibles del acto de escribir.

Palabras clave: alfabetización comunitaria, publicación comunitaria, estudios de escritura, indagación practicante.

Introduction

This article describes a community literacy approach (Coogan 2006; Flower 2008; Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006) to writing instruction in a cultural studies and literary criticism workshop in Tehran, Iran (2009-2014). We here narrate the process of writing and publishing a book by a group of Iranian feminists, who chose to write about and critique dominant discourses in Iranian hip hop, in an attempt to start a conversation with young underground Iranian rappers. The members of our writing community deemed this dialogue crucial because the rappers and hip hop artists addressed by the book, although marginalised by political and sociocultural dynamics in the country, had a significant impact on Iranian youth subcultures. This partnership, we hoped, would inform the hip-hop community about women's issues and, in return, would help the activists in the writing workshop learn more about discourses prevalent among the youth. In this article, three members of our workshop relate our experiences with the process of writing and publishing a collection of articles entitled *Persian Hip Hop: Writing as Social Action*, which has been downloaded more than 20,000 times to date.

Persian Hip Hop: Writing as Social Action is a collection of essays in Persian about the sociocultural dimensions of Iranian hip hop and its impact on Iranian youth. The book, in particular, focuses on the artistic legacy of the groundbreaking album *The Asphalt Jungle* (2006), written and performed by Soroush Lashkari and produced by Mahdyar Aghajani. There is a consensus in the Iranian artistic community that the quality achieved in this album made the rapid development of Iranian hip-hop possible. Adopting a variety of social studies and literary criticism approaches, the writers of our community wrote about how Iranian rap songs were written, what sociocultural and political discourses informed Persian hip hop, and how Iranian rappers challenged more conservative ideological paradigms in Iranian society. All through the workshop, the writers were in conversation with rapper Soroush Lashkary (known as Hichkas[1]) and Mahdyar Aghajani, the producer of the album.

In this article, the writing instructor of the workshop, Amir, reflects on his writing pedagogy, the challenges involved in teaching an activist writing workshop, and his positionality as a teacher of a workshop made up of educated feminist activists. Parisa, a women and children's rights activist and one of the writers of the workshop, discusses the process of writing the book chapters and the writers' identity negotiation as a result of a role shift from "writing students" to "professional" writers to be read by an audience of thousands. Finally, Mahdyar, an influential figure in Iranian hip-hop culture, narrates our struggles with publishing the book. Before sharing our narratives about the process, we highlight our research questions and discuss our theoretical frameworks and research methods.

Significance of the Project

Our inquiry contributes to the fields of community literacy, critical literacy education, and composition studies in a number of regards. It adds to the pool of empirical studies aiming

1 *Hichkas* is Persian for Nobody.

to comprehend the pedagogical potentials of community literacy with a focus on sociopolitical dimensions of collaborative writing and community publishing. Sharing our experiences, we also propose that non-mainstream qualitative research approaches such as practitioner inquiry (including action research) and narrative inquiry can help us better understand the complexities of authentic writing projects and their sociocultural and power relational circumstances. Moreover, this report is an example of international experiences with community-engaged writing for an English speaking audience, providing them with the opportunity to see how international educators and activists make sense of textual engagement and employ writing as a tool of activism for social change.

Dominant writing pedagogies in North American educational structures often regard writing as an individual activity and a form of cognitive engagement. Written texts, however, are the products of complicated social, cultural, and political networks (Atkinson 2003; Dobrin, Rice, & Vastola 2011; Kent 1999; Kent 2011). An emphasis on the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts that create texts can challenge dominant pedagogical practices, which typically ignore the social dimensions of text generation and which, in insular traditional classrooms, approach writing as a skill to be developed individually. Community literacy can create new pedagogical possibilities by re-defining written texts as artifacts created by sociocultural and sociopolitical interactions and by raising doubt about the traditional classroom as the ideal venue for literacy teaching and learning (Couture 1999; Ewald 1999; Petraglia 1999). The confines of the classroom have been designed to separate students from everyday social interactions to listen to teachers as the knowers of the *techne* (or technique) of writing (Hawk 2004). Community literacy can restore connections between writers and society.

In terms of research, community-oriented writing pedagogy calls for alternative qualitative research methods that can shed light on the complex dimensions of collaborative writing and publishing, which often remain hidden in textual and quantitative analyses of written products (Petraglia 1999). Multiple hermeneutic, social, cultural, and political layers of writing are so complicated that the genealogy and impact of each textual product can only be understood as subtly rooted in their uniquely local contexts. Such complexity defies generalisability, revered by traditional research methodologies. Thus, this article in line with other community research projects (see for instance, Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006), proposes that empirical research on community-engaged literacy can benefit from critical action research (Carr & Kemmis 2009; Morrell 2006), teacher research (Ballenger 2009; Lytle 2000; Lytle & Cochran-Smith 1992), practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009), collaborative literacy research (Simon & Kalan 2016), and narrative inquiry models (Clandinin 2006), which, as will be explained in more detail in the Inquiry Approach section, are better equipped to deal with the local, unique, and often messy nature of teaching and learning contexts.

Guiding Questions

In this project, we have explored the sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions of collaborative writing. We tried to see how writing could bring together communities and contribute

to social change. Also, we wanted to know what societal and power relational factors encouraged or interfered with text production and distribution. During the course of our workshop and later in the process of publishing our book, we had to wrestle with many questions in response to a variety of dissonant moments arising from the challenges we faced. These questions, which directed our inquiry, can be summarised as:

1 How can we use "writing" as a tool for learning, exploration, and social connection (as opposed to prioritising argumentation) in a writing community made up of a group of activists?
2 How can we connect our writing community to the social, cultural, and political life in Tehran, and also to other communities?
3 What cultural practices, social interactions, power differentials, and discursive conventions form and enrich the texts students produce through collaborative writing and publishing?

The complexity of these questions and the unpredictable dynamics of the project, from brainstorming of ideas to online distribution of the book, had us organically adopt critical community literacy as our interpretive framework and practitioner inquiry as our research approach, about both of which we will speak in more detail in the following sections. In this sense, the workshop was not approached as a research site; nor did the instructor of the workshop enter the community with a research design in hand. Reflecting upon our activities grew out of the members' desire to make sense of the project as the sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions of our activities became more and more visible.

Interpretive Framework

Out project connects with a variety of inquiry fields and can be discussed through different theoretical lenses. It, for instance, lends itself to feminist theory, media studies, and hip hop studies. This report, however, offers our reflections in accordance with conceptualizations in *community literacy* and *community publishing* (Coogan 2006; Flower 2008; Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006; Long 2008; Mathieu, Parks, & Rousculp 2011; Parks & Goldblatt 2000; Peck, Flower, & Higgins 1995), particularly when these concepts are considered as forms of *critical literacy education* (Freire & Macedo 1987; Janks 2013). This theoretical lens can help us highlight the pedagogical aspects of the project, in order to bring attention to the sociocultural and power relational layers of writing, which are often invisible and could remain untapped in the process of teaching and learning. In other words, as "Jeffrey Grabill (2001) pointed out … our conceptualisation of community literacy was, in one sense, an invitation for others in composition/rhetoric to locate the profession's work more broadly in the public realm" (Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006, p. 9).

Centralised curricula aim to homogenise students' literacy discourses and literate practices by having students engage with canonical texts through uniform literacy activities. In writing specifically, the dominate practice is engagement with the rhetoric of assertion in simplified forms of persuasive writing (Olson 2002), typically for an audience of one: the teacher. An unpleasant side effect of this factory model approach to writing instruction is

the elevated status of the traditional classroom as the only, or at least the dominant, learning venue, where the students can drill "great" writing under teachers' panoptic supervision. Dominant writing pedagogies, thus, sever the act of writing from its sociocultural and political contexts, and turn it into a context-less technical drill. Community literacy pedagogy, in contrast, constructs authentic writing circumstances by putting writing back in meaningful social contexts, by generating collaborative action, and by providing voice for minoritised communities to impact societal power relations.

Community literacy has been mobilised in different capacities (see for instance, Cairney, Ruge, & Training 1998; Cella & Restaino 2012; Coogan 2006; Flower 2008; Grabill 2001; Julier 2001; Long 2008). Our view of community-engaged literacy is closer to theorisations that underline the potentials of collaborative writing and publishing in terms of their impact on communities and their discourse practices. For instance, Peck, Flower, and Higgins (1995) described community literacy as social change through dialogic inquiry:

> First and foremost, community literacy supports social change. … A second aim of community literacy is to support genuine, intercultural conversation. … A third aim of community literacy is to bring a strategic approach to this conversation. … A fourth aim of community literacy is inquiry: to openly acknowledge … the history of failed conversations, but to purposefully examine the genuine conflicts, assumptions, and practices we bring to these new partnerships. (p. 205)

The same authors in a follow-up report of their project after more than a decade offered an updated version of their understanding of community literacy:

> Our approach to community literacy … uses writing to support collaborative inquiry into community problems; … calls up local publics around the aims of democratic deliberation; … and transforms personal and public knowledge by re-structuring deliberative dialogues among individuals and groups across lines of difference. (Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006, p. 10)

Consistent with these frameworks, our project was intended to create systematic dialogue across different discourse communities between a group of women's rights activists and a circle of hip hop artists. The conversation between these communities was rigorously critical and functioned as a medium of inquiry for both communities into their discourses and belief sets. This exchange, moreover, was made public through the circulation of what the workshop members wrote in order to impact societal discourses regarding women, and also the status of hip hop in contemporary Iranian culture. Hence, our writing community used writing as a tool of inquiry, a manner of communication, and a vehicle for sociopolitical critique.

With this approach a key question that we had to address was how to disseminate the members' writings, also a major concern in scholarly conversations about community literacy: "[Community literacy should] support personal and public transformation through circulation of alternative texts and practices" (Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006, p. 11). The publishing industry in Iran is heavily controlled by the government, which requires all books to be examined before publication for an official permit. Both the women's rights activists and the hip hop artists were underground communities functioning without required official authorisations, and thus acquiring a governmental permit was impossible. Even if we received an official publication permit by some miracle, we would have to deal with publishers who might not be interested to support a group of feminist writers, or who might not consider

hip hop worthy of serious attention. Even in case of an agreement with a publisher, the editing process would change the essence of our work because of economic and political considerations. We, as a result, thought a *community publishing* approach would be an empowering course of action in terms of our purposes regarding social critique:

> In the case of community publishing, the medium is also the message. Unlike commercial publishing, community publications are typically produced, edited, and designed *by* community writing groups or organisations. They often have editorial control of content, fonts, images, and cover design. It is this self-directed, unmediated sense of control that speaks to the essence of publication—as effort to tell their truth unfiltered by established organizations, such as educational, governmental, or religious authorities. (Mathieu, Parks, & Rousculp 2011, p.2)

Community publishing also would let us utilise the digital talents of the hip hop community and their experiences with online distribution of creative and artistic works. The online open access to the book would help the community communicate with larger numbers of Iranian youth. Engagement with the publishing process thus would let the members become "participant[s] in a larger cultural and political project of publishing and circulation, struggling over collective representation and rights" (Mathieu, Parks, & Rousculp 2011, p.13).

One can make better sense of community literacy and publishing by reflecting on connections between these concepts with larger paradigms of critical pedagogy and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo 1987; Janks 2013; Janks 2000). According to these paradigms, literacy engagement includes more than technical interaction with language because linguistic performance is a sociocultural performance, and thus connected to individuals' identities and positionalities in the world. If reading and writing are connected to people's positions in the world, literacy is by nature power relational since it figures as a power differential in the relationships between teachers and learners, learners and their peers, and learners and society. Because power relations connect literacy and society, literacy education can be transformational. As a result, educators should see students as agents of change, and provide them with access to space, discourses, and communication channels for their voices to be heard.

Inquiry Approach

Because of the complexities involved in community writing: including its local nature, its transformative tendencies, and questions about positionality, researchers and educators have often used different forms of practitioner research, such as action research (see for instance, Higgins, Long, & Flower 2006), to reflect on their projects and report their experiences. Similarly, our inquiry methods were informed by the principles of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009; Lytle 2000; Lytle & Cochran-Smith 1992) and collaborative literacy research (Simon & Kalan 2016). Practitioner inquiry emphasises the epistemic privilege of teachers and students as *insiders*. Moreover, most forms of practitioner inquiry are interested in societal and power relational aspects of education:

> [M]ost versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent of educational and social change. … Many of the variants of practitioner inquiry also foster new kinds of social relationships that assuage the isolation of teaching and other sites of practice. This is especially true in inquiry com-

> munities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p. 37)

Simon, Campano, Broderick, and Pantoja (2012), similarly, emphasised that critical action was an important feature of practitioner inquiry:

> [P]ractitioner research often involves creatively resisting dominant ideologies and working through contradictions. Generating literacy theories and pedagogical alternatives within the context of institutions marked by normative limits: as well as opportunities for developing meaningful relationships and more ethical arrangements – involves ongoing struggle. (p. 10)

This study was conducted by the teacher of the workshop (Amir), one of the students (Parisa), and the producer of *The Asphalt Jungle* (Mahdyar), who helped the writers with editing the articles and publishing the book. Practitioner inquiry, as a methodological orientation, would help us underline the significance of the knowledge we would generate through this study as insiders. In the collaboration between our writing community and hip hop artists and rappers: and also other professionals and artists who helped us with the project, we were cognizant of the concerns of collaborative literacy research:

> What role might collaborative inquiry play in helping individuals make sense of texts? How can teachers and students in a research context work together across differences to gain more nuanced understandings of our shared social world? … What are the potentials of collective research of this nature for actualising curricular, pedagogical, and social change? (Simon & Kalan 2016, p. 400)

All through the project, we followed an inquiry model known in practitioner research as *The Circle of Inquiry* (Pincus 2001). This model describes the process of inquiry-oriented teaching as follows. A *dissonant moment*, an unexpected event, or a strange occurrence in the site makes the instructor or other community members uncomfortable. This moment of dissonance creates questions that require a conscious and systematic inquiry stance. The learning community studies the situation, reflects upon it, and takes action accordingly. This circle, however, is not completed in one clear cycle or in linear progression, as suggested by classical action research. This process occurs continuously in new cycles. It also might be interrupted at any point and restart again later. This model of inquiry, with its emphasis on the local, messy, and unpredictable nature of teaching, lent itself well to our community's writing practices and literacy evented, which: as opposed to the defined direction of a pre-built curriculum, were mainly the result of new social interactions and the students' freedom to alter the lessons based on their experiences, visions, and agendas.

Next to the key function of *dissonant* or "puzzling moments" (Ballenger 2009, p. 5) in inquiry cycles, practitioner inquiry also employs concepts such as *legacy*, *community*, and *neighbourhood* (Lytle 2000) to highlight the local nature of teaching and learning and the importance of the context of research and practice. The concept *legacy* underlines the importance of practitioner researchers' backgrounds, and the way their professional and intellectual legacies connect to their practice and research. It is significant that practitioners, as *knowers* and knowledge generators immersed in practice and research sites, think of their own social, cultural, and political positionalities; identify their own perspectives; and are conscious about their epistemological stance in relation with their local and indigenous questions.

Community hosts the members of the site of practice/research who benefit from teaching and learning that occurs on the site and also from systematic reflection on practice.

Learners, their peers, their families, teachers, policy makers, and other supporting agents such as local artists, activists, and intellectuals are part of *community*. *Community* also involves the discourses through which the members speak and by which they make sense of the world. Communities are by no means isolated and: consciously or unconsciously, follow one another's sociocultural and sociopolitical existences in the society in which they live. Communities interact, co-operate, and have frictions. Effective educators think about a community's needs and visions in relation with its neighbouring communities. Accordingly, it is essential that reflective practitioners pay due attention to the concept *neighbourhood* and ask questions such as: In what neighbourhood is the community situated? In what ways does our research matter to that neighbourhood? Who is the audience of our research? Who are we trying to communicate with?

A focus on *legacy, community* and *neighbourhood* is crucial in our study inasmuch as the production and the distribution of the book would not have happened without the coming together of the instructor, the writing community, and the Iranian hip hop community, through a desire for cross-community dialogue. In the same virtue, the present study is an example of collaborative inquiry with the active involvement of the said parties. After an explanation of our methods below, we will again use concepts *dissonant moments, legacy*, *community*, and *neighbourhood* to frame the narratives that we will present as the findings of the study.

Methods

Our interactions from introductory writing lessons to the publication of the book continued over five years (2009-2014) in multiple sites including museums, art galleries, book stores, informal gatherings, online forums, and also a traditional classroom where all the members of the community met once a week. Moreover, during the process of publishing the book, the instructor of the workshop (now acting as editor) had numerous one-on-one conferences with the writers in the editing process. On the other hand, he was regularly in conversation with artists and professionals that helped us with the technical aspects of the project such as designing the book cover and making our book trailers. Thanks to the variety of locations and multiple dimensions of the project, we collected a rich body of data in the following forms:

1 Teaching logs: Lesson plans, notes, handouts, books, and other teaching preparation materials.
2 Observation and field notes: The students' interactions with the instructor and with one another. The students' engagement with educational materials for instance our readings and the cultural products we studied for analysis and critique such as paintings, films, and particularly for the purposes of writing our book: Persian rap songs.
3 Recordings: Audio recordings of all of our classroom conversations including the instructor's lessons and the students' questions following the lessons; also, audio recordings of conversations between the students and guest speakers including Hichkas, who occasionally attended our classes to listen to the initial drafts of our articles.
4 Written correspondence: All the email and social media exchanges with the writers and hip hop artists.

5 The students' writings: All the versions of the students' articles from the first drafts to the published pieces with all the changes the writers made to their drafts in response to their dialogues with the instructor and/or other students.

In order to analyse the data collected, we adopted a grounded analysis approach to the data. In our analysis, the emerging themes, including beliefs, attitudes, critical moments, incidents, interactions, and interventions that could help us construct a meaningful narrative of the developments of this project were identified and combined together in narrative format. As will be explained in more detail in the Findings section, we present our dissonant moments and hermeneutic decisions in three narratives reflecting the instructor's *legacy*, the writing *community*, and the *neighbuorhood* the writers tried to communicate with, namely the underground hip hop society in Iran. We opted for analytical methods that would help us report our findings in a narrative style, because we believed narratives would best describe the complexities of the developments of the workshop from instructing the class to publishing the book. Furthermore, drawing upon *narrative inquiry*, we would strengthen the study as far as validity and trustworthiness is concerned inasmuch as the readers would be directly in touch with the voices of the participants/practitioners. "Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) suggest that with narrative inquiry, validity rests on concrete examples (or "exemplars") of actual practices presented in enough detail that the relevant community can judge trustworthiness and usefulness" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p. 43).

Findings as Narrative Syntheses

> Ideas about what count as data and analysis in practitioner research are often different from those of traditional modes. Autobiographical and narrative inquiry (e.g., Cole & Knowles 1995; Florio-Ruane 2001; Lyons & LaBoskey 2002), for instance, treats stories as data and certain kinds of narratives as interpretation." (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009, p. 44).

Borrowing from the methods of narrative research as a common approach in practitioner inquiry, we present our findings in three interconnected narratives. To describe our experiences, we also borrow from Susan Lytle's (2000) concepts *legacy*, *community*, and *neighbourhood*, as explained in the Research Approach section. In what follows, Amir in Legacy talks about how he entered the writing community as a social studies workshop instructor, and how he tapped into his professional legacy and modified his pedagogical understandings to meet the requirements of his new teaching context. In Community, Parisa: one of the writers of the workshop, offers an account of the experiences of the writing community with the process of writing the articles. Finally in Neighborhood, Mahdyar, a respected hip hop music producer, shares his narrative about the challenges involved in publishing the book. Diversifying the voices of the narrators, we have tried to include the perspectives of all the communities involved in this project. The story of the project could have been constructed in many different ways; here, however, harmonious with the theories by which we have framed this report, we craft our stories based on the dissonant moments (which we previously defined in detail) and challenges that shaped our decisions in the course of writing and publishing the articles.

Legacy: Amir

I taught English Language and Literature at the Italian School of Tehran from 2003 to 2010. During this period, I embarked on writing a textbook that drew upon literary theory and social studies, to offer a critical literacy pedagogy that moved away from lecture-based instruction towards collaborative text-generation in response to critical reading. The activities discussed in the book were inspired by my Italian school students' creative projects, which were often shared publically in accordance with the pedagogical models that I was experimenting with: approaches interested in the impact of an authentic audience on the quality of writing and other textual products. Writing the book, hence, was a strategy for me to make better sense of my instruction as well as a way to record my students' experiences. Our public poetry and fiction readings, theatrical performances, and film screening attracted the attention of the Iranians who attended our events. As a result of this cultural exchange, the managers of Rahyab, a women and children's rights NGO, invited me in 2009 to teach a literary theory workshop, inspired by the activities suggested in my textbook.

The workshop was packed with women and (some) men who had been active at the centre in different capacities. The attendees were practicing activists and were not necessarily in the workshop to learn writing or feminist theory, but were more interested in exploring new hermeneutic and communicative manners to amplify their voices and multiply their social connections. This expectation also matched my vision of a literary theory and social studies pedagogy, which sought an extension of theory through problem-posing education, praxis, active text production, and dissemination. With the harmony between our views of the purpose of the class, our one-week workshop turned into a writing community that would publish the book we discussed in this study and whose members have stayed together up to now.

Considering the nature of the community and the activists' backgrounds, I decided that, to develop my pedagogy for this class, I needed to reflect upon two key dimensions: first, how we can employ "writing" not only to record our literary and textual experiences, but also think of "publishing and dissemination" as an important component of critical literary theory. In this sense, we not only had to critically read and write, we also needed to move further and distribute our textual products. This blueprint would broaden one's view of "writing" as an isolated individual intellectual exercise and would make us think of textual products as artifacts wrought by power relations, social interactions, discursive conventions, and cultural practices: especially collaborative textual events.

Second, I needed to reflect on how my pedagogy was connected to my positionality. All through our collaboration, up to and including this moment when we are writing this article, I have had to struggle with some important questions. How do I position myself as a male teacher among a group of women activists? How do I position myself in my interactions with Iranian rappers and hip hop artists? How far should we go in challenging legal and societal norms: considering the fact that hip hop is banned in Iran, and the activities of the Rahyab Institute challenged official guidelines from time to time? How are we going to report the project in Western academia considering the prevalence of misinformed views of Iranian cultural life in the West? How can we avoid presenting this project as a victory nar-

rative but only one story of the extremely vibrant cultural scene in Tehran? Thinking about these questions helped me regard myself as a member of the community rather than its instructor. This feeling, after more reflection I realised, was not an exception in my career. I had the same feeling when I was teaching my high school students at the Italian School; however, more visible power relations in our writing community (with knowledgeable adult activists and exceptionally creative musicians) helped me more comfortably stop pretending that I was the possessor of the knowledge of literary theory and a "writing" connoisseur; instead, I more openly identified as a hermeneutic designer looking for ways to amplify my students' voices.

Community: Parisa

Our workshop was one of the cultural programmes which were held in the Rahyab Institute. The Rahyab Institute was a women and children's rights organisation that tried to promote gender awareness and support children in need through cultural activities. The primary goal of organising the literary criticism and cultural studies workshop, which resulted in the publication of the book, was studying feminist literary lenses more systematically. As feminist and cultural activists, we believed that knowing about literary criticism approaches could help us consider gender issues in cultural products. However, after finishing the feminist theory workshop, some of us decided to continue the workshop to learn more about other approaches as well. This second workshop included structuralism, Marxist theory, postcolonial criticism, and deconstruction. While most of the participants were interested in cultural issues, the class was not monolithic; we were in different age groups and had different socioeconomic backgrounds from housewives to humanities PhD students and from teenage high-schoolers to professional writers. The diversity in our workshop had a significant impact on the process of learning. It provided an opportunity for us to learn how we could engage in dialogue with people with different opinions.

One of the first things we learned in the workshop was how to collectively think critically when reading a text. When we read together, we felt more confident to unearth social and political ideologies hidden in the text. At the same time, however, it was sometimes challenging for us to criticise the texts that were part of the Persian literary canon, which we had been brought up to cherish. Yet during the workshop we became more conscious about how literary canons were formed and how they reinforced dominant discourses in society. We also discussed why society appreciated some cultural products while marginalising others.

Why did we decide to write? Initially, we chose to write about what we read merely as a practical way to understand how we could apply literary criticism approaches; we wanted to learn by doing. We typically wrote short passages about canonical works, and had whole class conversations where we received feedback from our peers. Engaging in this activity, over time each of us adopted a specific literary criticism lens which we developed an interest in. Moreover, we experienced how the process of writing could be enriched by collective thinking about critical issues. Also, we had to organise our writing effectively to communicate our views with other group members and how to make helpful comments on other students' work.

The positive outcomes of focusing on writing motivated us to take one step further by developing a writing project about a specific body of literature. To start the project, the main question was what kind of literature we should focus on. To make a decision, we tried to recall the primary goal that encouraged us, as cultural activists, to participate in a literary criticism and social studies workshop. In our sessions we had discussed how societal power relations favoured certain literary genres and cultural products. We had also become more sensitive about texts and genres marginalised by sociopolitical trends and underestimated by prominent voices in mainstream culture; for instance, women's literature and texts penned by ethnic minorities in Iran. Persian rap, gaining rapid popularity among the youth at the time, was also another example of cultural products that frequently appeared in our conversations during the workshop mainly for its relevance and impact. Despite the growing popularity of Iranian hip hop, there was complete silence about it among music and literary critics. Many even attacked the genre as immoral, decadent, and corrupt. Some Persian rappers, from our perspective as a feminist community, were indeed reproducing patriarchal ideas prevalent in society, but there was more to Persian hip hop such as the potential to give the Iranian youth:including Iranian girls, a voice. These complexities motivated us to focus on hip hop in our project.

Writing about hip hop, we could also challenge the conventional boundaries that divided literature to high and low-brow, the latter being the place where most of women's literature is deemed to be. Thus, we decided, to focus on Hichkas' *The Asphalt Jungle*, the album whose success had made the denial of the impact of Iranian hip hop on youth's minds almost impossible. Despite our excitement about the writing project because of its novelty, writing about Hichkas' rap revealed some challenges especially for the students who were not familiar with hip hop. Some of us had to listen to the music that they were not particularly interested in. Nevertheless, the fact that we wanted to critically analyse the rap songs totally changed the way we listened to Hichkas. Now we were not merely consuming the music, although critically, we also had to focus on words and themes related to our critical approach in order to create our own texts.

But the biggest challenge rose when we decided to invite Hichkas to join our workshop to listen to our earlier drafts for his feedback. Inviting a banned underground rapper to a feminist NGO proved to be a problematic move for some of the managers of the centre. They feared possible negative consequences for the office, but fortunately after some lengthy meetings they at last agreed. The resistance that we felt against engagement with hip hop artists even within our own institution made us more confident that our project was, indeed, socioculturally significant. As far as writing is concerned, Hichkas' presence in the workshop influenced our writing process immensely. We were no longer writing to learn literary criticism; we were writing to communicate our views to a cultural icon with significant stature.

When Amir suggested we should publish our articles as an e-book, the workshop dynamics and our writing went through another transformation. Our articles were now supposed to be read widely by the public, which propelled us to revisit our words over and over again. Every statement was now considered a discourse interacting with public beliefs and opinions. This process involved many conversations with friends, community members, and scholars. Even a proper focus on the technicalities of writing, such as forming sol-

id paragraphs and proper punctuation, was not felt as a real priority until we decided to publish the articles. We knew our writings would be scrutinised by thousands of young men and women, and there was very little room for complacency. We started the workshop to learn more about literary criticism and social studies, but writing provided an opportunity for us to turn learning into action that would impact the battle of discourses in our society.

Neighbourhood: Mahdyar

Persian hip hop is very popular among the Iranian young generation and since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, there has never been a music genre produced by young people that has reached this level of success among their peers. As a music producer, I always felt the lack of theoretical conversations about Iranian hip hop and was rather disappointed that the intellectuals and academics did not really appreciate this culturally significant phenomenon, but simply wrote it off as an unimportant form of low-brow art.

When I was approached by the writers of the workshop and invited to contribute an article, I felt excited, but I also had my doubts. A few articles had been published about Persian hip hop by that time, but unfortunately none of them were able to capture the complexities of the Iranian hip hop movement as rappers and producers like me would have wished to see. Reading those publications, I always felt the publishers were more driven by commercial or political motivations rather than a genuine interest in observing and analysing the genre for itself.

After reading excerpts from the book, Hichkas and I decided that we would like to be in conversation with this writing community. Although we did not agree with some of the views expressed in the articles, we appreciated the writers' efforts to better understand the hip hop movement and describe it for the public. It was clear that the writers were trying to have an honest and thoughtful point of view and no matter how much we agreed or disagreed with them, the book was definitely a valuable endeavour much needed for the genre. Thus, when Amir contacted me to see if I had liked the articles, I told him I would be happy to help the process as much as I could.

In the beginning of our collaboration I was only supposed to write one article for the book, but as the process of publishing the book unfolded, we faced more challenges and my responsibilities increased. For instance, I had to read the articles to correct some factual errors regarding the Iranian hip hop history and also some technical mistakes in statements that edged towards musicology. Also, I advised the writers on parts that we felt might stir up pointless dramas and controversies like paragraphs that made references to rival rappers. We did not want the book to feel as if we were subliminally "dissing" other artists.

Musical editing of the articles and, in general, dealing with the writers was probably the easier side of the work. Later, we encountered more hiccups when it came to the technical aspects of publishing and distribution of the book such as creating the book cover, making a website to launch the book, and promoting the book for more effective distribution. Many professionals and artists who initially promised to help us left the community, because either they did not take the project seriously, or they tried to impose their opinions on us and as a result faced resistance. We had lengthy conversations to see how we could

solve these issues, and almost always the solution was dealing with the artistic and technical aspects ourselves. Fortunately, I am very much used to challenges of this nature due to the lack of professional support in most of my career as a producer, and managed to be instrumental by helping with advertising the book, which involved some artistic and technical work. I designed the book cover and the website and led the book launch campaign.

The workshop members' main priority was to distribute the book to as many people as possible and making access to the content as easy as possible. Nobody was concerned with making money by selling the book, and we thought the best way to release the articles would be offering a free e-book. We did not have any funding for this project, so we had to make use of our own means for advertising and promoting the book. We decided to start the advertising campaign two weeks before the release date by launching a website, creating social media pages, and sharing two commercial videos. We made two book trailers since we calculated that the book would probably have two major target audiences: Iranian intellectuals and Persian hip hop fans or basically the young generation. Accordingly, we asked a friend to make the first video, which was more minimal and artistic to attract an older and perhaps more "sophisticated" audience and I made a more colorful and rhythmic video aimed at a younger audience.

Hichkas and I have many followers on social media and sharing the videos through our web pages attracted the attention of the people who listen to our music and the media who follow our work. Next, people started to spread the news, especially the vast network of social media pages dedicated to Iranian hip hop. After two weeks of spreading the buzz about the publication, we released it in PDF format and it immediately became one of the top social media trends in the Persian language. We definitely would not have been able to reach so many people if there were no possibility for the digital distribution of the book on social media.

I think we were successful in reaching the youth but failed to grab the attention of many other circles, some of which have enormous power in the Iranian cultural sphere. We particularly could not engage the Iranian intellectuals and academics, who did not seem to be interested in why thousands of young people downloaded and read this rather difficult book. In the same manner, mainstream musicians, mainstream feminist groups, and corporate press showed almost no interest in our book although the writing community tried their best to reach out to them.

Discussion

Hilary Janks (2000, 2010, 2013) has conceptualised a framework for critical literacy education constructed of four components: (1) power, (2) identity/diversity, (3) access, and (4) design/re-design. The model emphasises that (a) literacy education is about critical textual interaction for empowerment in literacy events, informed by students' identities and backgrounds, yet it is also about (b) gaining access to knowledges; discourses; communication channels; and academic, cultural, and/or intellectual positions. Moreover, literacy learning, as well as reading the wor(l)d, includes reconstructing the wor(l)d by re-writing, re-creating, and re-mixing texts. In this sense, teaching writing should include more than

teaching the *techne* of writing and would be more precisely defined as collaborating with students to write and publish in order to create change in their communities and hopefully society as large.

Janks' model is harmonious with theories of community literacy/publishing and practitioner inquiry: the theoretical frameworks informing this project as explained above. Community literacy regards writing as semiotic interaction propelled by sociocultural and sociopolitical factors. Practitioner inquiry, on the other hand, pictures practitioners as generators of knowledge (as opposed to technicians) and thus agents of change. Our writing community, accordingly, critically read underground rap songs, but went on to create their own texts in response to the hip hop subculture. With the above theoretical constructs in mind, we discuss some of the findings and implications of our study in what follows.

We have illustrated the major steps in the process of writing and publishing the book in ten items in Table 1. The itemisation of the process steps in this table should not be interpreted as universal strategies that would lead to the creation of socio-culturally impactful texts of high-quality; the table, instead, is only an attempt to identify significant moments when we stepped beyond traditional writing pedagogies in order to complexify our reading/writing practices and create new hermeneutic possibilities by means of consciously adding sociocultural and sociopolitical layers to our project. These practices thus would differ from classroom to classroom and from community to community.

Table 1

	Textual Events	**Sociocultural Power Relations**
A	1- In-class writing activities	Classroom conventions
	2- Homework	Classroom conventions/Teacher
B	3- Decision on a project	Society/Culture/ Politics
	4- Brainstorming (oral exchange of thoughts)	Peers/Teacher/Administrators/Families
	5- Writing the articles (3 to 5 drafts)	Meeting Hichkas/the Public
C	6- Rewriting the articles	Call for publication/Editors
	7- Content editing	Publishing process
	8- Technical (music) editing	Publishing process
	9- Copy-editing and proofreading	Publishing process
	10- Publication	Society/Culture/ Politics/ the Public

Table 1 assists us in highlighting two major pedagogical implications of our project. First, next to the column Textual Events, which represents the process of writing, we have specified Socio-cultural Power Relations in order to invite readers to look at different steps of our writing process as significantly correlated with social, political, and cultural interactions. The column Socio-cultural Power Relations is meant to emphasise the fact that the process of writing should not be reduced to individual cognitive faculties; instead, the writing process needs to be examined as the organic outcome of sociocultural and sociopolitical interactions.

Second, we have grouped the writing process steps, or textual events as we prefer to call them to avoid suggestions of universality, into three categories (A, B, C). We hope this grouping guides readers to see traditional process steps as more complicated than brain storming, first-drafting, receiving feedback, and finalising text. "A" represents common in-

stances of dominant classroom pedagogy (product and process), which sees "writing" as writing tasks in the form of classroom activities and homework. Such conventions often have students drill the physical act of writing and fail to see students as real "writers" with activist and intellectual impact. "B" in the table illustrates that our writing community members did experience the revising and editing steps that process theory advocates; nevertheless, they engaged with the process as a result of creating a genuine writing context with a meaningful project and with the prospect of publication in sight. In this manner, we did not go through the process as following a certain formula; we did so as a necessary response to a potentially impactful writing context and to an organic rhetorical situation created by social, cultural, and intellectual interactions. That is why we specified the largest number of our textual events to "C" in order to underline the importance of community publishing and dissemination. Our data suggest that the stylistic quality of the students' writing did not improve dramatically until we decided to publish the articles, not only as a pedagogical technique but to create text that mattered to the society around us.

We are aware that the context we are presenting here lends itself well to power relations oriented theories within which we have immersed the project. Indeed, collaborating with adult activists and hip hop artists might more comfortably find its way into discursive battles and ideological conflicts than many mainstream educational sites. However, although our context has helped us illustrate power-relational aspects of writing more visibly, we propose the same mentality can be adopted for other classes, communities, and educational contexts such as college composition courses, K-12 schools, and additional language writing classes. Those contexts of course might breed different textual events and include more hidden forms of power relations.

Conclusion

Our inquiry stance in this study was a necessary step in order to lead our writing project in a unique educational setting. As with all fruitful writing classes, the specificities of our writing community defied established pedagogical methods, and thus made us struggle to find ways to guide our activities towards meaningful outcomes. Accordingly, all through the workshop, we systematically researched ways to create a writing community, to establish connection between the writers and the Iranian rappers, to help the writers edit and publish the book, and finally to invite the hip hop artists to advertise the book, so that the project would create public conversations and generate change. In this article, we documented these steps, including reflections on the pitfalls and challenges, and the decisions made to overcome them in the process of this collaboration.

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