

What Happens When High School Students Publish Books:
Cultural Sustainability in a University–Community Partnership

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In 2009, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that the federal government would devote \$3.5 billion in funding to an initiative targeting the nation's lowest-achieving public schools (Obama administration, 2009). The following year, \$34 million from this initiative was distributed among ten Oregon schools (Hammond, 2010b). The single largest payout—\$7.7 million, which was \$2 million more than any other school—went to Portland's Roosevelt High School (Hammond, 2010b).

Approximately three-quarters of Roosevelt High School students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and roughly the same percentage belong to an ethnic minority; these figures are among the highest in the state (Roosevelt High School, n.d.).

Furthermore, in 2009, Roosevelt High School “established itself as Oregon's lowest performing high school: Only 39 percent of students in the class of 2009 graduated on time, and sophomores' ... passing rate of 40 percent on the state reading test was dead last” (Hammond, 2010a). The injection of \$7.7 million over a three-year period would fund a variety of plans that were meant to send both test scores and graduation rates soaring.

Among the proposed changes that helped the Portland School District and Roosevelt High School secure this competitive funding from the federal government was its commitment that, “for the next three years, it will have extra counselors to put students on a college track, and daily after-school tutoring” (Hammond, 2010b). And so it was that

the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center came into existence in 2011.

The purpose of this new entity was clear in the minds of its creators:

We have designed the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center to serve three distinct functions:

- Enhancing academic writing skills for graduation, college and career;
- Raising the visibility of youth voice and writing in the community; and
- Sustaining our near-peer mentoring opportunities and the Writing and Publishing Center itself. (“Our purpose,” 2012)

The latter two functions ultimately led to a university–community partnership that would include an example of community-engaged teaching at Portland State University.

One of the most innovative efforts of the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center involved its decision to establish the Freedom Fighters Project. As part of this initiative,

students sought out and interviewed important Portland-area adults who’ve made a difference. . . . The students call their subjects “Freedom Fighters,” and they have gone far beyond what high school students normally do to share their stories—through writing, public speaking, a book and now a museum-quality exhibit. (Hammond, 2012)

This initiative is most obviously connected to the leadership’s desire that the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center “rais[e] the visibility of youth voice and writing in the community” (“Our purpose,” 2012). The students wrote every profile that

went into the first Freedom Fighters Project pamphlet they produced back in 2012, and they also wrote all of the content for the exhibit. The pamphlet and the exhibit, which appeared in at least five different locations around Portland, have the ability to then connect that “youth voice” to the broader community (“Our purpose,” 2012).

An article about the Freedom Fighters Project in the pages of the state newspaper, *The Oregonian*, caught the attention of Dennis Stovall, Director of Publishing at Portland State University (Hammond, 2012). Stovall subsequently attended an exhibit of the Freedom Fighters Project, where he struck up a conversation with some Roosevelt High School students who were involved in the initiative. The students, upon hearing that Stovall had worked for many years as a freelance writer and later as the owner and operator of his own publishing house, immediately expressed an interest in Stovall’s expertise. They were well aware that there was room for improvement in the Freedom Fighters Project pamphlet and exhibit; specifically, they recognized that the pamphlet and exhibit would have been improved by the participation of someone with Stovall’s background and abilities, especially in the areas of print design and production. Stovall’s role as the director of a master’s degree program at an urban university renowned for its commitment to community engagement gave him a stake in the conversation, as well.

The Department of English at Portland State University offers graduate work leading to a master’s degree in writing with a specialization in book publishing. Stovall served as director of this program from its inception in 2001 until his retirement in 2011. The master’s degree program in book publishing at Portland State University is at the forefront of publishing education nationally and has been recognized for its excellence by publications such as *Publishers Weekly*, which described the program as a place where

“publishing education gets innovative” (Habash, 2013). Students gain a comprehensive view of the industry through the program’s required foundational courses. Seminars conducted by expert faculty are augmented by a variety of experiential learning opportunities, the most notable of which is Ooligan Press, a publishing house staffed by students in the master’s degree program.

Publishing three books a year and selling them in bookstores across the nation as well as online, Ooligan Press provides a hands-on experience that is not replicated in any other master’s degree program. Students participate in every step of the publishing process—from manuscript acquisition to editing, from design and production to marketing and sales—with guidance and supervision provided by expert faculty. Students take lessons from the classroom and apply them to real-world publishing challenges, resulting in numerous award-winning and bestselling books that span every genre. Participation in Ooligan Press is required of all students in the master’s degree program.

The model of Ooligan Press, along with Stovall’s involvement with the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center, inspired another particularly innovative effort. Indeed, arguably *the* most innovative effort of the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center involved its decision to establish a student-led publishing house that goes by the name Unique Ink Publishing. This initiative, like the Freedom Fighters Project, is connected to the leadership’s desire that the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center “rais[e] the visibility of youth voice and writing in the community” (“Our purpose,” 2012). Indeed, “Unique Ink’s mission is to publish regionally themed books featuring student work along with that of professional and aspiring writers in the

area” (Schmidt, 2013), which would certainly have the intended effect of “raising the visibility of youth voice” (“Our purpose,” 2012).

The original vision for Unique Ink Publishing, however, extended beyond satisfying this single key function of the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center. Unique Ink Publishing was also meant to help meet a second key function: “sustaining our near-peer mentoring opportunities” (“Our purpose,” 2012). The leaders of the Roosevelt High School (RHS) Writing and Publishing Center elaborate on the purpose of this function in the center’s foundational documents: “RHS will institutionalize a culturally responsive near-peer mentoring model of service delivery that improves college access and retention for current and former students” (“Our purpose,” 2012). Near-peer mentoring at the high school level is meant to increase college retention by teaching students “how to effectively utilize a Writing Center to receive feedback and refine their writing” so that “graduates of RHS will utilize the Writing Centers on the college campus they attend” (“Our purpose,” 2012). To this end, the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center set out to establish “formal partnerships with at least four colleges to provide a mechanism for college students to serve as near-peer mentors” (“Our purpose,” 2012). It was in this context that Stovall and students enrolled in the master’s degree program in book publishing at Portland State University came to support the activities of the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center and, more specifically, Unique Ink Publishing.

To initiate this collaboration, Stovall taught a graduate-level class titled “Practicum in Classroom Publishing” in the summer of 2012. Only a few students from the master’s degree program in book publishing enrolled in the class, but English

Department and Portland State University administration allowed the class to continue because of their commitment to community-engaged teaching. The administration also recognized that this was a new initiative, and if they wanted it to succeed they had to support it in these early stages, even if that meant running a class that did not recoup its instructional costs.

A group of approximately one dozen Roosevelt High School students traveled to the Portland State University campus several times weekly during the summer of 2012, giving Stovall and this first class of graduate students plenty to do. Over the course of these visits, the graduate students “mentored [the] high school students in the process of publishing by helping them to create a publishing company and plan the creation of a book about Portland” (Ooligan Press, 2012). This process both satisfied a desire for “near-peer mentoring opportunities” in connection with the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center and allowed the Portland State University graduate students to reflect critically on their own education (“Our purpose,” 2012). More specifically, the graduate students were testing a pedagogical model in which they had already been unknowing participants via Ooligan Press; that pedagogical model goes by the name “classroom publishing.”

The concept of classroom publishing was developed by Stovall over many years, resulting from his desire to “help teachers understand publishing and how it might be best used by them or their students” (Rittenhouse Award, n.d.). Stovall eventually partnered with an experienced educator and textbook writer, Laurie King, to write a textbook titled *Classroom Publishing: A Practical Guide to Enhancing Student Literacy*. The book was published in 1992—nearly a decade prior to Stovall’s employment at Portland State

University—by Stovall’s own publishing house, Blue Heron Publishing. *Classroom Publishing*

put forward new ideas on how the publishing process can be used to advantage in almost any classroom, either as an adjunct to an existing curriculum or as the foundation for an entire curriculum in any subject, with any budget, and with any level of technology. . . . It was recommended and sold for use “elementary through high school” by the National Council of Teachers of English. (Rittenhouse Award, n.d.)

A revised, second edition titled *Classroom Publishing: A Practical Guide for Teachers* was published by Ooligan Press in 2010. This edition was authored by students in the master’s degree program in book publishing at Portland State University. Consequently, the second edition was not only a book about classroom publishing but also a product of that process.

During that first summer in which Stovall taught the “Practicum in Classroom Publishing” class utilizing a pedagogical model expounded in *Classroom Publishing*, “State Farm . . . awarded the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center a \$94,000 grant to set up its publishing operation and publish its first book” (“State Farm,” 2012). This grant from State Farm was awarded by its Youth Advisory Board, which “awards \$5 million each year in grants to student-led service learning projects. Service learning integrates community service with classroom learning to increase student engagement and raise achievement” (“State Farm,” 2012). On top of the \$7.7 million in competitive funding from the federal government, this State Farm grant was obviously a major boon to Roosevelt High School and, in particular, its Writing and Publishing

Center. The funding greatly accelerated plans for Unique Ink Publishing and its first book.

Unique Ink Publishing's first book, released one year later in July 2013, was an anthology titled *Where the Roses Smell the Best: A Literary Companion to Portland*. The book was "written by Roosevelt High School students as well as established authors and poets" (Schmidt, 2013). Among the better-known writers who contributed to the book are novelist Brian Doyle, poet and memoirist Kim Stafford, *Oregonian* columnist Steve Duin, Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist Renee Mitchell, and Oregon Poet Laureate Paulann Petersen; the mayor of Portland, Charlie Hales, wrote an introduction. Contributors, including several of the aforementioned high-profile writers alongside Roosevelt High School students, participated in five book launch events at various locations around Portland in the month of July. *Where the Roses Smell the Best* was stocked in three Portland-area bookstores; it was also made available in every room of The Heathman Hotel, a luxury boutique hotel in downtown Portland, as part of its "Book by Your Bedside" program (Roosevelt caps, 2013).

A Roosevelt High School student involved in the publication of *Where the Roses Smell the Best*, Zachary Learned, observed that he had "learned important career survival skills in the process, including how to send business emails and use Excel" (Ooligan Press, 2013). Learned's observation fits a claim made in the second edition of *Classroom Publishing*: "Some part of the publishing process is accessible to virtually everyone; those students who might not write confidently may excel in designing the book, creating its website, or handling the announcement of its publication" (King & Stovall, 2010, p. xv). Indeed, the Roosevelt High School students who worked toward the publication of

Where the Roses Smell the Best performed all of these tasks and more. For example, they arranged for their book to be stocked in local bookstores and at The Heathman Hotel. They also organized the book launch events and wrote the press releases that ensured local media would attend and report on the occasion. Empowering the students—that is, giving them control of all aspects of Unique Ink Publishing—was a conscious decision made by the leadership of both Portland State University and Roosevelt High School in an effort to ensure that this particular university–community partnership would be a sustainable cultural project.

The concept of sustainability manifests itself in two very different ways in this example of community-engaged teaching. First, there is the interest in creating a sustainable cultural project. On this issue, there is an obvious consonance between *Classroom Publishing* and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center. As was previously mentioned, one of the “three distinct functions” that is meant to be served by the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center is the function of “sustaining our near-peer mentoring opportunities and the Writing and Publishing Center itself” (“Our purpose,” 2012). The back cover copy for the second edition of *Classroom Publishing* also mentions sustainability: “This book discusses new projects, as well as tips from educators about how to sustain more traditional long-term publishing projects like school newspapers and literary magazines” (Ooligan Press, 2010). Clearly, there is a shared interest in sustainability, arguably born of an awareness of the difficulties inherent in institutionalizing an initiative that began as something much more personal. It is not at all uncommon for an initiative that has developed and been successful because of a

personal investment of time and expertise to stumble when attempts are made to institutionalize that initiative so that it can continue in spite of any personnel changes.

Some of these difficulties are evident in the particular university–community partnership documented in this chapter. For example, Stovall taught the “Practicum in Classroom Publishing” class in both the summer of 2012 and the summer of 2013, even though he retired from Portland State University in 2011. I was hired and assumed the title of Director of Publishing at Portland State University in 2012. After two summers of offering the “Practicum in Classroom Publishing” class to a small number of graduate students who acted as mentors and instructors to Roosevelt High School students, beginning in the summer of 2014 the master’s degree program in book publishing took a different approach. Now, the master’s degree program encourages its students to enroll in an independent study for which they receive credit. I supervise these independent studies, but the graduate students who sign up for them spend the majority of their time working directly with the cohort of Roosevelt High School students who are involved with Unique Ink Publishing at the time. Clearly, I am committed to the collaboration between the master’s degree program in book publishing and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center, but Stovall’s continued involvement is still crucial to the success of this endeavor; since the summer of 2013, he has continued to volunteer with the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center. Perhaps even more indispensable is the involvement of Kate McPherson, Community Engagement Specialist at Roosevelt High School. Drawing on the \$7.7 million it was awarded in federal government funding, Roosevelt High School hired McPherson in 2011 to lead the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center. To this day, her involvement remains critical to the

success of the organization and, in particular, of the singular and time-intensive undertaking that is Unique Ink Publishing.

By first training Roosevelt High School students in skills such as writing, editing, design, production, marketing, and business management, and then empowering these same students by giving them control of Unique Ink Publishing, this university–community partnership is attempting to build a sustainable cultural project. Hopefully, this is not the sort of project that will simply disappear when its charismatic leader finally burns out, because the students themselves are its engine and its greatest advocates.

In addition to providing vocational skill training for high school students, Unique Ink Publishing was conceived as a vehicle for the production of books that possess unique cultural value; this is the second way in which concept of sustainability manifests itself in this example of community-engaged teaching. Throughout the centuries, the book has proven to be an unparalleled format for the preservation of ideas. The student staff of Unique Ink Publishing take advantage of this capability by publishing books that preserve ideas they perceive to be underrepresented but, nonetheless, culturally valuable—something they are uniquely qualified to judge as students at one of Oregon’s poorest and most ethnically diverse high schools. For example, *Where the Roses Smell the Best* contains work by writers from underrepresented populations such as high school-age writers, writers of color, working class writers, LGBTQ writers, and more. By publishing these writers’ words and ideas in a book, and ensuring that book is properly marketed and distributed so that it gets into the hands of as many readers as possible, Unique Ink Publishing and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center are helping preserve and sustain these ideas for consideration by future generations.

Used in this context, the term “sustainability” clearly refers to the fourth pillar of sustainability—cultural sustainability. Of course, as has been asserted by researchers with much more impressive credentials on the subject of cultural sustainability, “Culture is capable of being integrated within sustainable development in three more-or-less separate ... ways, or ‘roles.’ These are derived from a literature review of scientific articles using the concept of ‘cultural sustainability’” (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 28). In this case, the third role—“culture as sustainable development”—seems most applicable (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 29). This role

sees culture as the necessary overall foundation and structure for achieving the aims of sustainable development. By recognising that culture is at the root of all human decisions and actions and an overarching concern (even a new paradigm) in sustainable development thinking, culture and sustainability become mutually intertwined, and the distinctions between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability begin to fade. (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 29)

The assertion, in this excerpt, that “culture is at the root of all human decisions and actions” is perhaps why this third role seems most applicable to the case of Unique Ink Publishing and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 29). To be sure, the terms “decisions” and “actions” are clearly significant to the researchers who use them here, because they use them elsewhere, as well, in their discussion of this third role, “culture as sustainable development” (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 29). For example, they write, “Culture in this approach refers to a worldview, a cultural system guided by

intentions, motivations, ethical and moral choices, rooted in values that drive our individual and collective actions” (Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015, p. 32). The gist of their argument seems to be that a decision must be made that is ultimately cultural before the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability even become a possibility.

This way of understanding cultural sustainability is particularly relevant to the business of book publishing. After all, the book publishing process always begins with the selection of a book to publish. The preeminent book on the subject of sustainability and the publishing industry, *Rethinking Paper & Ink: The Sustainable Publishing Revolution*, frames the issue in the following manner: “Truly responsible publishing starts with book acquisition. ... Acquisitions editors, who decide which manuscripts to publish, do have to ... [weigh] a book’s potential social or cultural value against the methods used to make it” (Carver & Guidry, 2010, p. 59). The authors of *Rethinking Paper & Ink*, Jessicah Carver and Natalie Guidry (2010), elaborate on this point:

The acquisitions editor functions as a gatekeeper between the worlds of unpublished manuscripts and published books. A sustainably minded acquisitions editor will be conscious of the gravity of the decision to bring a manuscript to the printed page with regard to the long-term [cultural] and environmental consequences as well as short-term financial gains. (p. 59)

Clearly, culture in this context is an initiating force that gives birth to the possibility of making economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable decisions—but only after a decision about cultural sustainability has first been made.

As long as Unique Ink Publishing continues to fulfill its mission to publish “regionally themed books featuring student work along with that of professional and aspiring writers in the area,” it is sure to serve as a vehicle for the production of books that possess unique cultural value (Schmidt, 2013). Accordingly, the particular university–community partnership documented in this chapter will continue to serve as an example of community-engaged teaching with a focus on cultural sustainability.

The outcomes associated with this example of community-engaged teaching are threefold: outcomes for the high school students who are involved with Unique Ink Publishing and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center, outcomes for Roosevelt High School itself, and outcomes for the graduate students at Portland State University who are involved with this project. For the high school students, there exists an abundance of research—not necessarily specific to this project—that testifies to the benefits of this type of endeavor. For example, one of the most frequently cited articles on the subject of classroom publishing is Dennis Rowen’s (2005) “The Write Motivation: Using the Internet to Engage Students in Writing Across the Curriculum.” Rowen (2005) writes, “We know that [students] take more care in their writing when they know their writing will be on display for all to see” (p. 22). In “Students’ Awareness of Audience in Web-Published Science Writing,” Nathan Bos and Joseph Krajcik (1998) refer to the Internet as a mode of “publication for a local, national, or worldwide audience” (p. 3) and state that students experienced some “motivational benefits” as a result of writing for an audience (p. 30). These types of observations certainly apply to the high school students who are involved with Unique Ink Publishing; after all, everything they do that is associated with a book’s publication—from writing stories and poems for inclusion in an

anthology, to designing the book cover, to writing press releases, to speaking at book launch events—has a very real audience of fellow students, readers from the general public, media outlets, booksellers, and more. For example, the next major release forthcoming from Unique Ink Publishing is an anthology titled *No Box Can Hold: A Modern Study of Identity and Self-Discovery* that, like their first anthology, combines the voices of Roosevelt High School students and community members. *No Box Can Hold* is clearly intended for the broadest possible audience. Unique Ink Publishing has also released two small pamphlets—*Invasion of the Head-Scratchers: Survivors' Guide to Scholarship Essays* and *Youth and the Law*—written entirely by students and meant mostly for their peers at Roosevelt High School.

For Roosevelt High School itself, the outcomes associated with this example of community-engaged teaching are more difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, it is notable that a news story on the subject of Roosevelt High School's transformation at the conclusion of its three-year federal grant uses *Where the Roses Smell the Best* to illustrate its main points. After observing that “the book launch caps a transformational three years for Roosevelt High School,” the article goes on to document the most significant benchmarks of the school's improvements:

- **Graduation Rate:** Rose from 42 percent in 2009–10 to 57 percent in 2011–12.
- **Math, Reading:** The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state math standards rose 25 percentage points in math—from 32 percent in 2009–10 to 57 percent in 2012–13—and 37 percentage points in

reading—from 39 percent in 2009–10 to 76 percent in 2012–13.

(“Roosevelt caps,” 2013)

These gains are remarkable in such a short period of time, and while it would be irresponsible to lay all of the credit at the feet of the Unique Ink Publishing and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center, they have surely played a role. As was observed in the aforementioned article,

Three years ago Roosevelt High School struggled with low achievement, flagging enrollment and a dispirited community even as the school and partners worked hard to bring change. Today the Heathman Hotel hosted Roosevelt students who helped write and publish the school’s first book and placed a signed copy in the storied Heathman Library—helping cap the high school’s three years of growth and transformation. (“Roosevelt caps,” 2013)

The collaboration between Portland State University and the Roosevelt High School Writing and Publishing Center was instrumental in delivering these positive outcomes for Roosevelt High School.

The outcomes for the graduate students from the master’s degree program in book publishing at Portland State University are also significant. For those involved with this project, there is the benefit of teaching high school students some of the publishing-related skills that they have been honing as graduate students. Research on the subject of learning by teaching presents unambiguous conclusions: “Teachers learn while they teach ... and while they prepare to teach.... Expecting to teach appears to encourage effective learning strategies such as seeking out key points and organizing information into a

coherent structure” (Nestojko, Bui, Kornell, & Bjork, 2014, p. 1047). In other words, the graduate students who taught high school students how to, for example, write back cover copy for a book, likely enhanced their own abilities as compared to their uninvolved graduate student peers. Furthermore, reflective practice is a well-acknowledged factor in the improvement of teaching and learning, with pioneering work on this subject done by Donald A. Schön as early as 1983. The first step in reflective practice is

setting the problem [which] involves two stages, *naming* (an understanding of the situation is developed and the “things” to which the practitioner will attend are named) and *framing the problem* (boundaries are established, and a “logic” or discipline is created for the problem, defining the context in which the named things will be attended). (Pereira, 1999, p. 342)

By practicing classroom publishing but not identifying these practices to their students, faculty in the master’s degree program in book publishing were flaunting this very first step of reflective practice. Naming and framing these practices—in other words, making these practices explicit—is the first step toward a more comprehensive reflective practice, thereby potentially opening up a unique realm of practical and pedagogical advantages for the graduate students from the master’s degree program in book publishing at Portland State University.

Perhaps, then, it is worth adding a fourth outcome associated with this example of community-engaged teaching. This final outcome is for Portland State University itself: adding yet another approach to its already impressive roster of examples of sustainability-focused community engagement in higher education. Clearly, what happens when high

school students publish books is that everyone connected to this enterprise comes out a winner.

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