

Through Their Words:
Building the Culture of Teen Creative Writing

Young Chicago Authors

Report prepared by
EmcArts Inc.



Young Chicago Authors is grateful to The Joyce Foundation for major support of this project. We also wish to thank Dr. Robert Boone, Michelle Boone, Illinois Arts Council, Girls Best Friend Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, Polk Bros Foundation, Nick Rabkin, Arnold Aprill, Julie Simpson, Cynthia Weiss, Robin Dixon, Christopher Gentile, and Melissa Dibble.

Young Chicago Authors encourages self-expression and literacy among Chicago's youth through creative writing, performance, and publication. YCA provides student-centered, artist-led workshops free to youth ages 13–19 in schools and communities. Our process emphasizes artistic development, mentorship, and creating safe spaces where a young person's life matters. We believe that through their words, young people can promote tolerance and remove barriers to transform their lives and society.

Young Chicago Authors is supported by Alphawood Foundation, Anonymous, Chicago Community Trust, Chicago Tribune Foundation, C.N.A. Foundation, Field Foundation of Illinois, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Girls Best Friend Foundation, Illinois Arts Council, Illinois Humanities Council, Joyce Foundation, Mayer and Morris Kaplan Family Foundation, MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, McCormick Tribune Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Polk Bros Foundation, Prince Charitable Trusts, Queenan Foundation, Relations Foundation, Sahara Enterprises, Inc., Speh Foundation, Stadheim Foundation, Woods Fund of Chicago, individual donors and community partners.

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Young Chicago Authors
SATURDAY WRITING PROGRAM
Program Overview

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2006

Overview

Teens will engage in the arts when what is presented is seen as relevant to their lives and when it provides a direct, meaningful pathway into artistic experience. ... The essential elements we must incorporate as we design exciting, exacting arts activities for teens are respect; open, honest, frequent communication; fairness; warmth; relevance; and authenticity. We can thus give kids what they deserve, and they will respond in ways that give value back to us.

Philip Yenawine, Co-Founder, VUE (Visual Understanding in Education),
addressing The Wallace Foundation's arts grantees
at a November 2005 convening



In 1991, Dr. Robert S. Boone, a published author and educator with extensive experience teaching teens in Chicago urban and suburban settings, founded Young Chicago Authors in order to encourage self-expression and literacy among Chicago's youth.

Over the past 15 years, Young Chicago Authors (YCA), has created an exemplary literary arts program for teens. At the heart of the organization's programming is the Saturday Writing Program, an intensive three-year writing program that accepts students who are beginning their sophomore year of high school. The 60+ student artists who participate each year attend small group workshops in poetry, fiction writing, nonfiction forms, playwriting, performance writing, and selected author studies. They also perform and publish their work, through YCA and independently. The students' work is supported by a pedagogy and culture that are unique to the program, but that also reflect other excellent work being done in the field of teen arts.

The culture of the Saturday Writing Program celebrates the students, constantly reinforcing the message that their work is being taken seriously. This culture values one-on-one interaction and autonomy, within a context of serious self-exploration and respect for one another. The students receive ongoing mentoring which encourages them to construct both a personal and a literary identity.

Thanks to its well-designed programming and its history of success, YCA itself has the potential to become a model for organizational learning in the field of youth arts. The organization's approach to fulfilling its mission includes both risk-taking and self-reflection, as well as ongoing documentation, evaluation, research, and planning. All of its efforts are aimed at improving students' ability to learn and giving them multiple opportunities to do so.

This report by EmcArts, based on an initial qualitative assessment of the Saturday Writing Program, looks at the relationship of YCA's work to nationally recognized best practices in teen programming. It reflects the voices of stakeholders who gave interviews (students, program graduates, and Teaching Artists), as well as EmcArts' on-site observations.

Successful Teen Programming

The Surdna Foundation's influential 2002 monograph, *Powerful Voices: Developing High-Impact Arts Programs for Teens*¹, articulates a set of core elements underlying the success of outstanding youth arts programs, and the impacts such programs can have.

The philosophy and practice of the YCA Saturday Writing Program, as articulated by staff and participants, and as observed by EmcArts, are consistent with the elements of best practice outlined in *Powerful Voices*. At the heart of the monograph is the "Framework for Effective Programming," which outlines the optimum program philosophy as follows:

1. The program is central to the overall mission and vision of the organization, and compatible with its institutional culture and ethos.
2. The program maintains high expectations of students at all times, and emphasizes the continual stretching of students into unfamiliar artistic territory – measurement of student "excellence" balances the rate and extent of individual progress with the achievement of quality artwork.
3. The program is holistic in its approach to the creative and expressive development of participants – its design consciously combines a commitment to artistic advancement with recognition of the intended impact on personal growth.
4. The program employs artist-teachers with a secure professional grasp of their disciplines, for whom work with young people is personally important and who want it to form a significant aspect of their practice.
5. The program is built on small-group interaction that includes sustained, intimate contact among student, artists, and staff, and among students themselves.

"The existence of these core elements," the monograph states, "provides a reasonable predictor in any project that work of high quality will be found, and the elements can be used as a guide to program design and evaluation."

EmcArts' report reviews the work and impact of the Saturday Writing Program in light of the program philosophy stated in *Powerful Voices*. The synergy of all five elements leads to programming with deep impact.

¹ The monograph is based on a comprehensive evaluation of Surdna's national Arts Program by EmcArts. An excerpt of the Framework for Successful programming is attached as Appendix B; the full report can be found at www.EmcArts.org.

Saturday Writing Program – Findings

The YCA Saturday Writing Program, now in its 14th year, is an intensive three-year writing program that accepts students beginning their sophomore year of high school. Over sixty young writers, who are referred to YCA by English teachers, community centers, and former students, attend small group workshops led by Teaching Artists who are professional writers. Workshops are offered in poetry, fiction writing, non-fiction forms, playwriting, performing writing, and author studies. At the end of each trimester, the best student writing is collected and published in a *Watch the Steps* magazine (*Watch the Steps* is YCA's publishing wing). Upon completion of the program, students are eligible to receive college scholarships; over 160 scholarships have been awarded since 1995.

Based on EmcArts' interviews and observations of the Saturday Writing Program, we believe that the work it does is in line with many nationally recognized best practices, including the program philosophy that appears in *Powerful Voices*. The sections below correspond to that philosophy.

Relationship of the program to YCA's mission

The mission statement of Young Chicago Authors is as follows:

Young Chicago Authors encourages self-expression and literacy among Chicago's youth through creative writing, performance, and publication. YCA provides student-centered, artist-led workshops free to youth ages 13–19 in schools and communities. Our process emphasizes artistic development, mentorship, and creating safe spaces where a young person's life matters. We believe that through their words, young people can promote tolerance and remove barriers to transform their lives and society.

The Saturday Writing Program lies at the heart of YCA's identity. Because it offers high-level training, mentorship and an open, welcoming atmosphere, it encompasses the core elements of the organization's mission.

Individual and artistic accomplishment

Students participating in the Saturday Writing Program receive rigorous training in the craft of writing. Interviewees told EmcArts that the program offers a highly challenging environment that is intended to help students understand how to access their own voices and to take a proactive approach to the development of their writing and life skills. The evolution of their work, in terms of quality and content, is impressive.

Over the three years of the Saturday program, students develop a deep commitment to the program which, EmcArts was told, strengthens the long-term effects of their learning. The students become serious about their craft and their identity as writers.

Coming here is like my occupation. I have more respect for my own writing now. I take time to review and revise it. I share my writing with others inside and outside YCA.
– Student

Students have traditionally had an informal voice in curriculum development through their TAs, who take student views very seriously – and this role is becoming increasingly formalized through the Youth Advisory Committee.

The program has generated a new, vibrant body of writing unique to Chicago and the youth experience. Some of this writing appears at the end of each YCA trimester in a booklet published by Watch the Steps Press, YCA’s publishing wing. In addition, Saturday Writing Program students participate in other YCA programs, including publication programs – *Say What* magazine, and GirlSpeak Webzine – as well as the popular *Louder Than A Bomb* poetry performance events. In addition to *Louder Than a Bomb*, youth affiliated with YCA can take advantage of many opportunities to hone their performance skills. Students perform at slams, libraries, churches, coffee houses – in some cases side-by-side with adult writers (for example, at the American Library Association’s Book Fair). There are also special initiatives such as GirlSpeak, which includes a webzine, co-gender writing workshops within the Saturday Writing Program, and a Girls’ and Women’s Collaborative performance project.

3. A holistic student experience

Because YCA concerns itself with its students’ overall well-being, the Saturday Writing Program seeks to strengthen their life skills as well as the quality of their writing.

The Program offers young talents a deeper and more challenging engagement with the literary arts than is typically available at their schools. Students report that the artistic and personal discoveries they make in the YCA workshops have had a profound effect on their sense of what they may be able to accomplish in the future.

Often, the program is an outlet for teens who are talented, but do not excel in the traditional academic environment. In YCA classes they are free to delve into political, social and personal issues without the typical limitations of the public school setting (where charged language and controversial content may not be well received). This creates an open environment which engages students from their place of interest, within a serious educational context.

As a white rapper and writer, I had a hard childhood because no one wanted to believe that I really loved hip hop. At YCA I am accepted for my writing. Nobody here calls me a ‘wigger.’
– Student

Our class on escapist writing was like a writing class and therapy. The teachers care for your writing skills and your well-being.
– Program graduate

I’ve never seen kids my age respect a place this much. Even the graffiti artists don’t tag or mark their space here if it’s unauthorized—they feel like it’s theirs already. It’s the most respected place I’ve ever been to.
– Student

Many students find additional ways to engage with the program, learning skills in administration, grant writing, teaching, curriculum development, and management. These students are encouraged to assist in multiple ways by YCA staff and TAs.

Program students and program graduates were aware of the personal maturity and growth that this setting had fostered. One program graduate summarized this by saying, “YCA really taught me how to live.”

The YCA space is cherished by students for being welcoming and

comforting, and for offering plentiful artistic resources. The teens have full ownership of the space, spending long hours there. As a result, they are highly respectful of it. And they are respectful of one another as fellow writers. They feel secure at YCA – mentally and physically – in a way that many do not at home or at school.

4. The teacher/student relationship

The Teaching Artists at YCA are respected in Chicago’s literary and teaching circles. Their expertise and commitment are responsible for a great deal of the Saturday program’s success with teens.

The TAs we spoke with told us that the dedication of the students, the consistently high quality of their work, and the relationships developed with them over time in the program – relationships that benefit both student and teacher – are unique to YCA.

These are major factors in drawing TAs to bring their educational practice to the program. One remarked:

I never respected teachers or wanted to be a teacher. This makes me want to be a teacher. The cool teacher.
- Student

I have a full house of kids on a Saturday who are really devoted to writing. They take it seriously because it’s their thing, and their dedication over three years is unique to YCA. I am friends with current and former YCA students, and I trust their response to my work more than anyone else’s.

Another unique aspect of the program’s pedagogy is the autonomy TAs enjoy in creating their curricula. This freedom is grounded, we were told, in the expectation that their teaching practice will be academically rigorous, challenging for the students, and inclusive of multiple viewpoints and experiences. Further, the pedagogy emphasizes the value of inquiry. Students are encouraged to formulate searching and critical questions about literature they confront. A TA reported:

Classes are always a nice balance of seriousness, curiosity, and inquiry, and the writing we develop is always raising the bar. Because they’re so serious, I’ve been able to experiment with new programs for them around what the students or I want to learn more about – and they always rise to the challenge.

Even though the teaching practice in the Saturday Writing Program is not codified, it is well understood throughout the organization, by TAs, staff, and students alike. This knowledge informs the vetting process through which TAs join the YCA roster, ensuring a continuum in the student experience over three years of instruction.



5. Working toward long-term results

Intensive small-group work

Everything here is about writing and cultivating the arts. I am around lots of great writers, and there are books everywhere. But it is also homey and welcoming, and comforting to students.

- Program graduate

The pedagogy of the Saturday program includes a strong focus on the development of the individual voice. Critiques are honest and professional, and they are available to students inside and outside the classroom. The atmosphere is not competitive. Rather, students benefit from opportunities to learn from the TA and from one another, rather than being “taught at.”

YCA’s staff values small classes, in which it is possible for the TA to pay attention to every student.

Accent on mentorship

The mentoring provided by the TAs is a key feature underlying the success of the Saturday Writing Program. Indeed, most interviewees stated that it is the program’s most important feature. Teachers and students at YCA told us that they relate to one another personally, as equals – both as writers and as people.

Teachers and students enjoy considerable one-on-one exchange. And the multi-year nature of the program means that many of these relationships play out over several years, so that the TA has a clear sense of the effect his/her mentoring has on an individual student.

Indeed, relationships of this quality are enjoyed not just by students and teachers, but also among students, and between students and YCA staff.

And both program graduates and TAs told us that the mentorship and connection to YCA frequently continue after students have graduated. This occurs formally through alumni teaching assistantships, as well as informally through writing exchanges and critiques, through contact within the Chicago writers’ community, and through graduates’ efforts to stay in touch with YCA staff and teachers.

It is worth noting how strongly the ways in which mentoring works at YCA are in line with the essential program elements that are listed in the “Framework for Effective Programming” (from the Surdna Foundation’s publication *Powerful Voices*), which appears in Appendix B.

Youth as social change agents

The YCA student body crosses Chicago’s demographic boundaries; within YCA, every student is treated with equal respect and attention. Students in the Saturday Writing Program publish and perform their own work and thus act as advocates for themselves

Kevin Coval went from being Kevin my teacher to Kevin my friend, very quickly. I can give Kevin writing of mine to review at any time, and he’ll give me his. There’s no age gap, and we’re not teacher/student—we’re just cool.

- Student

and the communities with which they identify themselves. This includes LGBT teens and, through the GirlSpeak Initiative's co-gender writing workshops, young women seeking a safe space to find their voices.

At a gathering of The Wallace Foundation's arts grantees in November 2005, Ellen Rudolph, Program Director for the Arts at the Surdna Foundation, stated:

The teen years are as critical in a young person's life as early childhood. They need avenues for personal exploration and expression. They need opportunities to develop an understanding of the world and their place in it. ... There is real potential here to help erase barriers by changing the way these young people imagine themselves and their potential in the world.

And indeed, students in the Saturday Writing Program are encouraged to articulate a vision for social change – a vision that springs from literary work that reflects their experience of family, community, and society at large. This strategy encourages and empowers YCA's teens to develop strong, confident individual voices. Ultimately, the effects of teens' participation in YCA is carried back to their regular schools, in the form of greater artistic and political awareness.

The future of the program

The program participants and other stakeholders in the Saturday Writing Program are dedicated to retaining and strengthening the unique culture which has been nurtured at YCA – a culture that is challenging, personal, safe, spontaneous, and informal.

On the basis of this common platform, interviewees raised a number of questions about the program's goals and opportunities, which YCA may consider for future planning. Most directions relate to strengthening the Saturday programming, expanding the program's capacity to serve youth in Chicago, and increasing the organization's local and national recognition. These opportunities have been grouped by theme as follows:

Programming

- ◆ Expand and improve the system for in-school programs (Chicago Public Schools and other schools).
- ◆ Expand and highlight progressive, risky programming that is unique to YCA, such as queer and gender-specific writing workshops.
- ◆ Encourage students to take more ownership of programming and overall decision-making.
- ◆ Expand training opportunities for teens who are interested in becoming paid teaching assistants.
- ◆ Provide students with more opportunities to publish their work.

Teaching Artists

- ◆ Develop a “faculty” of Teaching Artists, with improved pay and benefits.
- ◆ Maintain a space for and encourage TAs to share their work and practice, through Teaching Writers Collective and other venues.

Evaluation

- ◆ Complete a thorough evaluation of the Saturday Writing Program, in order to support the philosophy outlined in the Program Overview with rigorous quantitative and qualitative evidence.
- ◆ Enable students to carry out action research (including evaluative activities) for the organization.
- ◆ Survey YCA graduates to obtain quantitative as well as qualitative data about the long-term impact of their involvement in YCA's programs.
- ◆ Conduct comparative research on organizations with similar programs, mission and challenges, including Artists for Humanity (Boston), Global Action Project (New York), Albany Park Theatre Project (Chicago), YouthSpeaks (various) and many others

Further Documentation & Case-making

- ◆ Document student work and achievements, as well as achievements of the organization.
- ◆ Strengthen Web presence; improve how YCA presents itself online to attract teens, educators and others.
- ◆ Explore new ways to document YCA (for example, a documentary film). Consider documenting various YCA “stories” and points of view.
- ◆ Develop YCA’s learner-centered pedagogy into a replicable model.

Community building

- ◆ Increase YCA’s presence, its level of service, and its ability to recruit students within diverse Chicago communities and the Chicago Public Schools.
- ◆ Convert the continuing enthusiasm and energy of alumni into more formal roles.
- ◆ Connect YCA and its students to local, regional, and national literary and spoken-word communities through visiting authors and artists, publications and performances by YCA participants, and other activities.
- ◆ Increase publicity efforts to reach broader audiences.

Facility and Access

- ◆ Decide on infrastructure and facility needs, backed by financial planning.
- ◆ Eliminate barriers to access (for example, provide transportation stipends).

Organizational Development

- ◆ Maintain and increase diversity of YCA students, teaching artists, staff and board members.
- ◆ Create greater public awareness of the full range of YCA programming, including not only the Saturday Writing Program, but also *Louder Than a Bomb* and other public performances, *WordPlay*, *Say What* magazine and other publications.
- ◆ Expand student leadership opportunities and programs such as Youth Advisory Council.
- ◆ Develop a regional and national presence for YCA and give students a broader, more national perspective.

Appendix A – Individuals Interviewed, January 26–28, 2006

Students

Tim “Toaster” Henderson

Adam Levin

Shari Lewis

Aarti Monteiro

Staff & Teaching Artists

Dr. Robert S. Boone, Founder, Board President

Kevin Coval, Artistic Director

Toni Asante Lightfoot

Jenn Morea, Teaching Artist

Julie Parson Nesbitt, Development Director

Eva Olsgard, Co-Executive Director/Programs

Shinae Yoon, Co-Executive Director/Managing

Program graduates

Cristina Correa

Kevin Derrig, YCA Teaching Assistant

Amanda Torres, YAC Coordinator

External informants

Arnold April, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

Robin Dixon, Girl’s Best Friend Foundation

Julie Simpson, Cricket Island Foundation

Cynthia Weiss, Center for Community Arts Partnerships, Columbia College; parent of former student

Appendix B – Framework for Successful Teen Programming

The full Framework for Effective Programming that appears in the Surdna Foundation’s 2002 monograph, *Powerful Voices: Developing High-Impact Programs for Teens*, is as follows:

A. Program Philosophy

1. The program is central to the overall mission and vision of the organization, and compatible with its institutional culture and ethos.
2. The program maintains high expectations of students at all times, and emphasizes the continual stretching of students into unfamiliar artistic territory – measurement of student “excellence” balances the rate and extent of individual progress with the achievement of quality artwork.
3. The program is holistic in its approach to the creative and expressive development of participants – its design consciously combines a commitment to artistic advancement with recognition of the intended impact on personal growth.
4. The program employs artist-teachers with a secure professional grasp of their disciplines, for whom work with young people is personally important and who want it to form a significant aspect of their practice.
5. The program is built on small-group interaction that includes sustained, intimate contact among student, artists, and staff, and among students themselves.

B. Programming Essentials

1. Extensive planning and monitoring by staff and artists together to ensure a strategic fit among artistic leadership, overall goals and program activities.
2. A high ratio of teachers to students, allowing personal attention to each student.
3. A rich interaction between artists and students, based on consistent (rather than occasional) work together.
4. Artistic literacy fostered by connecting students with art-making and art work outside the program (peer and professional).
5. A high level of staff support, provided by individuals with sophisticated artistic understanding and advanced people skills.
6. A safe environment that promotes trust to all sides.
7. Devices to build real student ownership of the program and ground it in the students’ own experience.
8. A careful balance of varied short-term student achievements with coherent long-term goals.
9. Means to re-engage with students (after participation in the program) in a variety of roles where their responsibilities can increase over time if they desire.

C. Approach to Content and Style

1. Be true to the core philosophy and use the programming essentials in building program content that genuinely and idiosyncratically relates to the students' experiences and the local situation.
2. Maintain a high level of responsiveness to unfolding activities day-to-day.
3. Be flexible in changing course, without losing overall direction.
4. Address challenging artistic, personal and social issues, as they arise.

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