

Deep Center's Block by Block Program

By Dare Dukes

Deep Center's new Block by Block program builds literacy through creative writing, journaling, community engagement, and visual arts. Deep is an award-winning provider of afterschool creative writing literacy programming in Savannah, Georgia.

Local creative writers founded Deep Center in 2008 to address the detrimental effects of Savannah's persistently high poverty on young people's literacy, their ability to tell their stories, and the city's narratives about working-class communities. Since then, we've served nearly 2,450 kids, published 65 anthologies of youth writing, trained more than 145 volunteer writing instructors, and hosted live readings reaching local, diverse audiences of 4,000.

Deep Center takes an in-depth approach to literacy by challenging young people to engage with language and their stories through writing, reading, and performance. We help them write with skill, confidence, and courage, and we showcase their best work through publication and live readings. Deep strives to ensure the stories of Savannah's youths are valued. We help raise the voices of diverse young people to make sure their perspectives, stories, and aesthetics are part of our city's cultural fabric, and to afford them the opportunity to engage in debates and the development of cultural forms and movements.



We piloted Block by Block in spring 2015 to address a clear need for sequential programming for our most invested young authors. It is Deep's first creative writing literacy program to combine multimodal literacies with community engagement in a youth-centered, dialogical learning environment. The goals of Block by Block are to increase youths' writing skills, critical thinking, social agency, and understanding of the people and stories in their community. Block by Block grew from a foundational belief, based in a large body of current scholarship, that language literacy has the greatest potential to develop and flourish when exercised in tandem with visual and other creative literacies, and when learners are given ample opportunities to use language to make meaning about themselves, their worlds, and their positions in those worlds.

Block by Block ran for 18 weeks, from January to June 2015, and served 12 youths (ages 12-14). Program facilitators Molly Leiberman and Coco Papys, both teaching artists and writers, co-facilitated the program, meeting with youths on Sundays from 3-5pm. Deep program director Megan Ave' Lallemand drafted a curriculum that provided structure for the pilot year, yet we afforded Leiberman and Papys a lot of freedom to develop and play inside this draft so that the program could benefit organically from their extensive



experience. Youth played, reflected, created, worked and learned in four areas: 1) writing, with particular focus on what Linda Flower calls “writer-based prose” (writing for the writer rather than for the reader); 2) community research, which included interviewing both planned visitors about their community-based service work and people on the street during walking excursions; 3) art-making in a variety of

media; 4) and creative production around the theme of community to complete a collaborative mural and a zine, incorporating both writing and visual art. (A zine or “zeen” is a small-circulation, self-produced magazine that includes original and appropriated texts, as well as written and visual art, and often intentionally features a hand-made or DIY aesthetic.)

We had two public celebrations as the art-making and writing came to completion. One day, youth and community members joined together to paint their mural (rendered on canvas and now on display in a neighborhood art supply store); and a zine launch, which happened during our city's monthly art march.

These activities helped the young authors explore and express their personal stories while connecting them to those of people in their neighborhood and city. This overarching focus grounds Block by Block at the intersection of literacy, social agency, and healthy youth development, and we believe it's a powerful mix for helping young people become compelling writers, joyful and engaged life-long learners, and community leaders.

Dare Dukes has been the executive director of Deep Center since 2014. He has been an advocate for youth and community arts and social justice since 2003. He is also a writer and musician. For more information, contact dare@deepkids.com or visit Deep Center (<http://deepkids.com>).