

Right to Write
Philippines
Pomona College
Samantha Mae Coyiuto, Philippines, Pomona College

'Right to Write' was originally planned to be a writing workshop for thirty talented, but underprivileged high school students in the Philippines. The project aimed to give young Filipino writers the chance to share their stories and to encourage creative writing in the Philippine school curriculum.

The biggest difficulty I encountered was recruiting students and teachers. Before I went back to Manila, I was e-mailing a professor of *Malikhaing Pagsusulat* (creative writing in Tagalog) in the University of the Philippines. She was thrilled with the project and very interested in handling the workshop. However when we met in person, she realized that the university's hectic schedule didn't allow her to handle all sessions. Around this time, I was able to get in touch with, Joy Pena, the associate manager of the Ayala Museum. I've only been to the museum during a field trip years ago. The museum showcases multiple exhibits of Filipino culture by Filipino artists, including a diorama exhibit of the entire Philippine history. I told Joy about my project idea and she was so enthusiastic about the museum hosting it. Coming from a public school, she wished that she had the same opportunities as a kid. When Joy showed me the price, I took a while to consider whether I should spend that much of the budget on the venue. Holding the workshop in the museum had plenty of benefits. First, it already had high quality classrooms and projectors. In addition, students and their parents would be provided with free museum tickets throughout the sessions. After considering all of these, I realized the museum would be the perfect venue. Since the museum frequently hosts workshops, Joy knew a lot of writing teachers. I ultimately decided on Mina Esguerra. Mina is a famous young adult writer and has published over ten novels. She created the workshop "Author At Once" for writers and publishers; plus she is great with kids. After discussing with Mina and other writing teachers, I found out that thirty students were too many for a personalized writing workshop. We then decided to limit the class to fifteen students and have an additional art workshop for another fifteen students. For the art workshop, I decided to hire Eileen Escueta, an artist (specializing in watercolor) who is great with children. When we finalized the logistics and the teachers, all we were missing was the students.

Since we moved the venue to the Ayala Museum, I decided to look for schools that were nearby. I also wanted to give the opportunity to as many students as possible. After talking with Joy and past workshop organizers, they all suggested to go through the Department of Education. Luckily, the secretary of DepEd is a friend of my dad. Through him, we were able to send a memorandum out to several schools around the Philippines. We required students to submit past works and recommendation letters for their application. Unfortunately we had to push back the deadline because of the typhoons during those months. Even so, we received an overwhelming amount of entries. After thorough screening among the teachers, Joy and me, we decided on participants from fourteen different schools. Contacting the selected students was one of my favorite parts. All of them were so excited to be a part of the project. When I called one student's mom, she was unaware that her daughter even applied. She was in tears and said that she didn't know her daughter was so talented. After all the delays and budget constraints, I had to change the details in the proposal. Since the museum was far from most universities, college volunteers weren't able to take part in the sessions. I also had to cut down the sessions to five weekends from the original ten. Since the works still need to be edited before publishing, the book will also be printed later this year instead of September. The students lived so far from each other so I decided to give them a weekly transportation allowance instead of hiring a bus to pick them all up.

Throughout the sessions, I would go back and forth to observe the art and writing workshops. During the first few sessions, a lot of the students were very reserved. One girl in the writing workshop would shy away whenever Mina would ask her to read her works. One boy in the art workshop didn't want to join because he felt that everyone else was more talented than him. However by the end of the workshop, that girl was reading her story to the class and that boy had a folder filled with his artwork. Beyond the lessons on plot or brush strokes, these students had gained confidence. Aside from the students, I think this project had an impact on their teachers and parents. Most of them never knew that their students or children were interested in the arts until the latter joined the workshops. I met Paul Hernandez, a training teacher in Caloocan High School. He told me

that his student was very shy and he was surprised that she was interested in applying to the workshop. When he told the school administration, they were reluctant to allow her because they would be responsible if anything had happened to the student. Paul then volunteered to accompany the student to the workshop every weekend. Besides Paul, many teachers came to observe their students and see their drawings and stories. At the end of the workshop, the museum employees and I held a small graduation ceremony for the participants. All the parents were so proud as we gave the students their certificates. Some were crying when they found out their works would be compiled into a book. After these five weekends, I hope that these students will continuously be encouraged to pursue their passions in and out of the classroom. When the book eventually comes out later this year, it will be a symbol for these students that they are really some of the most talented youth in the country. I hope that distributing this to different schools will also encourage greater emphasis on writing, arts and other creative avenues. I always hear about Philippine schools trying to advance in the math and sciences, but the arts are hardly included in these conversations. Students who want to write, draw, paint should know that their talents are worth training. After talking to Joy, she and I planned for the workshop to become an annual event. Since this first project was successful, it should be easier to find sponsors for succeeding workshops.

When I think of peace, I think of an environment of equal opportunity. I think of people, young and old, who are not hindered from dreaming; a community where hope is alive. I wanted to emphasize this in the project by making the theme of the whole project, '*Pangarap*' or dreams. In the short-term, I think that these participants were able to partake in a workshop where they were free to express themselves. They chose their characters, the settings and the language that they wrote in. They chose what to paint and which medium to use. In these five weekends, these students were true writers and artists. From this workshop, I hope these students learned to believe in themselves and learn that what they have to write and draw do matter. Years ago, a young girl told me that she couldn't be a writer because she didn't have the money for it. Afterwards, I never wanted to hear anyone's dreams to be limited because they lack the resources or the money.

One lesson I gained from this project is how powerful the arts can be. I have always had trouble expressing myself verbally. If I ever do talk, I was always worried whether I said the right thing. Writing was where I felt free. I didn't feel constrained and it was place where no one would judge me. The high school teachers I met during the workshop described their students as quiet or shy. Even if this were so, these students were never afraid to paint with new techniques, write about places they've never been and share their stories. Eileen described the students in her class as fearless. I realized that the arts are important because it is where a lot of people dare to let go of their inhibitions. One student commented that writing a story set in a foreign place made her feel like she was exploring new worlds. Another wanted to write about the Philippines in a positive light because he felt that the country is always portrayed as corrupt and polluted. This project convinced me further that creative expression should be a huge part of any person's education.

I read articles about the shortage of books, lack of teachers and the continuous decline of the Philippine education system. I had unconsciously used these articles as lens whenever I think about the public school system. Meeting these students completely changed my perspective. If these students were given the same opportunities I had, they would probably be authors or journalists by now. I realized that aside from these twenty-seven students, there were hundreds like them who are never given the chance to fulfill their potential.

I had a conversation with one of the parents who told me that the workshop is a great idea, but it's not the real world. One of the accepted students never showed up to the workshops because her parents thought that it was a waste of time. What happens when the students encounter people that have the same mindset? Inside the workshop, these students have a safe space where they are encouraged and supported. Unfortunately, the real world isn't necessarily like this. I've always thought that the school should be the one pushing students to follow their dreams. This project made me realize that optimal learning can only be achieved when a child is surrounded by support at home and at school. A main reason why Right to Write was a success was the involvement of both parents and the teachers. Future projects for education reform should also take into account the school and home environment.

Right to Write is a project worth sustaining because it emphasizes that to follow one's dream is a person's right, not a privilege. I learned that letting one's imagination run wild and creating something out of nothing can open up unlimited possibilities for the Filipino youth.

