

Reader Response: A Dialogue between Jessica Restaino and Elenore Long

Dear Jessica,

Thank you for the opportunity to read and talk to you about “Absent Voices: Rethinking ‘Writing Women Safe.’” One of the things I love most about your piece is how it takes the title of the journal and demonstrates reflection as a strong and extended verb / action.

I’m also struck by the various ways our projects overlap and diverge from one another. There seems to be so many interesting threads to pursue. One that strikes me most is where we locate students’ investment—you in terms of their experiences; myself, in the critical incidents that students craft and then use to ground their inquiry projects. While we describe these sites so differently and while those descriptions evoke different theoretical resources, both are efforts to ground service learning in students’ own investments and values as learners. So talking more about that interests me. I also am intrigued by the challenge you identify: helping students to see writing as political action—and how the genres they compose for service-learning projects can undercut or highlight the rhetorical effects of writing. I’m wondering how you assessed the rhetorical significance of Hillary’s inquiry project—a hybrid genre in its own right.

Ellie

Hi Ellie,

Thank you, too, for the dialogue! Reading your piece—and especially thinking about Hillary’s hybrid project—certainly gives me ideas for

a revised approach to the writing component in my service-learning course. It seems to me there are two central threads swirling around at this moment and maybe many others the more we explore. Firstly, a shared goal for each of our courses, I think, is that students understand an issue from

multiple angles. I would argue that Hillary’s multi-voiced inquiry really enables her to think from these complex vantage points, while also exploring her own crucial positioning; this is a goal for the revised version of my course and something that I think my initial service project failed to do.

Secondly, though, is this looming and important challenge of writing as social and political action. I want my students to understand the potential of their writing in these learning contexts. However, developing writing projects that are at once student-driven and activist is a tremendous challenge, I think, and one I still navigate with some degree of hesitancy. For example, Hillary’s project is an essential thinking exercise for her

And—I’d argue—her readers. Your description of the project is key for me: “to design a text that draws readers into the issues at hand while inviting readers to negotiate and integrate rival perspectives from the text for themselves” (21). While this kind of writing project is quite different from my initial writing-as-political-action assignment, the rape prevention pamphlets, it is certainly a kind of writing that, in my opinion, does political work. The work is meaningful, student-centered, and may invite students to discover new pathways to action, too. But they need to think and write their way there, don’t they? And I believe an assignment like Hillary’s multi-voiced project may facilitate that—allowing students to write from varied disciplines and lived experiences—to come to a layered understanding of a problem. It opens up space for asking “Now what?” and is fertile ground for effective problem-solving. While such a writing project may stop short



of getting students' writing "out on the street," so to speak, perhaps the intellectual value is far greater than another kind of "out of school" writing assignment in which students had less investment.

When I think about redesigning "Writing Women Safe," I want students to write their way into work that is inquiry-driven, interdisciplinary, and tied to the major questions of the course. But the challenge, of course, then becomes how we allow the writing to be open enough that they might draw their own conclusions and come to their own pathways to action. I think Hillary's project is a good example of this. But I'm also interested in hearing about the range of possibilities with such a project: are there moments when students "opt out" as they try to write their way through the layers? Are there occasions when conflicting voices simply can't be reconciled or integrated? What does that look like? What becomes the teacher's role in these instances—how do you navigate and explore these kinds of writing experiences?

I'll stop here for now. Hope you're very well and I look forward to continuing our conversation.

All best,
Jess

Hello, Jessica,

I appreciate your work identifying threads for us to discuss. One that, as you say, looms large is the challenge of designing service-learning courses in ways that commend writing as social and political action. Your response indicates how tenuous my own claims may be to readers, and makes me want to unpack them a bit more here.

CIT 300 works from the assumption/faith that students' inquiry projects prepare them for later gate-keeping encounters, and—just as importantly—that these encounters are decidedly public and political events. In other words, learning how to listen to and to represent the



expertise and agency of others within these encounters is political work. (Ellen Cushman is pretty explicit about this in *The Struggle and the Tools*. Interested readers could also look at my analysis of the gate-keeping encounter as a distinctive local public in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* (Chapter 6), which is available online at http://wac.colostate.edu/books/long_community/long.pdf).

I'm reminded, too, of Cushman's point in "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change." *College Composition and Communication* 47.1 (1996): 7–28. Here Cushman suggests that political action need not mobilize a sea-change in, say, a public policy to be significant but instead could seek a better understanding of how ordinary people use "language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life" and could "facilitate actions" with those in need (12, 14). So that was the orientation that directed the design of CIT 300.

That said, you remind me to open up my own stance in all this and to invite/expect students to discover additional pathways to action—beyond those that the course maps out through assignments leading up to and assigning the multi-voiced inquiry. I love that

Idea; it's a culminating move in the course that asks students: so what? What are you going to do as a result of what you've learned from your inquiry? And it even suggests: Go ahead, get started on that plan of action and report back to us about how that rhetorical activity extends or complicates other insights from your inquiry project. (Maybe such a course would be a year long, rather than a semester.) You make me think about how the design of a course can help or hinder students as they "write their ways" to political action. I hadn't used that expression before, and I like how it attends to the time and care it takes to frame and carry out a meaningful inquiry. Your response also asks me to acknowledge the extent that Hillary's inquiry serves as an exemplar. I have to say that students across sections of CIT 300 have invested a lot of great work in the course—conducting similar inquiries at a range



of human-service agencies. That said, as an educator your antennae are attuned to the possibility of the student who for whatever reason is more resistant. Your comments brought to mind another student in Hillary's class—the one with the highest GPA, most scholarship money behind her, and Honor Roll accolades. This student—I'll call her Pam—simply switched tracks when it came time to conduct and write up her multi-voiced inquiry. Rather than working to get the inquiry to work in the context of her internship, Pam conducted a strange kind of social-science experiment back on campus that bypassed the goals of the course. I could recognize this pattern of competing schema from Reading to Write and Learning to Rival. But my best instructional moves couldn't get this student to venture into the intercultural contact zone that the course itself values so much. As you point out, those dynamics are worthy of more reflection that I gave them in my piece. Writing with you like this drives home another point: how important it that students have opportunities to circulate their inquiries to others. For one thing, resistant writers like Pam may be more willing to take the rhetorical risks that such an inquiry requires were they to see examples and "proof" that such effort can yield really interesting fruit. (At the time Hillary and Pam were in the course, the only examples I had to share with them came from seemingly really different contexts—such as the Community Literacy Center and Lorraine Higgins' work with the Rainbow Health Clinic. So it was no doubt a challenge for students to see how to import CLC strategies into their own inquiry projects.) For another thing, I have observed that HIPPA restrictions and IRB concerns will make more and more demands on educators wanting to design courses like ours. It may be that increasingly students will learn about navigating intercultural contact zones and representing and respecting the expertise and agency of others less from their own educational experience and more from reading the work of others. That proposition gives me pause. But I think it is also a very real possibility and strong motivation for enhancing the design of the kinds of



educational partnerships that make CIT 300 and Writing Women Safe still possible.

Jessica, I look forward to hearing from you.

Ellie

For more of the Restaino/Long dialogue, visit the "Current Issue" at the *Reflections* webpage: reflections.syr.edu