Writing Theories / Changing Communities: Introduction

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Rhetoric and composition now has a history of teaching, research, and engagement with communities. We also have a number of terms for describing this work, each with its own history: community literacy and service learning are but the two most common. The historical roots that led to community literacy have also yielded shoots of growth in the areas of public rhetoric, cultural rhetoric, ethnography, research, and professional and technical communication. Central to all these areas is the fundamental understanding that writing matters; it can make a difference for peoples, organizations, and institutions. Depending on the purposes and exigencies for writing in these contexts, community-based writing can mobilize people, inform policy, seed new initiatives, draw audiences to events and forums, allow for greater participation in decision making, and make decision making transparent. For the last decade and half, scholars in rhetoric and composition have worked hard to define our roles in facilitating writing in the public interest, though we have not often done so in ways that create a synergy around shared research interests or theoretical projects.

With respect to recent history, Peck, Flower, and Higgins's 1994 publication is perhaps the watershed moment for the emergence of something called "community literacy" in rhetoric and composition, but their work picked up on older, emergent interests in literacies outside of classroom settings and formal educational institutions. The emergence of service-learning in composition has a somewhat different history. While it could be argued that "community literacy" is an artifact of

rhetoric and composition (ask colleagues in Education about a field called "community literacy" and wait for the blank stares), service-learning has a much longer and more diverse history that teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition have adopted and adapted (e.g., Stanton and Cruz).

We traverse across the concepts of community literacy and service-learning because it is often difficult to separate them in the work we produce in rhetoric and composition concerned with writing in the community. Indeed, as we will discuss below, it is worth calling our collective attention to our insistence on using a term like "community" to the exclusion of concepts like "group," "organization," "culture," "institution," and other ways to name social and operational collectives. We also begin our essay by calling attention to terms as a way to encourage us all toward a more theoretically driven approach to this work and toward work designed to theorize what we do. Take, for instance, the term "service" as attached to service-learning. There is a long discussion of service in relation to learning, and we have no intention of reviewing that discussion here. We do want to spend a little time discussing both service and learning for the implicit ways that the pair limits and enables our work.

For college and university-based academics, "service" carries with it a number of limitations in terms of naming intellectual work. One persistent problem with the category of "service" in terms of larger institutional value systems is its obvious designation as not research and not teaching. The identification of our community-based teaching and research with service is, in the long term, not sustainable. Engaged or community work is often understood as "service," and "service" is no way to make a career or to build and maintain a program. At Michigan State, like some other institutions, we have the ability to draw on concepts like "engagement" and "outreach" (see Grabill). "Outreach," in particular, is understood as a cross cutting category that designates an activity as, first, located outside the normal space

of the university and, second, as supporting a community-focused activity. Outreach is also explicitly understood as scholarly activity, as epistemic in its procedures and outcomes. As a cross-cutting concept, outreach rarely exists outside of a pairing with research or teaching. Outreach-research, therefore, is one of the ways that we describe our community-based research projects, including some of our pedagogical efforts. What remains, we designate as outreach-teaching. Here is our point: we want to call attention to the fact that we have many colleagues wrestling with similar attempts to understand the meaning and value of community-based work. These attempts require theory. Experimentation, exploration, and narratives rooted in personal or programmatic experiences often mark the early years of the development of a field. Over time, it is necessary to ask hard questions about why we do this work, about what makes for good and poor design, and about the outcomes that we should expect and how we might measure those outcomes. With these questions and their answers, it is also possible and equally necessary to engage each other in conversations about value; conversations that should lead to disagreements and intellectual growth. Again, we need theory.

Our interest in theorizing community-based work in this special issue is an explicit attempt to gather together conceptual statements. Both initial and exploratory, each essay included here provides the field with conceptual tools for more thoughtfully going about the work of research and teaching in community settings. Before we introduce the articles, we first want to more fully explore the terms and areas of work that we believe to be essential to those of us interested in sustaining community-based research and teaching.

Public Rhetoric

The role of the rhetorician is no longer confined to the good man speaking well, or disinterested critique, or training college students to write better essays. Among the first to pioneer recent research in this

area, Susan Wells offers a definition of public writing as an opportunity to enter into the public sphere through rhetorical practices that forward social and civic arguments. This concern for public writing has led some rhetoricians to redefine the role of the public intellectual, to consider what it means to make knowledge with and for communities. "If we accept that activist intellectualism might," as Cristian Weisser writes, "consist of more than addressing a singular, overarching public sphere, and that our discourse need not be confined to matters of 'common concern,' we might be able to conceive of a new definition of what it means to be an activist intellectual" (127). Activist intellectuals can and do weave their scholarship, teaching, and service (Welch) together to form a unified, mutually sustaining set of intellectual pursuits that make knowledge with and for communities.

The work of public rhetoric has taken shape over the last decade to include multiple geographies of activist work within communities. In "The Space to Work in Public Life," David Coogan and John Ackerman develop a brief history of the institutional and community exigencies that have shaped the role of rhetoric in public engagement. They find that "rhetoric is in the midst of discovering anew its usefulness" (1).[1] This usefulness is less about instigating public debate through Arnoldian disinterested critique, but is rather, and more importantly, "motivated by the embodied practices that we have cultivated in relationship with people in our communities; by a rhetorical labor that we share with others, where the grain-size of the discursive act relies upon the authority of individuals in 'relevant social groups';[2] acts that are conferred by the cultural economies of actual places" (10). Their edited collection includes essays by rhetoric and communication scholars working with/in communities, tribes, organizations, disciplines, and professions to reveal the complex intersections of writing and public engagement. The tension-filled navigation of complex exigencies come to light in everyday practices of identity formation, narrative creation, leveraging privilege, securing rights, and gaining respect— these are everyday matters for

most people, matters that are undertaken with considerable savvy with or without the input of rhetoricians.

If research and writing with community writers is one articulation of activist intellectualism, at least one other possibility remains for the public work of rhetoricians: to influence beliefs by entering into public debates. This possibility is taken up in Sharon Crowley's recent book *Toward a Civil Discourse* in which she argues that three tactics are useful for rhetoricians who seek to enter into public debates: telling stories, appealing to emotions, and locating claims in relevant belief systems (196-201). Her work seeks to "demonstrate the importance of a vigorous rhetorical theory to the maintenance of civil society," and is "motivated by [her] concern about the currently hostile climate toward open, careful, discussion of important political and social issues" (28). Entering into public debate is one application of public rhetoric that rhetoricians have less frequently taken up, an idea also suggested by Mike Rose in his featured presentation at the 2009 CCCC:

> While I was teaching, or running an educational program, or doing research, I was also composing opinion pieces or commentaries about the work I was doing. Many of the chapters in *Why School?* had their origins in such writing. This process of writing with part of my attention on the classroom or research site and part of it on the public sphere forced me – would force anyone – out of familiar rhetorical territory. As a result, I've been thinking a lot about both the challenge and the importance of academics and other specialists communicating with the general public – and I certainly have been thinking about how hard it is to do it. Our languages of specialization can be so opaque, and mass media are becoming all the more sound bite and entertainment oriented. Serious consideration of serious issues is difficult to achieve.

He developed courses at UCLA to teach PhD students to write always with academic and general publics in mind. The types of writing produced in these courses allow scholars to enter into public debates using many of the rhetorical strategies that Crowley outlines. Still, much remains to be done in our efforts to produce knowledge of the sites and rhetorical strategies with/in public rhetorics, particularly as the work of public writing can be informed by the research of scholars who study in the areas of cultural rhetoric, ethnographies of communities, research methodologies, and professional writing.

We experience two tensions in our own research and teaching in these areas. One is that much of the work in our field that we are calling public rhetoric deals with the public intellectual, but the study of people doing rhetoric in the world is perhaps more important yet less visible. A second tension holds notions of the public as, at best, distinct from and, at worst, exclusive of cultures and organizations. Linda Flower's work with intercultural inquiry exemplifies this tension as well, as she defines the community, or local public, in her community literacy research. Responding to Jeff Grabill's question put to the field, "where is the community in community literacy," Linda Flower offers this:

> Unlike a counterpublic called around a shared identity (e.g. having been "othered," as a feminist, African American), this local public is designed around internal difference. From its intentionally diverse identity to its explicit strategies and deliberate search for rival interpretations, community literacy creates a friendly space within its community for *discursive* conflict…Discovery starts with the articulation of difference. It leads to a deliberation (unlike agnostic debate) that enjoins all its participants to act as partners in inquiry, to take on the difficult role of collaborative problem solvers. That is, to be responsible for understanding images of others in order to build a new negotiated meaning, workable options, and a resolution marked by justice…The most important thing that this counterpublic put *in circulation* was not its policy

statements on school suspension or its insights on gangs but its model of "stranger sociability"—that is, *its demonstration of a public dialogue that uses difference as a resource for inquiry and decision making.* (emphasis hers, 40-1).

As Flower defines the community in community literacy, the local public that centers upon expressed differences has it merits. It affords a kind of discovery through the creation of a safe and friendly space where discursive conflict can lead to deliberation and collaborative problem solving.

For its merits, Flower's notion of a local public has its basis in a Western understanding of pragmatism. The extent to which discovering difference through discussion might afford understanding, empathy, or insight into cultural and relational differences or systemic inequities is not clear. Creating forums for discussion, entering sites for interaction and exchange, and moving scholarship into public discourse work well when local and emergent problems need to be addressed. Yet, difference can be understood beyond generating superficial "images of others," or mining "difference" as a "resource" to be extracted, remade, distributed and capitalized upon, or in a model of "stranger sociability" which at the end of the day still means people are strangers to each other, even if cordial ones. At this point, it is important to ask a parallel question to the one that Jeff Grabill asks: where is culture in intercultural inquiry?[3]

Cultural Rhetorics as Public Rhetorics

Community literacy and activist intellectuals can draw upon the immense and long-standing bodies of research in the rhetorical practices of various cultures in order to understand long-standing social problems. The rhetorical and literate strategies of African Americans (Richardson, Smitherman, Pough, Royster, Moss, Gilyard, and Middleton), Asian Americans (Lu, Okawa, Young, Guinsatao

Monberg), and Latinos/as (Villanueva, Moreno, Perez, Baca) have had noteworthy impact on unmasking the power and privilege of whiteness and race. Juanita Comfort defines whiteness as a "cultural construction of individual and group identity that is associated with images of race that underpin the structure of our society" (548). As a cultural construction, whiteness could be compared to other races as well, and indeed needs those races to be the background against which the boundaries of whiteness can be seen. "In a culturally pluralistic society like America, whiteness does not exist in isolation from non-white cultural constructions such as 'blackness'; it must exist in juxtaposition against those other constructions…. Certainly part of the advantage vested in whiteness lies in its ability to mask its own power and privilege—to render them normative, even invisible, in the minds of most whites, in order to maintain the framework of white supremacy" (548-9). The rhetorical strategies used to understand cultural difference in rhetorical contexts can be facilitated through both listening to those within the field of rhetoric and writing and immersion in communities.

The "'subject' position really is everything," Royster writes in her canonical essay, "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own." The subject position can be used as a "terministic screen in cross-boundary discourse… permitting interpretation to be richly informed by the converging of dialectical perspectives" (29). Importantly, a convergence of dialectical perspectives is possible only insofar as scholars are able to listen to each other with the goal of engaging in "better practices so that we can exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding with the intent of being in a good position to cooperate, when, like now, cooperation is absolutely necessary" (38). The problem is that scholars working in community literacy and cultural rhetorics rarely listen to each other. The field of rhetoric and composition has, on the one hand, community literacy projects with under-developed notions of the cultural and rhetorical practices of local publics; and, on the other hand, a number cultural rhetoricians who rarely write about their public engagement courses,

if they are teaching such classes, within cultures outside of academe. Because each group has identified different foci and loci for their efforts, community literacy scholars and public rhetoricians don't often engage in cross-boundary rhetorical work with each other. Be that as it may, the work of rhetoric and composition scholars within academe and communities demands cross-boundary rhetorical practices of cooperation that initiate and sustain mutually rewarding knowledge making practices. Scholars developing rich methodologies for their lines of research in communities and organizations provide possible links between community literacy and cultural rhetoric.

Research

Yes, we are going to include a call for more research, but hopefully not in a way that is empty of substance. To be perfectly honest, we are really interested in particular types of inquiry and not simply in more inquiry.

As we wrote earlier, it is long-past necessary to ask hard questions about why we do community-based work, about what makes for good and poor design (of studies and of service learning experiences), and about the outcomes that we should expect and how we might measure those outcomes. In other words, if we believe that service learning pedagogies add value to student and community experiences, why do we believe this? Why do we believe that these experiences are better than or meaningfully different than other teaching and learning approaches? If we believe that our teaching and research work in communities makes a difference, how do we understand "making a difference"? What are the outcomes that are valuable? Can we operationalize them in a way that will allow us to measure them and communicate the results of these measures in ways that will be persuasive to others? When we design educational experiences, studies, and programs, are those designs evidence-driven? Do they enact a theory of good design? Do we research design and pay attention to

the results of design decisions over time in order to make stronger arguments for approaches and resources?

We realize that there are many questions in that prior paragraph, and questions, in some ways, are easy. But we did also use terms like "outcomes" and "measurement," and unfortunately in rhetoric and composition (and more so in the cultures of English in the academy), those terms index values that can surface resistance and hostility. We understand some resistance as a function of concern over the reduction of complexity and value systems that privilege certain forms of inquiry over others. And we can understand nervousness with the notion of outcomes themselves. At the same time, if we cannot ask and answer some basic questions about outcomes, then we will not be able to convince ourselves, let alone others, that the significant investment required to do engaged work is worth it. Do we make a difference? We believe our work does make a difference and we should be in a position to show various forms of evidence through which learning outcomes are achieved. We should be able to make transparent our research and teaching goals; to describe how we systematically parse, code, and analyze data; and to write in a variety of genres that distribute these forms of evidence for various audiences and purposes. We should be able to answer the big "so what?" question loudly and clearly.

Our interest in more and more focused research begins with assessment and with inquiries that include data and measurements that would allow assessments, but there is more. With respect to our understanding of research, we are adopting a position that is much like the one advocated by people like Janice Lauer, Lee Odell, and Cheryl Geisler some time ago. Research in this area must be "dappled" and so include philosophical/hermeneutic work, historiography, and empiricism. Too much work that forwards claims about service-learning, community literacy, and other forms of engaged intellectual work are a function of narratives that add to the body of lore that we have collected over time. We are not hostile to narrative or to teacher research, which should

be evident in the essays selected for this special issue. In fact, we see the production of narrative as the outcome of all research traditions, though some are clearly more self-conscious of this fact in their approach than others. But we need research that is well designed and that shares this design with others to allow for discussion, critique, and replication. We are interested in research that attempts to make bolder claims of knowledge or understanding. We are interested in research that explicitly builds on prior studies and that attempts to pay attention over time. We are interested in a body of work that theorizes what we do more powerfully than what we see around us in existing books and journal articles. And we include ourselves in this critique. There are approaches across research traditions that can meet these standards, and it is time to consistently meet high standards and attempt to make bolder claims about what we are doing and that what we do makes a difference in this world.

Ethnographies of Cultural Communities

Earlier we identified work in public rhetorics and cultural rhetorics as resources for researchers interested in community-based work. Ethnographies of cultural communities can also facilitate the pedagogical and intellectual work that bridges universities and communities. Through immersion in the cultural groups of local communities, ethnographies of literacy and language provide insight into and examples of the cultural rhetorics that individuals use in their everyday struggles for respect. Research in this area has blossomed since the 1985 move toward new literacy studies, a move that shifted the singular paradigm of literacy study to studies in literacies. In rhetoric and composition, this move has heralded qualitative research that explores literacies in Asian American (Duffy; Guinsatao Monberg (see this issue)), African American (Moss; Cushman; Mahiri), rural (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell; Rumsey a and b), working class (Lindquist; Trainor; Gorzelsky; Goldblatt and Parks), and Mexican American (Guerra; Cintron; Perez) cultures.

Important understandings of the nature of everyday literacy and rhetorical practices are to be drawn from this work. First, literacy and orality are best treated as two coins exchanged in the realm of rhetoric. John Duffy argues this point well in his essay, "Letters from the Fair City: A Rhetorical Conception of Literacy" in which he studies a letter writing exchange among Hmong refugees and residents of the fair city of Wausau who had voiced resentment to the influx of immigrants. The letter writing activities of the Hmong were situated within purposes, situations, and exigencies that guided their practice— a "rhetorical conception of literacy," then, affords an important insight into the everyday meaning making acts unfolding within cultural communities. Through a rhetorical conception of literacy, scholars of community literacies and cultural rhetorics might begin to understand "that in contexts of developing literacy skills, such as those that prevail in many immigrant, migrant, and refugee communities, rhetorics of public and civic life influence how people learn, use, and value the possibilities of written language" (226). Seeking to understand the ways in which cultural literacy practices are situated within specific rhetorical exigencies is paramount to developing synergies between the areas of community literacy studies.

Here is why. When the literate, oral, and rhetorical are viewed as a whole, a wealth of knowledge about the persuasive strategies used daily becomes available to scholars and students working within communities; this knowledge helps community members and academics gain purchase on the cultural means of persuasion used to address the needs and issues important to communities. "To understand the particulars of persuasion for a given culture," writes Julie Lindquist, "is to understand how that culture establishes itself *as* culture— how it invents and sustains its mythologies and what circumstances must obtain in order for these mythologies to change—as well as to recognize that shifts in public belief are contingent upon their value in the local marketplace of ideas. Attention to the particulars of rhetorical practice enables such understandings" (4). Cultural knowledge of

communities is woven within the rhetorical web of significance that community members weave. Intercultural inquiry, it seems, is made possible through both the theoretical lens of cultural rhetorics and the sociological lens of pragmatism in public writing—research of literacies in communities, organizations, and cultures demonstrate how this is so. The findings from and the theoretical lens informing this more ethnographic research have import for the field of community literacy, and it is one form of research that we would like to see more of and to see leveraged to make bolder and deeper claims. And this means more sustained, longitudinal, and shared inquiries.

Professional and Technical Writing

Jeff has been living at a boundary between professional and technical writing and community literacy for some time, and so it is not surprising that we would identify this area of work as one that we need to pay attention to in the future. But we remain surprised that those interested in literacy practices in non-school settings would fail to make more use of a field that is interested in literacy practices in non-school settings. People who need to use literacy to get work done in the world need to use the literacies of work and workplaces, of bureaucracies and institutions, of technologies and infrastructures. We all have to draw lines somewhere around our work, we know, but there should at least be a meaningful conversation between these areas.

There is one aspect of work in professional and technical writing that people interested in community-based literacy work of all kinds could learn from, and that is this field's attention to organizations, institutions, and increasingly, to groups (e.g., Spinuzzi; Amidon and Blythe). Those of us who study community literacy have only one meaningful term for collectives—"community"—and it hasn't always been as much a conceptual tool as it has been the name for a location or a context (or an implicit value claim for the goodness of our work). Service learning still very much orients to the individual, as do nearly all of

our pedagogical approaches. That is, we still understand ourselves as teaching individuals and as working with theories of individual development. But if we study how work gets done in the world, which professional and technical writing often does, then we immediately see that groups do most of that work. Within groups, work is variously coordinated and collaborative (and sometimes uncoordinated and not very collaborative). Because scholars in professional and technical writing have long studied writers in organizations, they also have a history of attempts to understand the organization itself and the impact of the organization on writing behaviors.

Taken together, this interest in groups and organizations—which still needs significant development within professional and technical writing—is an interest that should be shared by those of us interested in community literacies of all kinds. If we are interested in agency, in short, we need to pay attention to groups and the literacies that help groups form and function—as well as the literacies that groups use to do work in the world. This is an exciting possibility for work in communities. We know a number of graduate students, for instance, who are interested in community-based work but who came to us not interested in professional and technical writing or even aware of that field's work. As they have tried to understand the scenes and practices of interest to them, they continue to stumble on issues that we have identified as central to the focus of professional and technical writing: the existence and power of organizations, the need to collaborate (and the difficulty of doing so), and a range of technical and professional literacies that are not taught in first year writing but that are taught in professional writing classes. As they cast about for resources to help them, they sometimes resist looking at nearby fields for help. We need to get beyond this and look eagerly and critically at work in professional and technical writing that can help us understand what we do more fully, but more importantly, that might help us be more useful to the people and groups in communities with whom we work.

Of Shoots and Roots

The essays in this special issue of *Reflections* take up the questions, issues, and problems we have outlined here: they bring various analytical frames to better understand the cultures of communities, classrooms, and notions of self that inform the teaching and research undertaken by the authors. We believe these essays provide an important and necessary step toward a synergy of areas of composition and rhetoric through applications of old and new theoretical lenses to classrooms and communities.

Drawing upon her qualitative research in Filipino/a community organizations, Terese Guinsatao Monberg develops Tom Deans' three paradigms for service learning pedagogies into a fourth paradigm geared especially for students of color. This pedagogical move resonates with a model of learning that she has found in the work of Filipino community activists; this model of learning involves students in a "recursive, decolonial movement toward the transformations we hope to prompt through service learning."

Thomas Trimble's essay, "Into the Field: The Use of Student-Authored Ethnography in Service-Learning Settings," offers one way in which students might begin to write as community. Too often, instructors of publicly engaged writing classes rely on something like ethnographic methods that involve students in developing essays about their experiences in working with community partners. Exploring the strengths and limits of such an approach, Trimble provides "a descriptive sense of the intellectual and rhetorical strategies used by student ethnographers engaged in service settings," one that affords a deeper understanding of the nature of relationships students form with communities.

Student writing should not be the only place that community literacy scholars look to change practice and theorize our work. Important aspects of institutional literacies that professors do within everyday

life of professorial work also need to be considered in relation to community members' needs and capacities. This argument is well demonstrated in Ashley Holmes essay, "Advancing Campus-Community Partnerships: Standpoint Theory and Course Re-Design." With standpoint theory as an analytical framework, Holmes presents a backwards design methodology that better affords the integration of needs and capacities of community members in course curricular goals, assignments, and materials. In a similar move that focuses on the teacher's work and development of stance, Laura Rogers revisits Mina Shaughnessy's seminal theory of teacher development. Rogers' essay, "Diving in to Prison Teaching: Mina Shaughnessy, Teacher Development and the Realities of Prison Teaching," presents results from interviews with sixteen teachers who instruct incarcerated individuals. Using Shaughnessy's rough-hewn notion of culture shock, which professors of literature experienced when the doors of the city universities in New York were opened to everyone seeking education, Rogers' applies as a heurtistic for understanding the stages of development that teachers of incarcerated individuals experience. These teachers develop for themselves meaningful lives as a result of teaching students within highly circumscribed and continually watched environments.

The final essay of this special issue explores a question implicit in the root of community literacy scholarship: where might we locate and trace social change? Be it in college students' writing, teacherly work and development, or in the literacy practices of community stakeholders, the outcomes for our research, teaching, and service might best be characterized at "the intersection between pragmatic and ethical concerns that underlies effective social change." Gwen Gorzelsky, Frances Ranney, and Hilary Anne Ward's essay, "Views of Girls, Views of Change: The Role of Theory in Helping Us Understand," presents a strong case for the need for "a dialogic approach that uses reflexive work on researchers' own experiences

of, and attitudes toward, gender literacy to engage substantively with community members, students, and others about their own experiences and attitudes on the topic."

Taken together these essays move across types of data, loci for work, and theoretical frameworks to create a synergy in perspectives that acknowledges the roots feeding several offshoots of research, teaching, and service in community literacy. While more work remains to be done, we are pleased that these scholars have contributed to the call for theoretically rich, data driven, pedagogically nuanced approaches to community engagement.

Endnotes

[1] *The Public Work of Rhetoric* is the title of an edited collection by David Coogan and John Ackerman. As this title indicates, the work of community literacy articulates with the role of the rhetorician.

[2] Bjiker, *Of Bicycles*.

[3] In their book, *Learning to Rival*: *a Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*, Linda Flower, Lorraine Higgins, and Elenore Long define culture as semiotic practice by narrowing the parameters of Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as a "web of significance." Their epistemological shift moves culture away from patterns of practices, beliefs, and values that make up a web of significance to one that focuses upon the symbolic functions of interactions between rivals (90-93).

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