

Review

Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum

by Eli Goldblatt

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In the fall of 2007 I taught an evening college course at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Such evening courses often serve returning adult students and this course was typically diverse. Ten of the seventeen students were Black, four had home languages other than English (Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, Patois), three were born outside of the United States, fourteen were women, and fourteen were not the traditional college age. At least two had first studied at local community colleges. While the apparent diversity of the room was evident during the first class, it wasn't until I got the first set of papers and noticed the range of writing strengths that I wondered what, exactly, had brought them to this particular course at this particular moment. What were their histories as writers and readers? How could I design a course that worked for them as learners? Eli Goldblatt's important book, *Because We Live Here*, asks similar questions and gives writing teachers and program administrators insight into the complex but often overlooked connections among individual students, the university, and the community that can be leveraged for student success. In Goldblatt's words, "Is there something about the

demography, geography, or social psychology of a region that should affect the instruction and investigation pursued inside of a given campus?" (11).

Because We Live Here foregrounds the relationships among writing programs, high schools, community colleges, and nonprofits and asks writing program and administrators to consider how such relationships affect our work. Further, it urges WPAs to consider not just what our students bring into our writing programs but what we *do* in the surrounding community. This is an anti-ivory-tower book that invites us to engage more broadly with program building in order to better connect the university and the community. The interweaving of Goldblatt's stories as he builds relationships and reflects on his commitment to the community of Philadelphia makes the writing itself engaging. Implicit in *Because We Live Here* is an emphasis on *time* itself as central to building the connections that Goldblatt describes. The book chronicles events that begin with the "Literacy: Because We Live Here" conference in 2000 and extend to 2006. But it is also clear that the research in *Because We Live Here* would not be possible without Goldblatt's 18+ years in the city of Philadelphia, which triggers questions about what the academic job market does when it asks graduate students to write dissertations on literacy practices in particular places and then sends them across the country for faculty positions.

Because We Live Here uses the Temple University writing program and its relationship to Philadelphia as a case study for how metropolitan universities can build connections with the community. Through shared programming, informal and formal networking, and a good bit of what Goldblatt refers to as "lunch" (brainstorming conversations over coffee or sandwiches), Goldblatt advocates for non-hierarchical, reciprocal partnerships between the university and the community. Goldblatt argues that through deep alignment and literacy sponsorships,

universities can collaborate with partners in ways that acknowledge their mutual self-interest.

The book opens with a thoughtful chapter on how writing “within, across, and beyond” the curriculum works. Drawing from Dewey, Goldblatt argues that those on the margins—basic writers, English as a second language learners, non-traditional students of various stripes—can do the most to show us what works and what doesn’t work in our writing programs. In addition, Goldblatt, drawing from Dewey, contends that our role as WPAs includes developing, “a constellation of abilities that help students become both productive individuals and engaged social beings” (15). While Goldblatt makes this argument for writing programs, *Because We Live Here* would be a useful text for various people within the university who are committed to building university-community connections. The work that we do within an institution is only a part of the work we must do; building connections outside of the institution is necessary part of creating “productive individuals and engaged social beings.”

The second and third chapters delve into Temple’s relationships with the high school and community college students who feed most of its student population. By focusing on several area high schools, Goldblatt highlights the ways that urban and suburban high schools prepare students for college. He describes his extended visits and relationships with one urban school and one suburban school, both with excellent teachers but quite different curricula. From conversations with teachers and students, an examination of curricula and assignments, and time “hanging out” at the schools, he concludes that the urban school’s curriculum centers on control, on doing what you need to do to keep your nose clean, while the suburban school’s curriculum centers on continuity, on what middle class students need to know for college.

What is more interesting than how the urban and suburban schools differ is the way that Goldblatt models building bridges between high

schools and colleges. Goldblatt visits these schools not as an observer but as an ambassador from Temple. In one high school he answers questions about college writing expectations from students who want to be scientists and engineers; in another he works with the school and the Temple admissions office to discern whether a good student from the urban school would be better served by coming directly to Temple or transferring after two years at a community college. The relationships that Goldblatt builds with individual teachers and administrators help him to create the dialogue that he finds necessary for literacy sponsorship.

By presenting Temple's relationships with the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), Goldblatt argues that "deep alignment" between the community college and the four-year university must go "beyond articulation agreements and the automatic acceptance of course equivalences" (96). To bridge the divide, Temple and CCP had a "Deep Alignment" conference attended by faculty in both schools; they sponsored a teaching exchange where a Temple faculty member taught basic writing at CCP and a CCP faculty member taught basic writing at Temple; and they developed an exchange of writing assignments so that CCP faculty and Temple faculty could see how assignments in an equivalent course (first-year writing) differed across institutions. Important to these conversations was an effort on both sides to level the playing field. Meetings took place at both Temple and CCP, and faculty who attended each discussed the assumptions that grounded each assignment. By building relationships with community colleges and creating ways for cross-college conversations about the teaching of first-year writing, Goldblatt's work breaks down the barriers that isolate one institution from another. In doing this, Goldblatt offers a model of cross-institutional connection that works against the fragmentation and separation that characterizes much of higher education. Here, too, I am reminded of just how complex a conversation about assignments among institutions can be. For example, in order for the faculty exchange to take place, union contracts needed to be navigated across

institutions, and it is beyond the scope of Goldblatt's work to consider the plight of part-time faculty who might teach at Temple and CCP, and perhaps another area school or two. If notions of sponsoring literacy rest within the home institution, then perhaps we can learn a great deal from part-time faculty who regularly wind their way among several different institutions.

In the chapter titled "Alinsky's Reveille," Goldblatt draws on Saul Alinsky's work in community organizing in Chicago to question how composition courses can best serve the local community. Alinsky held two ideas dear that Goldblatt applies to his work: a belief in relationships with community members and a belief that each group works in its own self-interest (acknowledging implicitly that self-interest is not a bad thing). Goldblatt describes hanging out in the community and building relationships: having hamburgers in diners and coffee in bodegas with community leaders; bringing Temple students and students in an adult literacy program together to talk about education; serving on the boards of nonprofits. This is important work for two reasons: first, it is a necessary part of knowing one's community; and second, it is often difficult to make this work visible to the university because it does not fit neatly into categories of research, teaching, or service. It takes time to do this work. And time, or at least the flexibility of having some day-to-day control of one's work hours, is a gift that academic life provides. However, having coffee with a community partner on a Friday afternoon does not show up on an annual report and is difficult to quantify. *Because We Live Here* shows us a model of how to combine teaching, research and service in a way that will "count"—both in the community and to the institutional powers that be. The actual writing of *Because We Live Here* serves as an important account of what work with community partners is like. For example, Goldblatt and several members of area nonprofits form a loose affiliation called the "Open Doors Collaborative," a group of folks from adult education programs who would work together to

“develop a curriculum that promotes critical thinking, independent inquiry, communication skills, and leadership ability within the specific context of . . . North Philadelphia” (136). The “Open Doors Collaborative” wrote a grant together that they didn’t submit, talked for eighteen months about adult education, and ultimately broke up because of various structural changes to the nonprofits. While the collaborative did not achieve any concrete goals, such as a successful grant, the work that Goldblatt began there has led to a longer-term partnership between Temple and Proyecto Sin Fronteras, the educational wing of a local nonprofit. Goldblatt’s work opens up questions about what internal structures are needed to support the often invisible work of university-community collaboration, and also points up the reality that nonprofits do not work according to university timetables.

Because We Live Here focuses on the local networks that sustain the university and articulates a new vision for building community connections. Whether seen from the perspective of a WPA or a teacher of literacy, that vision prompts us to rethink our work in communities—not only as researchers but also as citizens—and to question what makes such relationships sustainable. The book also points us toward related opportunities for scholarship on, for example, the impact of No Child Left Behind on the students who are now attending our universities, collaborative means of assessment, and the influence of race, class, gender and sexuality on university and community collaborations. Specifically, institutional and cultural racism need to be unpacked through research into the community and university relationship. Goldblatt’s work suggests the need for more case studies of particular university-community partnerships, more careful examination of what happens as student learners and local citizens interact in community-based classes, and continued attention to how pedagogy changes as university-community relationships develop.