Diana George

The Word On the Street
Public Discourse in a Culture of Disconnect

In what can be called a "culture of disconnect," students and teachers alike often want to engage in public discourse but do not know where to begin. The newsletters and newspapers produced to support the work of small, alternative hospitality houses and prison ministries reveal the role communication plays in the lives of active participants in democracy and show how communities of people who choose to write and publish learn from each other's examples. These extraordinary words of ordinary men and women, writing for local, often little known causes, offer ways of understanding what may motivate writers to begin to assume a meaningful public voice.

1993 Anne Gere identified what she called the extracurriculum of composition, the self-sponsored writing among ordinary people who meet in living rooms, nursing homes, community centers, churches, shelters for the homeless, around kitchen tables, and in rented rooms to write down their worlds (76). In that CCCC address, Gere proposed that we listen to the signals that come through the walls of our classrooms from the world outside (76) in effect suggesting that composition had yet to understand how writing is used and is useful in everyday life. Gere's talk has certainly been a touchstone for literacy scholars for nearly a decade now, and, yet, until recently we've seen little classroom material that actually takes very seriously that extracurriculum of composition.

Of course, it is not new to speak of writing in terms of local or political motivation. In one of what she calls her historical and polemical essays on composition in the university, Sharon Crowley asks us to recall the lessons of ancient rhetoric, whose proponents were unabashedly interested in influencing the course of cultural and political events. Teachers of ancient rhetorics, writes Crowley, assumed that people compose only when they are moved by some civic exigency. Unlike the composing principles taught in current-traditional pedagogy (and in some versions of process pedagogy), the composing principles taught in ancient rhetorical theories were fully situated in public occasions that required intervention or at any rate stimulated a composer's desire to intervene (263).

We have often, in teaching writing, reminded students that what they
write and how they present it has much to do with the reason for writing, the moment in time, the audience they have in mind, the material circumstances surrounding the writing, and more. And yet, we have only begun to investigate how the circumstance what John Trimbur identifies as the call to write works itself out beyond the walls of our classrooms. Though it is true that popular literacy studies are becoming more and more crucial to the work we do in composition, I would argue that this field of study has much yet to learn about how writing/how composing functions in response to civic exigency. Such knowledge might actually lead us to accomplish the one thing we have argued for years our composition and communication classrooms ought to do: prepare students to be active participants in a democracy.

If anyone has been moved by civic exigency to a call to write, certainly the women and men I describe below have. In what follows, I want to examine that call that motivation and set the writing that follows from it in the larger context of how communication does function for active participants in the politics of a nation.

When I began this work over two years ago, my thought was to locate the places in everyday life where anything like what we might call local activism is going on. I wanted to be able to explain the role writing/composing plays in the work of nonprofit and independent groups local coalitions for the homeless, women's shelters, Catholic Worker houses, soup kitchens, environmental groups, local land trust groups, and others that are common throughout the country.

In organizing and in carrying out the activities of the organization, these individuals must rely on some means of communication usually a newsletter, a small newspaper, brochures, signs, banners, posters, public service announcements, and, more recently, web sites to get the word out, raise funds, and build memberships or foster coalitions. Such groups are filled with active participants in this democracy. Many of them do not think of themselves as writers but found themselves at a moment when writing was needed if the organization was to survive.

I started in a very limited way: For several months I read the newsletters and newspapers that come to my house published by about a dozen or so of these groups from across the country Guadalupe, the newsletter for Casa Maria, a Catholic Worker house in Tucson as well as newsletters and newspapers from Catholic Worker houses in Houston, San Antonio, New York, Milwaukee, Worcester, and Minneapolis; Freedomways, New Hope House newsletter, Gatherings, and other prison ministry newsletters in the south; publications like Hospitality and Sojourners which are papers and magazines written for and about street people and soup kitchens in Atlanta, Washington,
D.C., and rural Georgia. From my own community, I examined *Off the Beaten Path*, a newsletter from the Barbara Kettle Gundlach Shelter Home for Abused Women; the newsletter of The Copper Country Peace Alliance; newsletters from local environmental and land trust groups, and more.

Like David Barton and Mary Hamilton who in *Local Literacies* write of their attempts to uncover and document everyday literacies which are often unrecognized in dominant discourses about literacy (5), my aim has been to uncover the literacy practices of marginalized groups the small voices that, now and then, lead to big action. To do that, I had to locate the people who actually produce these publications and learn what their call/their motivation has been, what constraints they face, how their publication is produced and circulated, to and on behalf of whom they are writing, how they locate their audience, and how they see themselves or their organization fitting into the larger landscape of social or civic action, and most important for this paper how (or, indeed, if) they identify themselves as writers.

Mine is a large project that is ongoing, but I propose here to tell the story of one community and one newsletter which led me to the stories of four communities and the people who work in and write for them.

My interview with Ed Weir and his story of the beginnings of *New Hope House*, a hospitality house in rural Georgia for families of prisoners on death row, led me to interview Murphy Davis who with her husband Ed Loring began *The Open Door Community* in Atlanta and its paper *Hospitality*. And, those interviews and the history of *The Open Door* led me to Hannah Loring-Davis, then a student at Guilford College in North Carolina, who helped found the independent student paper *The Student Activist* and to Joe Roos, a co-founder with Jim Wallis of the Sojourner Community in Washington, D.C., and *Sojourner Magazine*. These all led me back inevitably to the life of Dorothy Day and the beginnings of the Catholic Worker Movement and especially the newspaper *The Catholic Worker* which led to the origins of *The Nation Magazine* and the influence, on Day, of papers like *The Masses* and *The Daily Worker* all of which might very well seem a far remove from the writing classroom or even from literacy studies, in general, but I don't believe so.

Begging the reader's patience, then, I begin.
In that little trail of people and papers and organizations, it must be clear that one of the first things I discovered was something very simple: These cheaply produced, often unprofessional looking papers and newsletters defy what some have called the Culture of Disconnect. They do not exist in a vacuum. They reject the fragmentation many of us experience as or at least suspect is characteristic of life in the 21st century. Moreover, they actually do effect change, on the local level and beyond, in the lives of the people they work with and for.

I won’t, however, rest too long here in what might be taken for foolish optimism. In her discussion of writing and the public sphere, Susan Wells reminds us that the relations of students and teachers to the public are marked by what she calls a simultaneous sense of exclusion and attraction. There is a suggestion in these words that many students and their teachers want to engage but don’t believe there really is a way to enter such a large and faceless debate, if, indeed, there even is a debate at all. That alienation is especially true in the world of large news and publishing conglomerates, of CNN and NBC and MSNBC; of Time/Warner and AOL and Disney and US Magazine and ABC2 and more. That doesn’t leave most of us much of a voice, does it?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in how we identify our audience and what we expect from our part of the conversation. Wells writes, I have never known a writer, student or teacher, who wanted a smaller audience, or a narrower readership; I have never known a writer who felt unproblematically at home in the discursive forms of broad political or social address (332-333). I would say that perhaps Wells has hit on just the problem with the way we too often approach political or social address.

In the work I describe below, I have, in fact, known writers who wanted a smaller audience, a narrower readership. And, I encounter these writers all of the time in the small, activist publications I carry with me for this work. Here, for example, is how Dorothy Day describes the moments of the first issue of The Catholic Worker:

I had sent my copy to the printer news accounts of the exploitation of Negroes in the South, and the plight of the sharecroppers; child labor in our own neighborhood; some recent evictions; a local strike over wages and hours; pleas for better home relief, and so on and we were waiting for proofs.

When they came we cut them out and started making a dummy, pasting them up on the eight pages of a tabloid the size of The Nation, writing headlines, and experimenting with different kinds of type. Peter looked over what I had written as it came back from the printer. I could see that, far from being
happy about it, he was becoming more and more disturbed. One day, while looking over some fresh proofs, he shook his head. His expression was one of great sadness.

It's everyone's paper, he said. I was pleased. I thought that was what we both wanted. And everyone's paper is no one's paper, he added with a sigh. (Loaves 17)

Peter Maurin believed that a newspaper could bring about what he called clarification of thought—the first step in moving others to action. Men, he told her this was 1933—must think before they can act. They must study (7). He was calling for a paper that could and would be radical. A newspaper that is for everyone is a newspaper that speaks to no one and, thus, moves no one to action. What Maurin was after was a public voice speaking to those who would listen and be moved to act. This is very different from the faceless, nameless public we too often set up in our classrooms.

Like *The Catholic Worker*, none of the newsletters and newspapers that constitute my study can be called everyone's paper. They speak to special interest groups on unpopular topics and take radical positions. To be quite honest, they ask their readers to do the impossible:

- End the death penalty.
- Feed, clothe, and house ALL the poor.
- Stop abuse.
- End violence.
- End poverty.

In other words, they are groups calling for not just radical but outrageous action. Outrageous action isn't a subject for broad audience appeal.

As Barton and Hamilton remind us, literacy practices are shaped by social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may produce them and have access to them (7). That, of course, is especially true for publications that circulate as newsletters and newspapers. We know what such publications look like and from looks alone can immediately identify one as mainstream or not. Many of the publications I examined are printed primarily on the most inexpensive paper available and sport somewhat amateurish graphics though the arguments presented within are often quite complicated and for any mainstream publication quite long. *Hospitality*, for example, often follows the example of *The Catholic Worker* and features articles running three, even four tabloid-sized pages long suggesting that the writers do expect their readers to want more, not less information.

More to the point, though the publications I am talking about represent
alternative, even radical voices, they are also produced in the very ordinary context of the newsletter, the small tabloid or newspaper, the political speech, the sermon, the witness, the broad sheet, and the public appeal. Notice, for example, that when Dorothy Day describes laying out the first issue of *The Catholic Worker*, she started making a dummy, pasting it up on a tabloid the size of *The Nation* (17).

Identifying with a publication like *The Nation* is not accidental. First of all, Day’s own background was with small, alternative, leftist newspapers. Her brother worked for the dime-novel sized labor paper, *The Day Book*, a publication that introduced her to Eugene Debs and the IWW and to both national and international labor politics. Day’s own first job was with the Socialist paper *The Call*. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Day writes of absorbing a radicalism from *The Day Book* and from the words of Jack London, Upton Sinclair and other socialist writers she encountered through these small papers and magazines (41).

Her model, *The Nation*, was a magazine begun in 1865 at a time when the press was being pulled by serious factions emerging from the Civil War and Reconstruction. In their prospectus, the founders wrote that one main object of this new magazine was to be the discussion of the topics of the day, and, above all, of legal, economical, and constitutional questions, with greater accuracy and moderation than are now to be found in the daily press (Vanden Heuvel 1). At least one stated motivation for its founding, then, was to set the record straight.

Setting the record straight is, in fact, what all of the people I interviewed identified as one primary motivator as they set themselves to the task of creating a paper. Ed Weir of New Hope House and Murphy Davis of The Open Door both see their publications as offering an alternative view setting the record straight. Murphy, in particular, pointed to the recent Time Warner acquisition to say that there was little out there that was not coming from essentially the same source: the same people own most of the mainstream press. There is very little chance out there, she said, for alternative voices.

**Motivation The Call**

Ed

Ed and Mary Ruth Weir run New Hope House, a hospitality house for families of prisoners on Georgia’s death row. They are exceptionally quiet people who get by on almost nothing. New Hope House and the Weirs livelihood is supported by non-tax-deductible contributions. In other words, they must depend on folks who are more interested in the work of New Hope House.
than in finding a good place for a tax deduction. Ed and Mary Ruth attend trials, sit with the families of the accused, help file appeals if it is necessary, visit death row prisoners, and get the word out that there is opposition in Georgia to the death penalty.

Their newsletter, published from Possum Trot Road, is as unassuming as

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THE SHORT STORY OF A VICTIM'S FAMILY

Marlanna, the mother of Joe, is sitting between her sisters and one brother-in-law on one side and a friend Beth on the other side. They are on the front row directly behind Joe and his two lawyers sitting at the defense table. Marlanna's church friends are sitting on the row behind. Ed and John Cole-Yodick sit on the next row. The whispers from the balcony tell us the jury has decided a punishment of either the death sentence or life without parole. Marlanna is a short, sturdy woman but not overweight. She wears skirts that slightly spread out rather than cling tightly. Her hair is cut short. Marlanna's face is nice to see. Except that she looks worn and weary. Over the past eight days she has often left the courtroom to sob. She has probably cried many times over the past four years since Joe was arrested. Beth is a contrast in appearance - tall, slender, longish blond hair, in a sports t-shirt, and loose-fitting long pants.

As we wait for the judge to begin, Beth is sailing and talking in Marlanna's ear. Beth turns and mouths some words to Ed which he doesn't understand. The two get up and meet in the aisle. Beth asks, "Is this a good sign that the jury has taken only an hour?" "Usually it is not," Ed has heard very little in the trial to think that Joe will not get the death penalty.

It is easier for 12 people to all agree to execute a person who just 24 hours ago they decided had committed murder than it is to spare one's life without any possibility of parole.

The judge begins by instructing everyone not to display any signs of emotion when the verdict is read. Now absurd! Not to cry out when a mother is told that her child will be strapped in a chair with electrodes attached to head and legs and then thousands of volts will be poured into the body to kill. Even absurd to think victims' families, who have been yearning for a justice of death wouldn't sob if the jury decided life without parole.

The judge reads the jury verdict form: "We the jury sentence the defendant Joe Smith to DEATH." The judge, in a rare display of voice inflection, maybe only for show, raises his voice and shouts out the word DEATH.
a newsletter can get, and just looking at it readers might not imagine that it has much of an effect on many people at all. Yet this little publication is crucial in creating a network of support for the anti-death penalty movement in Georgia.

The Student Activist

Isaac Brown discusses African American History and Activism

UNAM Student Movement: Getting the Truth Out

Justice for Daryl Howerton

Forces Racial Justice to Forefront

by Matthew Spencer

Justice for the wrongly convicted Daryl Howerton means working to educate political and others in order to bring justice to the present, especially to end the police brutality whose victims are poor and overwhelmingly African-American, Latin, and other people of color. On September 8, 1994, Daryl Howerton, a 29-year-old black male, was the subject of a false arrest. He had been seen cutting up meat and feeding it to grand dogs behind a fire station in Greensboro.

Daryl was asked to leave. When he did not stir the dogs, police entered his house and beat him. The police, as well as that day's police, then told the police that they never had been inside Daryl's house. Daryl was taken to the hospital.

Accommodation was not made. Instead, the police were accused of a grossly perjurious crime by the district attorney, and a sworn report was made to the publisher of The Student Activist.

The police then arrived on the scene and started talking to Daryl in front of a newspaper holding a dead bull's head. During this time, the police were also allegedly injured in the face. Daryl had been shot six times, including once to the head. Frisco County Jail was the target of the Black community of the community.

The Student Activist is a voice for the voiceless.

The Student Activist, edited by second generation activist Hannah Loring-Davis

The Student Activist, edited by second generation activist Hannah Loring-Davis
In rural Georgia, you don’t find many people who are outspokenly against the death penalty in a way, at least, that might move them to take action, form a community, spend time demonstrating, that sort of thing. So, the newsletter, according to Ed, helps unite a network of friends who watch the courts for death penalty trials, let Ed and Mary Ruth know what’s going on, get in touch with families of the accused, visit prisoners, and support New Hope House.

According to Ed, the newsletter had to be written for the most basic of reasons:

- To raise money for New Hope House
- To keep the subject in the minds of the people.
- To maintain the network of people (especially Georgians) working against the death penalty.
- To inform supporters on current events relating to death penalty trials and legislation.

The newsletter often cannot, however, do what Ed initially wanted it to do: It can’t tell the stories of the prisoners and their families because drawing too much attention to one prisoner is likely to put that prisoner at risk even likely to move up an execution date. So, he has to write about them, not name them, but give his readers enough to understand the case.

It’s a pretty tricky rhetorical situation, especially for someone who claims he never saw himself, really, as a writer and can’t remember ever taking a writing class that at Vanderbilt he majored in getting out.

And, yet, writing was a part of what, even as a child, Ed recognized as something adults did. His grandfather wrote a column for the local paper in Douglas, Georgia, where Ed grew up, and even as he claimed not to be a writer at all, he told the story of how he and a friend stumbled onto an old printing press and started making up a neighborhood paper with neighbor news and recipes and jokes and stories. The two rode around town on their bikes distributing their paper to the neighbors.

Ed’s story reminded me of my brothers and sisters and I who played school with boxes for desks, mass with pressed white bread for the communion host, and store with empty cans and boxes from the kitchen games we created to mimic adults. Ed was becoming his grandfather as he wrote and printed the daily news, and so when it came time to write a newsletter of his own one with much more social and political significance than the one of childhood games he already knew where to begin.

Murphy Davis

Ed Weir knows Murphy Davis because New Hope House began out of The George
Open Door’s prison ministry program. Murphy had been a death penalty opponent for many years even before the creation of The Open Door Community. *Hospitality* the newsletter from The Open Door—covers prison issues as well as the politics of homelessness. Members of The Open Door participate in vigils before executions, go to trials, visit prisoners and their families, and serve on the Board of New Hope House. They are part of the network kept alive partially through Ed Weir’s little newsletter.

Murphy is an ordained Presbyterian minister who says she must have taken the required writing courses in college though she doesn’t remember them. She took sermon writing, of course, but dismissed it as a writing course though much of the quality of a well-wrought sermon does come through in her writing. She writes for and helps to edit *Hospitality,* a newspaper that started as a newsletter. The newsletter, like New Hope House’s newsletter, was started because it had to be:

To raise money.
To recruit volunteers.
To notify the community.

When Murphy told of changing from a newsletter format to a small newspaper, she had in mind something like *The Catholic Worker.* The influence extends beyond Dorothy Day, however. Murphy and her husband Ed Loring had also been reading a radical Christian paper called *The Post-American* founded by Joe Roos and Jim Wallis. *The Post-American,* it turns out, was the precursor to *Sojourners* magazine and the Sojourners Community in Washington, D.C.

**Joe Roos and Jim Wallis**

Joe Roos, a co-founder with Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community, knows Murphy Davis and Ed Loring. He remembers their daughter Hannah Loring-Davis as a toddler, now the co-founder of her own independent paper at Guilford College. He also knows Ed Weir and the work of New Hope House.

In a history of *Sojourners,* co-founder Jim Wallis describes the exigency which moved him, with Joe Roos and others, to begin a paper:

> We knew there had to be other people who were feeling the same things we were . . . I have sometimes likened the publication of the *Post-American* to the raising of a flagpole. Many people on the ground, at the grass roots, were longing for an alternative to the narrow versions of Christian faith they were experiencing in their churches, but they didn’t know one another. (15)

In changing the paper *Post-American* to the magazine *Sojourners,* Wallis and Roos were actually making a commitment to community and not simply to getting the word out to like-minded people. Wallis describes it this way:
The relationship between the members of our little group was the foundation for the publication of the magazine. . . . The magazine gave a focus to our relationship, a task around which we gathered, and the excitement of new ideas soon became the catalyst for thoughts about a community. (99)

And, this actually returns us to Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin and *The Catholic Worker*.

Jim Wallis says that the number of people touched by Dorothy Day is beyond counting. This evangelical boy from the Midwest was one (162). Peter Gathje’s history of The Open Door Community says something of the same for Murphy Davis and Ed Loring: In their attempts to find direction for their own work with the homeless, they traveled to Mary House in New York. On the train home, Ed read Day’s autobiography *The Long Loneliness*. Gathje writes that as he and Murphy shared their reading . . . they began to see what this call of hospitality would require of them (28).

It is no accident, then, that Murphy had something like *The Catholic Worker* in mind when she created *Hospitality*, and it is no accident that Jim Wallis experienced real pride when someone told him that Sojourners Community was like a Protestant *Catholic Worker* (163).

Conclusion

I began my observations by saying that I learned something very simple: that these little newsletters and cheaply printed papers (*The Catholic Worker* still sells for one cent) defy the Culture of Disconnect. They might look unimportant, but they apparently do extremely important work both within and outside the organizations that produce them. They connect people and ideas and they do have an effect on the ways people live their lives. That connection is, in fact, the primary motivation of these writers.

Perhaps the problem with teaching public discourse is not so much that, as Wells notices, our advice to students is too abstract/the audience we imagine too faceless though that is certainly a problem. Perhaps the real problem is that too many believe that small changes/small movements don’t really mean much. They don’t really change much.

And, yet, if I look at an organization like Sojourners or Catholic Worker Houses or New Hope House, it is very clear to me that one of the few ways most of us even have access to alternative views is through these networks of small newsletters and newspapers that reach out to like-minded readers. Certainly, the only way the American public is likely to know that there is poverty in this country unless they are experiencing it themselves is through the people working with the impoverished.

More to the point, it is when we open our classrooms to communication

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of all sorts not just to E.B. White (though he wrote beautifully) or to academic cultural critique (though much of it is timely and of great interest) and, especially, not just to *Time, Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*—that we begin to understand the role communication plays in the lives of active participants in this democracy.

Hannah Loring-Davis knows this. As a Guilford College student, she joined with students from Guilford and other surrounding colleges to establish a student paper, *The Student Activist*, that would actually publish stories on national and international politics, stories not written from the point of view of whatever administration is currently in power. Like Ed Weir, she was following the adults in her life who had already shown her what it could mean to write something that matters to other people, something that would unite those around her who did not recognize themselves in the stories of most mainstream college newspapers. More than that, because she grew up watching her parents write for and read alternative press papers, she knew where to begin. Perhaps in the end, it is finding out where to begin that is left out in most of our talk of public writing. And, it is in reading the extraordinary words of ordinary men and women writing for local, little known causes, that we might just discover where to begin.

Notes

1 John Trimbur's *The Call to Write* is a notable exception to that rule. In it, Trimbur takes the notion that writing is situated and social that we write in response to a need, an event, a moment and uses it (from Lloyd Bitzer's treatment of exigency) to create a composition text that looks a good deal different from what we have come to expect in such books. That theme, that we write in response to a call, determines the very nature of both the instruction and the assignments throughout.

2 ABC recently announced that, in addition to its partnership with Disney Corporation, it now has an ongoing relationship with *Us Magazine*, confirming for many the connection between television news and *Entertainment Weekly*.

Resources

3 This has been especially true since the Fall of 2001 when Georgia resumed executions at a three-year court battle over whether or not the electric chair constituted cruel and unusual punishment. By the time the court had decided it did, the Georgia Department of Corrections had equipped its death chamber with equipment for lethal injection. Between October and December of 2001, four prisoners were executed using lethal injection, and the rate of executions is likely to rise in 2002.
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Diana George is a Professor of Cultural Theory and Composition Studies in the Department of Humanities at Michigan Technological University. She is co-author, with John Trimbur, of *Reading Culture*, soon in its fifth edition. Her work in composition and cultural studies has appeared in such journals as *CCC* and *Cultural Studies*. The author wishes to thank her husband, Chuck Harris, whose dedication to The Open Door Community and to New Hope House are primary inspirations for this research.