Interview

Linda Flower

The Evolution of "Intercultural Inquiry"

A Professor of Rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon University, Linda Flower pioneered the study of cognitive processes in writing. Motivated by the need for a more integrated social-cognitive approach to writing, her recent research has focused on how writers construct negotiated meaning in the midst of conflicting internal and social voices. Flower is Director of Carnegie Mellon's Center for University Outreach, a founding partner of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center, and a member of CCC's National Service-Learning Committee.

Reflections: Most writing teachers know you as a researcher who developed a model of the composing process. But in recent years, you've devoted much of your time to building community/campus partnerships. Can you tell us about your movement into community-based work?

Linda Flower: That's a very good question. The connection is teaching. In 1980, when I wrote *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*, I saw myself translating the thinking moves we were uncovering in our cognitive research into strategies that any writer could use. With each new project I got to add ideas on collaboration, revision, academic discourse and so on. When I wrote the new Part II on community writing two years ago, Harcourt saw a new book with a new name, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*. But, to me, it was a logical next step, trying to translate my own education into useful strategies for other writers.

The difference was that in the meantime I had been educated and inspired by Dr. Wayne Peck, Mrs. Joyce Baskins, and all the mentors and teenagers at Pittsburgh's Community House about the possibilities of community literacy.

Reflections: You've been involved with Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center for ten years now. What does the CLC do? What roles do Carnegie Mellon students and faculty play?

Flower: We founded the Community Literacy Center together in 1990 as a place where urban teenagers could learn to use writing and problem solving to "name the world" and explore their situations in it. Pretty soon these young people were holding public Community Conversations and writing documents like "Listen Up" and "Risk and Respect," teaching me and my students about the world they saw and teaching themselves that they could enter a deliberative discussion with adults.

The Carnegie Mellon mentors enter the process not as tutors or experts but as collaborative planning partners who ask the teens to think like rhetorical decision makers. These mentors are also on a journey of their own as writers, doing what we call an *intercultural inquiry*. In this kind of inquiry, writers pose a question (such as, "How do the "non-traditional" families in urban neighborhoods support young people?"). They then bring a diverse set of voices and rival hypotheses to their "table," creating an intercultural "dialogue" that involves not only published writers and researchers but the mentor's own observations and taped inquiries with everyday people. In an *inter*cultural inquiry the teenagers' expertise is essential; the teens are partners in the mentor's inquiry, not the subjects of it.

Reflections: Has your community-based work awakened new research interests?

Flower: I found that community literacy didn't just open up research, it reshaped the enterprise. In 1990, when I was the Co-Director of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Berkeley and CMU, my research was focused, first, on collaborative planning and then on freshmen working through the conflicting demands of college writing.[1] What we learned with college writers one day went into our practices at the Community Literacy Center the next—what was good for students at a selective university made sense to urban teens too.

But it was the rival hypothesis project that opened up a two-way street between community and university learning. In *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*, Elenore Long, Lorraine Higgins and I had been tracking the decision making of minority college students learning to move from a familiar thesis and support argument to an inquiry that actively sought out rival hypotheses. And we saw how these students used writing to deal with important cultural and identity issues. When we took this strategy to the community, it was immediately dubbed "rivaling" and appropriated by the teens to express ideas without landing in an adversarial argument—a strategy they really welcomed. So our research turned into a comparative study of learning "in school and out."

Listening to John Dewey and to these teens, we saw how this rivaling practice could open a path to an *inter*cultural inquiry that would *use difference as a resource* to build better, more diverse interpretations of cultural issues.

Reflections: As a member of the CCC National Service-Learning Committee, you have supported service-learning in composition. But you don't use the term to describe your own work. Would you share your thoughts about the term "service-learning"?

Flower: I am cautious with the word "service." I don't want my students to see themselves as the donors of knowledge or expertise to others in need, but as partners in collaborative planning and mutual learning. An intercultural inquiry, for instance, makes difference a resource, not a problem to overcome, and it foregrounds the expertise of community members. I know that many service-learning educators are trying to do this too, and I would invite them to post a research brief (or a link to their students' work) on the Intercultural Inquiry web site: <http://english.cmu.edu/outreach>.

Reflections: What new directions do you foresee in your teaching and research?

Flower: In my new course, The Rhetoric of Making a Difference, we are putting these same strategies to work on the difficulties of urban women entering new workplaces. Students are building problem scenarios out of discussions with Nursing Aides which become the basis for a Community Think Tank, in which aides, nurses, managers, human resources people, trainers, welfare officers, and clients explore rival interpretations of common problems and consider options for action. The Think Tanks get the expertise of people who are normally not invited to the table into discussions of performance and respect.[2]

I'm having an absolute ball with this course. As we read folks like Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, and Martin Luther King, Cornel West and bell hooks, it is really exciting to see this research in community problem-solving against the backdrop of American pragmatism. And the Community Think Tanks are getting a lot of management and policy people involved in listening to grassroots folks in a different way, as problem solvers with real insights into big issues like workforce performance. My students can use their writing to contribute to a public conversation that really could make a difference in my city.

N o t e s

[1] This research is discussed in *Making Thinking Visible* and *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*.

[2] More information about The Community Think Tanks can be found on the Intercultural Inquiry website: <www.cmu.edu/outreach>.

Works Cited

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