

The Consequences of Engaged Education: Building a Public Case

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As the reach of community engaged writing has expanded, it has come to offer a uniquely powerful contribution to a college education, well beyond service. We have the opportunity to make a visible, cross-disciplinary case that embraces this remarkable diversity in a compelling public argument—one that can link vision with new evidence of genuine educational consequences for students. This paper sketches a framework for both articulating that social, ethical, and intellectual contribution and supporting it with theory-driven and data-based evidence of shared, valued outcomes.

In their invitation to join this issue, Laurie Grobman and Deborah Mutnick celebrated a progression from “service learning” to “community-engaged writing and rhetoric.” The breadth of this new identity was inescapable at the 2019 CCW, Coalition for Community Writing conference. It featured sessions on our standard-bearing agendas, from “Community Partnerships and Pedagogy,” or “Community Accountability” to the “Documentary Impulse,” “Circulating

Stories of Homelessness,” or “DIY Community Publishing.” At the same time, you might enter the playing field of unresolved challenges, whether it was “Balancing Authority and Advocacy in Community” and “Food Justice” or learning how to “Explore Urban Space,” or even move out of our disciplinary comfort zone with science-based research to address “Food and Environment” or amass data that builds “Capacity for Advocacy.” Some discussions delved into “Theoretical Approaches” while others called for research on the “Long-term Impacts of Engaged Learning.” And down the hall, colleagues were advocating action in the wider public arena by “Cultivating Local Publics,” building partnerships for “Justice Entrepreneurship,” and (in the concluding session) by taking on “Grassroots Community Organizing, Impacting Policy and Legislation.”

As the vision and reach of the movement suggests, community engaged education based in writing and rhetoric has come of age. It has undergone an expansive transformation, evident in the journals *Reflections* and *Community Literacy* and in a wave of books and publications. And its reach has extended beyond a family of projects to a broader vision of what education itself should accomplish. More importantly, with this expanding family of practices, it has established an identity that is no longer limited to the vaguely commendable act of service or to specific programs, projects, or practices. Rather, the wider public case for community engaged education, I will suggest, rests on the unique contribution it makes to the social significance of a college education more broadly. That is, it can give students an intellectually and experientially grounded preparation for a form of citizenship that works with and across cultural and social differences guided by ethical commitments.

To help envision *this* sort of citizenship (in a world where it is a contested notion), I would like to start with a brief historical look at important ways the agendas of community projects *differed* in the early days of this movement. I do this in order to argue for focusing on the critical point at which they *converge* around a richer, integrated model of citizenship. Secondly, I believe this multi-faceted foundation offers us a way to build a broader, even more public case, combined with new kinds of evidence, for the consequential nature

such learning has that extends beyond writing, the classroom, or a discipline.

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF ENGAGEMENT: HOW WE GOT HERE

In its early years, a movement like this grows by staking out new territory, or as Michael Warner's study (2005) of emerging counterpublics puts it, you say "not only 'Let a public exist' but 'Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way. ... Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes'" (114). And you must also make a case for why this flag is so significant. Why *should* we do this, often in light of other options in education, research, social or civic engagement? In the early years of writing about *community* engagement and the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh, for instance, I understood them in part as an alternative to the model of service learning growing out of Campus Compact (founded in 1985 by the presidents of three prestigious universities and an education commissioner).

To put this response in context, the Community Literacy Center began work in 1990 as a collaboratively initiated and designed partnership without outside funding (although it later garnered more substantial outside support). It saw itself as an alternative to the trend Paula Mathieu saw in her 2005 critique of universities' move "toward creating long-term, top-down, institutionalized service-learning programs" designed to privilege the universities' own broader strategic goals (96).

Reviews written nearly thirty years later reveal the continued usefulness service-learning has had to academic institutions, noting its wide uptake in social studies, although community staff themselves may not see the difference between service, volunteerism and internships (Davis 2019). And in international, especially Asian institutions, it had been widely adopted in disciplinary education in medical and nursing sciences, business and economics, computer and social sciences, where it is often equated with an experiential learning activity in a disciplinary practice or a prologue to an Internship, and prized for its training in interpersonal relations (Salam 2019). In American educational studies, service-learning tends to be evaluated in terms of the support it gives to learning classroom material

(Currie-Muller and Littlefield 2018). However, these reviews are also showing an expanded concern with a wider set of values and career goals (Pritchard and Bowen 2019).

With a special focus on composition students, Iverson (2019/2020) picks up this thread reviewing service-learning outcome studies since 2000 and the shift in terms (as exemplified in the new subtitle of *Reflections*) to “community engaged writing and rhetoric.” Though, as he notes, these studies are few in number, they continue to support the effect on social awareness and individual growth broadly defined, and on writing in particular. They also note a link to later professional choice, although that might be hard to separate from initial self-selection. His own longitudinal study of ten students helps illustrate some of the strengths and limitations of typical “service-learning” projects, as when this student reflects “that a sort of first-year writing experience that focuses on service-oriented stuff is important” and helpful “like if you have to, later on in life write grants...I don’t know, write a newsletter or anything” (17). Iverson also noted that the student did not recall any particulars of the classroom or readings and appeared most influenced by the focus on writing in the disciplines. Using three (of his ten) case studies, Iverson makes a strong and nuanced case for the value that a writing-plus-service-course like this can have on students, especially when reflection raises their ethical, political, or civic awareness. However, the path I wish to focus on, which I will call *community engaged education*, will differ in its more intensely intellectual and outcome-oriented focus, which will in turn make additional demands on both the community partners, the teachers, and the students.

Community literacy, as my colleagues and I envisioned it in 1990, had a different logic. To begin with, it was a very strategic partnership—helping urban teenagers who were typically not school comfortable develop rhetorical problem-solving strategies in order to write publicly circulated documents discussing urban issues (e.g., police enforced curfews, job options, risk and stress, or school suspension policies) and to do so from their own “expert/ insider” point of view (Peck et al 1995). This version of community literacy was also strategically designed as a process of inquiry into both community writing and our own approach. The Community Literacy Center

(CLC) itself grew out of a somewhat unlikely union. Our home, Pittsburgh's Community House, was a neighborhood center built in 1890 as part of a large, downtown Presbyterian church, but as demographics changed, it became identified with its racially mixed, inner-city neighborhood. In that established presence of midnight basketball and small group neighborhood meetings, the CLC project added a new discourse. Its literacy program, based more on thinking than writing instruction, combined an ethical, intercultural agenda with insights from problem-solving research. It was energized by the visionary acumen of its director, Rev. Dr. Wayne Peck (with Harvard Divinity school and Carnegie Mellon degrees), the wisdom of Ms. Joyce Baskins, a magnetic and motivating African-American mother to all in this urban neighborhood and a representative voice in city planning, and by my desire to learn by doing. As a consequence, the CLC's strategic educational vision grew up in a contact zone where decidedly cross-cultural insights and three kinds of leadership operated within a shared commitment (Flower, *Construction*). Within that understanding of engagement, community literacy worked as a knowledge-building space for all of its participants. Later, the lessons and practices of the CLC would morph into an ongoing series of Community Think Tanks which drew cross cultural, cross hierarchy groups into focused problem-solving dialogues. In that instantiation, college students collected interviews and data to document alternative and often competing versions of a local problem which they brought to Round Tables that could include welfare recipients, nursing aides, high school students with an LD (learning disability), or the Independent (first-generation and self-supporting) college students, and the relevant administrators, policy makers, CEOs, counselors, educators, or students. There they explored different perspectives on the problem, considered options, and tested them against possible outcomes, all of which was documented in published *Findings* (Flower, n.d.). So even as the contexts and projects changed, the agenda and community literacy's rhetorical practices continued to develop.

However, the early CLC was clearly not the only agenda emerging in the academy. In composition, for instance, the "social turn" was asserting its own turn away from the individual and their inner or cognitive experience, mounting a needed critique of power and ideology. Community work, on the other hand, was also making it

clear that one would have to deal with the *interaction* of all these social, cognitive, affective, material, and embodied forces and practices. When you walk out of theory or the classroom, interaction—including politics—is how things get done. Meanwhile, yet another set of agendas began to surface in the muddy, competing waters of institutional relations. For ten years, the Community Literacy Center (in its collaboration with the National Center for the Study of Writing at Berkeley and CMU) was able to also conduct research supported by the N.I.E. (the National Institute for Education). But by the end of that period, the inquiry-friendly N.I.E. was replaced with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, an institutional machine dictated by the conservative politics of the time and its agenda to impose standardized testing on struggling schools.

So, when Paula Mathieu (2005) mounted her criticism of how institutionally shaped service-learning was insulated from the needs of, or communication with the community, I felt we were concerned about many of the same problems. Yet, in defining her approach as “tactical,” and in fact excluding “strategic” thinking, we seemed to be operating with competing value systems. Building on Foucault, who equated “strategic” practices with self-interested, oppressive institutional agendas, this dichotomizing argument called for an explicitly non-strategic, opportunistic, and subversive set of methods and practices, operating under-the-institutional-radar wherever possible. And compared to a more research-based, try-study-and-revise style of development, these “tactical” projects were not designed to be repeated. Yet, at the same time, Mathieu was giving us impressive case studies of homeless newspaper sellers giving voice to their reality through journalism—an action that seemed inescapably related to the strategic problem-solving valued in cognitive rhetoric. This raises the question, were these two approaches, seen as at odds in the academic literature, necessarily *contradictory* to one another? Or were they just differently *situated* with some equally valuable but different short-term *goals*? How were they, in fact, related?

Another more recent example raises its public-calling flag with a still different agenda in Steve Parks’s strongly argued 2014 essay, “Sinners Welcome: The Limits of Rhetorical Agency.” Of special relevance here, he offers a very insightful analysis of the Community

Literacy Center's approach to community engagement and its vision of helping silenced people take rhetorical agency. He then (politely) rejects this model to make his strongly alternative, "we should" case for moving to much more local, politically engaged organizing, focusing on specific action items. The goal and test of value of such a project is its local results. And like Mathieu's, his own work shows that social impact is indeed possible.

So, I want to question whether these cogent assertions of the significance of a particular agenda can support a claim for what is *necessarily* the right or even *best* course for community engagement. In each of these alternatives we reach different goals and reveal different limitations. The CLC, with its link to college courses on literacy or leadership, for instance, is unlikely to make immediate political change, although its educational focus for *all* the participants can promote intercultural and local as well as academic and professional forms of engagement (Flower 2016). The practice of developing, testing, and then adapting one's own approaches helps build on each experience in a more considered way. Yet whatever effect this agenda has on "changing the conversation" around a local police-enforced curfew, for instance, it does not then enter the ongoing tangled web of city politics and policy. As I expect Steve Parks would say, it is more likely to circulate words *from* the street than it is to be out *on* it. In short, each of these complex agendas seemed to define and make a difference in its own way.

THE SOCIAL CASE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How then might we build a coherent case that recognizes alternative agendas, including today's impressive array of yet more paths to community engagement? For example, one path might be the choice to replace the efficiency of packaged literacy training with the slowness and uncertainty of learning to listen (e.g., what are the "real" needs of an internally conflicted diaspora community in Phoenix?). And only then, from there, to create a new collaborative "rhetorical response" (Long 2018). Another path appropriate to an established Indigenous context might involve creating a sustainable technological presence for the Cherokee nation through a community constructed web site (Cushman 2013). Or, like the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, one might use their special expertise to develop a collection

of research on pollution in the Delaware Water Gap, designing it as ammunition for others, such as a coalition of multiple local activist trying to protect the river (Kroll 2016). And in North Philadelphia, the path has become a stream of collaborative community/university projects arising from a wide network of collaborators, maintained by mutual respect and face-to-face relationships (Golddblatt 2007).

What these radically different paths draw attention to are the multifaceted goals and methods of community engagement which work as an ethical and intellectual vision and a force for change. However, taking an inclusive perspective can lay the groundwork for a broader public case for engagement as an essential element in contemporary education. Even as our colleagues jump aboard the train for STEM, it is a case we need to make. The particular framework sketched here argues for an educational significance beyond the humanities built on two lines of argument: our unique contribution to citizenship and the persuasive power of consequences.

When we represent the paths to engaged education with an inclusive roadmap, we see that one place these paths converge is around a conscious commitment to pressing social concerns—in particular, to crossing divisive social boundaries, guided by the need for moral clarity, and motivated by the desire to make change happen. Being grounded in writing and rhetoric also means that our ideas and methods are well articulated and are themselves open to reflection, challenge, and change. And linking the goals of engagement to social impact moves us from out of the classroom and into a larger community. Consider a suggestive parallel to the ancient Greek’s ideal of *kosmopolitēs*. There one strives to become a cosmopolitan, “a citizen of the world,” not limited by the identities your culture offers (e.g., being a Greek, an Athenian, or a member of your city-state). This means you identify as a member of a single community to which all people belong, linked with a shared moral vision. It is the sort of citizenship that prepares one to walk into a new local community, listen, learn, and participate.

Being immersed in this as a felt experience can prepare students for the kind of collaborative community building Eli Goldblatt describes in *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the Curriculum* (2007).

The “Here” may be Philadelphia, but the community is built around a common cause. In the same sense, community engaged education places a student within a larger narrative of social commitment that seeks not only to understand these social differences, but also how to use them for change. For instance, working with community writers—whether they be the homeless journalists of Boston, urban teenagers in Pittsburgh, or the school kids, immigrants, and disabled publishing their stories with Philadelphia’s New City Community Press—their writing becomes a way to put their strengths as well as the unrecognized and often harsh realities they face into public circulation. It happens through the *interplay* of town and gown in divided communities, or when the well-off (with the standing or means to be heard) collaborate with the expertise and insight of the poor, marginalized, or voiceless. And for the college student, classroom concepts are not simply “learned” but re-represented as actions in context with complications and consequences. Their personal engagement with difference, ethical choice, and change lets education become, in Burke’s words, “equipment for living” (1973)

The case for citizenship as part of a core curriculum is, however, less likely to be successful if it rests on an abstraction—even if it has classical credentials. How will educators in other disciplines see it as relevant to their work? We might take one lesson from the research on “transfer” which started by arguing for competing *definitions* of the phenomenon. When the results of these studies, however, are interpreted within their context—as a response to different settings, expectations, personal goals, dispositions etc.—definitions are replaced with a more expansive, contextualized understanding of the different ways transfer *can work*. The same logic applies to the arguments for the educational value of engagement. When a community project is represented as a response to its particular, richly contextualized rhetorical space, it gives presence to adaptive, goal-directed choices engagement demands. Equally important, it also directs our attention to a central strength of local engagement—its potential for explicit, adaptive, socially valued outcomes. Such outcomes, often tied to rhetorical and social interaction, can range from an individual student’s new capacity for cultural understanding, for reading difference, taking agency, or working in collaboration (whether one is in business, engineering, medicine or marketing). Or it may show up in the capacity a small group, coalition, or counterpublic

must develop to “change the conversation” in its rhetorical space, or the power to actually modify practices or policies (in a city council, community, or corporation).

I also recognize that the notion of “education for engaged citizenship” may not have an immediate appeal to the perceived needs institutions, administrators, educators, funders, families, or students now face. For many, the so called “crisis in the humanities” raises the need to attract students and to build a case for relevance, impact, or funding. In contrast to STEM enterprises, we rarely produce patented objects, procedures, or data, forcing us to argue for significance with limited evidence. But does that mean it isn’t there? As William James (1981) would say, “there can be no difference that doesn’t make a difference” (45). This is something to which community writing projects have had a front seat. However, John Dewey (1988), who sees even our best ideas as “hypothetical,” sets the stakes even higher. The worth of ideas, theories, or beliefs, such as those which support engaged education, is “conditional; they have to be tested by the consequences of the operations they define and direct.” Their “final value is not determined by their internal elaboration and consistency, but by the consequences they effect in existence as that is perceptibly experienced” (132).

In standard academic practice, our observable or documented outcomes typically take the form of grades or papers, based on an assumption of (or hope for?) transfer to subsequent classes or perhaps internships—again, typically measured by grades. But community writing and civic engagement can have consequences well beyond the classroom in peoples’ lives—not just in the transfer of learning, but in the choices urban teenagers make “on the street” or in school. It can show up in college students’ articulation of experienced-based insights into intercultural collaboration and later in professional performance as socially strategic team leaders, embedded activists, or teachers. We have each seen this impact in part and believe in the reality of its reach.

Yet how good is our understanding, not to mention evidence, for how this form of education works in practice beyond the project? To build a public case for the “perceptibly experienced” impact of community

engaged education would mean both tracking those outcomes and interpreting their significance. One traditional approach involves satisfaction surveys or collecting data on school retention, job placement, contact hours, and publications, all complemented by an engaging narrative of a case in point. College programs tend to use grades, surveys, or reflections. I expect we have all used some of these at some time. But will they constitute a persuasive set of “perceptibly experienced” consequences?

BUILDING A CONSEQUENTIAL CASE

The framework sketched here would combine the social case for citizenship through community engagement with the persuasive power of a “consequential case.” Building such a case, I suggest, would call for:

1. a more complex form of evidence
2. focused on how this experiential learning has been *put to use* in people’s lives,
3. gathered when possible over longer periods of time,
4. with informal but sophisticated, theory-conscious methods,
5. interpreted and circulated in terms of both abstract values and persuasive ways of measuring its grounded, working significance.

In my own experience, this sort of inquiry has revealed some surprisingly different ways this sort of learning is put to use and the scope of its impact. In an ongoing set of case studies, one particularly useful method started with making college students’ final written reflections not only a significant and shared part of a course as many of us do, but by requesting a direct focus on ways their learning had actually been *put to use in their lives*. An even more probing picture of outcomes emerged when students used a challenging course concept or theory to develop a data-based analysis of one of their own unexamined (problematic) strategies for engagement. Their analysis created some explicit, workable options for change, developed to apply in their teaching, in student government, or personal relations. An informal follow-up confirmed this analysis had real consequences.

Satisfaction surveys can be a limited tool for gauging impact or the usefulness a project has for community partners or participants. More formal “critical incident” interviews, on the other hand, can create focused, even codable accounts of when or if a person actually called on or used what they learned in a project (Flanagan 1954). My own experience with this method of follow-up with college students, up to ten years after a community engaged course, is revealing the remarkable staying power of knowledge when academic and experiential learning interact, as well as its creative transformation as they take it into their personal and professional lives. Yet another way of assessing impact can track the circulation of not only texts but of interpretative frames that may have changed the “conversation” on a campus, in a union, or department.

There are, of course, a range of interpretive lenses with which to analyze the text and talk we collect, such as coding it for students’ ability to interpret cultural difference, engage in intercultural dialogue, entertain rival hypothesis, or engage in productive conflict. We can use activity analysis to let us step back and tease out the dynamics of the larger “activity system” operating in a classroom, a project, a university, community, or organization, revealing some of its rules, mediational tools, and divisions of labor or status and how they interact with its goals or wider context. It can help us articulate some of the “contradictions” embedded within such a system when, say, the goal of equitable town/gown relations confronts the established institutional methods or tools for delivering a “service.” More importantly, uncovering embedded contradictions locates the sites warm for innovation and change (Engeström 1933).

A theory-conscious interpretation of case studies may depend on grounded-theory, a feminist analysis, or a material, cognitive, or cultural lens. It can use coding and even non-parametric (small sample) statistics to test an interpretation. And it can draw on powerful concepts from studies of transfer, framing, or decision making. The point is, we have a wealth of “mediational” tools that can let us discover more of the underarticulated impact of our work and build a stronger, more sophisticated case for the diverse, distinctive, and significant, “perceptibly experienced” outcomes and

the personal, social, and public consequences of community engaged learning.

This research has another endearing quality. Because these methods typically involve face-to-face interaction or writing, they create a unique reflective space. When participants are asked to articulate formative or vivid experiences, they begin seeing them again (or maybe for the first time) through the lens of consequences in their own lives. In doing so, they find themselves discovering their own capacities, potential for agency, struggles, and unresolved challenges. Inquiry has its own unexpected outcomes.

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With the creation of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center, Flower and her collaborators applied these insights to supporting community writers as rhetorical agents engaged in social action (*Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*). The CLC's practices of intercultural inquiry led to new work organizing deliberative local publics on problems in urban workplaces, schools and colleges. Designed as a cross-hierarchy, cross-cultural practice, these Community Think Tanks have given an articulated presence to the unrecognized expertise of people from nursing aides, to high schoolers dealing with a learning disability, to low income "independent" college students (www.cmu.edu/thinktank). This paper is part of a new study on the outcomes of community engaged education for college students, tracking ways they have gone beyond transfer to self-consciously transforming their experience into publicly valued skills.