

Community Engagement for the Graduate Student Soul: Ruminations on *Reflections*

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Reflections offers a plethora of stories, strategies, and applicable content for community-based writing projects as well as considerations for our pedagogy within institutional walls. In this piece, I, a first-time contributor, reflect on a few of my own endeavors in community-engaged work over the last decade alongside a reading of this journal and its continued impact on my pedagogy and research. Specifically, I discuss the value of community engagement efforts for graduate students developing as teachers and scholars in the discipline. Through this writing, I contribute to and build upon the ongoing knowledge-making practices at the heart of this journal.

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the value of community engagement efforts for graduate students developing as teachers and scholars in the discipline. Through this writing, I contribute to and build on the ongoing knowledge-making practices at the heart of this journal.

To begin, I offer a short story of my first community-engagement efforts. My first time teaching took place at a community center in the city where I lived while obtaining my master's. When my graduate program peer mentor asked me if I would be interested in joining a community literacy group a few years old led entirely by graduate students, I was excited by the prospect of getting to work with members of the community on their writing. I saw this as a moment to make connections within the graduate student community. Plus, a teaching opportunity prior to my official graduate teaching year? What a dream! This experience was also my first sustained service-learning effort. In the past, I had taken part in day or week-long community workshops or support efforts, but nothing to the caliber that I entered here in regard to my labor and leadership. I remember spending hours during the days leading up researching, remixing, and creating fourth and fifth-grade literacy materials with the aid of Pinterest and Google, looking at the practices of organizations like 826 Valencia nonprofit community writing center, which I was told our graduate effort modeled. I knew little about what I was getting into, but I knew I was excited to start.

As a first-generation student, I didn't know much about what academia entailed when I began my master's program in composition and rhetoric in the fall of 2013 beyond a desire to continue learning about writing and rhetoric. I went into this community engagement project similarly, imagining classroom spaces with boards and desks. My expectations of what teaching looked like shifted quickly when I entered a gymnasium space with a far corner marked by three large blue partitions to create the illusion of a separate room. Each class, my co-teacher-friend and I would show up early to set up our materials, taping giant Post-It note sheets to the wall with masking tape that hardly wanted to come off the roll. We graciously used the supplies we were given, many of which were donated—if not purchased—by the community center. We chipped in our own supplies when we could, making use of the dollar spot at Target

or the Dollar Store to create a pool of incentive prizes for literacy games. I looked forward to meeting with the students at the Center each week, and, as Center staff reminded us from time to time, we were among few consistent connections for these students, many of whom did not have stable home lives. When one of us was absent, students were quick to question where we were, why we might not have come, and then ask where we were when we returned. I share this story to offer a glimpse of the impact of one service-learning project early in my now career-path as a writing and rhetoric scholar. I reflect regularly on this work and recognize the invaluable way it helped me develop my own teaching persona, one who emphasizes classroom community-building in her pedagogical practice.

I worked with writers of all ages across literacy levels at different sites in the city throughout my two years as a graduate student in Lincoln. I taught fourth and fifth grade students at the Clyde Malone Community Center in an after-school writing workshop twice a week for an hour. I also worked with adult literacy learners at the Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach. For both sites, I helped create weekly lesson plans and worked with writers on writing, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and other literacy and communication skills to support learners on their communication endeavors beyond our spaces, such as meeting school standards or completing job applications. Community writers wrote about topics that mattered to them, from adult literacy learners hoping to learn the alphabet to build writing skills to write letters to their grandchildren, to 5th grade students practicing new vocabulary words through fanfiction, remixing familiar-to-them topics. No matter where writers were at, it was clear our workshops mattered as a regular part of our week, especially when most participants' home and work lives remained uncertain and in flux. Time and time again, I found this labor rewarding and re-energizing such that I desired continuing this work in the future. Furthermore, it helped me connect with and learn from fellow graduate students as we continued to establish additional community connections and sites, build our network of volunteers, and meet more writers where they were. Pauszek et. al (2019) describe similar impacts of their early career community engagement projects wherein co-author Charlie Lesh notes that we should continue to reflect on our community-engagement practices to consider "the diverse ways that communities use writing to shape,

resist, or reshape the politics and powers of everyday life” (139). Similar reflections on my experience in this work from a graduate student perspective contributed to my growing interest in what it means to be a present-day graduate student, the initial inquiries of which became my dissertation project focusing on first-generation-to-college doctoral students in rhetoric and composition and the ways they negotiated the expectations of graduate study with their lives and many obligations.

Needless to say, these experiences and the many community engagement experiences I’ve been privileged to take part in since have contributed to my growth as a teacher-scholar. Although I was not a regular reader of *Reflections* at the time, in preparation for writing this piece, I spent time working through the *Reflections* web archive to get a glimpse of all of the journals in its twenty-year history thus far. From this overview, I understand that the community-engaged work in which we partake impacts localized facets of our worlds. For instance, in her contribution, Gwen Robinson (2007) focuses on how student discussions and writing in her first-year writing classroom post-Hurricane Katrina made her a better teacher, but more importantly, offered students space to reflect on shared experiences surrounding tragedy. Robinson’s classroom became a space for students to process Katrina as a community. Likewise, I recently engaged such strategies following a local shooting affecting the university community where I work. I also chose to “throw out my normal procedures and establish something completely different” when turning my classroom and office hours into spaces to talk, process, and grieve (Robinson 2007, 111–112). This approach becomes more frequently utilized in our post-Trump times with seemingly faster news cycles. Following these dialogues, several students in my classes asked if they could develop projects reflecting on and/or processing the shooting. Students wrote collaborative poetry, painted artwork depicting their feelings, developed personal essays and journal entries, and covered topics including mental health, racialized tensions within the community, loss, and hope. Many students cited these projects as therapeutic and among the most important things they had written in class discussions at the end of the semester reflecting on our work. Robinson’s work affirms the value of reflective writing during moments like these when we move our existing plans

aside and re-plan our own next steps through reflection, something that we don't always get taught in our graduate programs.

The role of *Reflections* in our writing and rhetoric discipline offers space to make oft-invisible and undervalued labor visible and valued. *Reflections* can help us make a case for why the work that can get relegated to service or "other" categories in our professional portfolios, the ones that impact our future job titles and salaries, matters much more than service designations credit. *Reflections* becomes an archive for this labor and its impact. In the case of the Writing Lincoln initiative, I want to emphasize again that these community engagement efforts were led and sustained by graduate students, a population in which, due to the sheer nature of graduate education, we are on our own limited timelines when it comes to community involvement. In other words, graduate student participation in these efforts partly depends on navigating this work around our degree progress. As Hubrig et. al (2017) further detail in their article describing WLI's efforts toward theorizing strategies for graduate student community engagement, these graduate student efforts come with many challenges:

Coordinating a community partnership program often requires difficult decisions about mediating cross-institutional relationships; communicating effectively with community organizations and campus administrators; anticipating and addressing logistical, liability, space, and funding concerns; writing and managing grants, which must be housed in a particular institution or department; negotiating transitions in anticipation of graduation; and balancing one's own labor conditions, as initiating a community partnership is often unpaid and challenging to translate into work valued by institutions beyond a "service" CV line. (94)

In short, and as other community-engaged scholars have echoed, this work typically needs institutional support to thrive. Outside of the community with whom we engage, certain conditions and resources are necessary for this work to happen. In my first year with WLI, for instance, we needed money to sustain our efforts. I helped lead a successful Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign to help raise more

than \$1,000 toward purchasing supplies and developing a book of writing by students at the Malone Center; this can be considered a 21st-century literacy sponsor. Gathering resources for community engagement work often means building both institutional and community connections. These practices can help graduate students learn how to build infrastructure and gain valuable administrative experience. Graduate students can apply theoretical frameworks, rhetorical concepts, and writing skills we learn in composition classrooms in community literacy spaces to build infrastructures and gather resources. For instance, in the crowdfunding effort I describe here, much of the campaigning required employing rhetorical concepts creatively in the form of short blurbs and videos to garner support. While the conditions came to fruition in the moments of the previous project, this is not always the case. Notably, many graduate students, especially from first-generation, working-class, and/or other historically underrepresented backgrounds, must continue to find ways to survive and thrive in their programs despite diminishing institutional support. Developing and enacting community engagement projects allows us to engage our rhetoric and writing skills toward advocating for community members as well as ourselves. Part of this work happens within community literacy courses, such as the one in which the idea for the Writing Lincoln Initiative I describe here began. But, it is the practical application of these ideas that can go by the wayside because students are left to negotiate between “save-the-world” ideals and practical constraints when hit with the kind of labor and resources necessary to make community-engaged work a reality. However, many of these tactics come from business practices rather than what is traditionally taught in a writing classroom. Elenore Long’s (2008) notion of interpretative pedagogies moves us toward enacting in-class lessons in public spaces. Again, this pedagogy is grounded in having students do work outside of traditional classroom spaces.

Community-engaged work doesn’t happen alone, as is evident through the numerous collaborative projects and descriptions of community relationships throughout the pages of *Reflections*. Celena Todora (2019) perhaps best sums up this coming together of human-centered pedagogies, research, and, of course, community-engaged work toward performing what she terms a “radical coalitional rhetoric,” one that emphasizes “listening to the needs of the community to curb

systemic injustices rather than applying the band-aid of service work” (277). Specifically, she articulates how community-engaged work can build from social movement rhetorics toward better engaging “rhetorical and power structures within university-community relations” (259). Coalitional work, of course, necessitates developing reciprocal relationships with community members. Todora cites Karma Chávez’s (2013) definition of “coalitional possibility,” arguing that coalitions require a “shared commitment to social and political change” and not just a relationship (259). For instance, during my PhD program, I took part in a “hack-a-thon” toward developing digital resources for immigrant and refugee populations in Louisville, Kentucky. Among the thirty participants were not only humanities students and professors, but also community partners already engaged in efforts to support the local immigrant and refugee population. Together, over eight hours, we used our strengths toward building materials. For instance, modern language participants helped translate web pages from English to Spanish; English folks engaged our digital literacy and writing skills to create clear and concise copy. Todora’s piece, alongside several in *Reflections*, highlights strategies for thinking about the aspirational diversity of our discipline alluded to in the call for this special issue—much community-engaged work is inherently diverse, as are the themes of many issues in this journal.

However, we can continue to do better. Coalitions thrive through building on the strengths of their members. Likewise, community-engaged work using a “coalitional commitment to intersectionality as opposed to individuality enables an understanding and acceptance of multiple—perhaps differing or contradictory—experiences or perspectives” (Todora 265). Working alongside community partners allowed us a direct link to the needs of the community to ensure that the materials we designed would support the population by filling some of the existing communication gaps. As further evidenced by the pages of *Reflections*, community-engaged efforts are inherently collaborative, building on the strengths of all participants. At its core, *Reflections* presents numerous approaches to thinking and doing community-engaged work by and with an array of communities, as marked by the numerous special issues from the last twenty years and the many more to come.

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