

The Art of Learning Our Place

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This essay recounts the origins of Reflections and considers the first seven years of the journal's publication from the perspective of its first editor. Arguing that Reflections serves as a barometer of changes in our field, the academy, and the production of knowledge over the past two decades, it recounts the journal's initial mandate to provide a forum for communication and inquiry and characterizes the unique ethos of the journal. It assesses the generative role of special issues in using a community organizing approach to publication to connect scholars, practitioners, and participants around a theme, developing many of the now-thriving subfields of community-engaged writing. The journal, it concludes, thanks to its inclusive, experimental, and multigenerational approach and deep roots in communities where we have built lasting relationships, provides a mirror in which we can see our field deepen our questions and extend our reach. It celebrates Reflections for cultivating the brave space we continue to need to collaboratively and critically craft our crucial places within and beyond the university.

It is June 15, 2020. As I have, on and off, for several months, I let my eyes pass one last time over the two collections of journals on my desk. The first set includes the issues I shepherded as *Reflections'* editor from 1999-2007, initially in 8 1/2 x11 format, and then in the basic layout that continues to govern the journal's design today. The second constellation of issues bursts into bold color, as the journal, guided by Steve Parks, Paula Mathieu, Diana George, Cristina Kirklighter, Laurie Grobman, and Deborah Mutnick, reaches beyond print genres to explore dialogue, activist documentaries, sustainable communities, and veterans' writing, probing the relationships, pedagogies, tactics, networks, and theoretical commitments that complicate and make them possible.

Like a family photo album, each individual issue beckons. Every time I leaf through one, I'm struck by a different theme—the ambitious reach of the journal, the unlikely affordances of hosting an independent journal at a small liberal arts college, the mix of high editorial standards and humility that rooted our success, the materiality of editing a journal when email was still novel and PageMaker was our state of the art publishing platform, the let's-put-on-a-play entrepreneurial spirit that animated our work, and, of course, the generous, durable coalition of community-engaged writers who, in the exchanges of manuscripts, reviews, and revisions, have woven the fabric of our shared commitments together.

I'll explore some of these themes in the pages that follow. Today, though, I may have finally identified what feels most profound about what our *Reflections* community has built together. With images of the protests of past weeks scrolling before my eyes and my inbox overrun with institutional declarations of humility and solidarity, I applaud the fruits of our twenty-year long collaborative inquiry into critically, carefully, learning our place.

THE BIRTH OF THE JOURNAL

A group of scholars gather in a large room at the 1999 Conference of College Composition and Communication in Atlanta to discuss how we might leverage the \$5,000 that Tom Deans and Nora Bacon helped to secure from the now defunct American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). "Our mandate," explains Tom Deans, "is

to provide leadership for, and encourage dialogue among, members interested in connecting service-learning to college writing; to provide the membership with information, forums for communication, and teaching resources on service-learning; to encourage research on how community-based learning informs composition studies; and to encourage reflection and discussion on the ethical and ideological implications of service-learning” (2000, 3).

The discussion is robust and animated. Like the Writing Center subfield that had successfully matured thanks in part to the *Writing Lab Newsletter* and *Writing Center Journal*, we, too, need a venue to anchor our scholarship, legitimize it, and make it visible. A journal would make our scholarly work “count” for promotion and tenure, a need we experience acutely given the characterization of our community-based work as “service,” the intensity of its logistical and relational demands, and the contingent status of many of the faculty involved.

But our needs are deeper, too. Even as those of us who are early adopters of the rhetoric and service-learning combination enthusiastically promote community-based work to our universities, partners, and students, we hanker for a space to share misgivings, make sense of contradictions, and learn from others’ endeavors to do the same. We worry that communities will be defined by deficits not assets, that relationships can be exploitative, that unexamined good intentions backfire. We are conflicted about the institutionalization of service-learning. Even at this first meeting, we grasp that the journal can become home to a growing community who “want students to learn in and through unstructured situations to be involved in the production of something of public value...., to recognize that they are members of communities, and that as citizens in a democracy, everything they do has implications for the health of our society” (Zlotkowski 2000, 1). A journal would create the platform for such an association—a reality that would come to full fruition fifteen years later with the founding of the Coalition for Community Writing in 2015.

From the back of the room, I raise my hand and hear my voice not just advocating for the value of a journal but volunteering to join

accomplished scholar Nora Bacon in editing the publication we have collectively begun to imagine.

GOUCHER COLLEGE AS *REFLECTIONS* INSTITUTIONAL HOME

Soon after Four Cs, Nora was asked to assume more leadership of the writing and service learning programs at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Over one of our “trunk calls” that let us talk for hours, long distance—and for just pennies!!—Nora asked me to investigate what it would mean for her to step back and for Goucher College in Baltimore to host *Reflections*.

Goucher, founded in 1885 as an urban women’s college, had joined—and accelerated—white flight out of the heart of Baltimore in the 1950s and now sat on 180 wooded acres in Baltimore County. The school became co-ed in 1986. With 1200 undergraduates and little contact between the undergraduate faculty and the part-time graduate programs, Goucher seemed an unlikely institutional home for an academic journal. Who would fill the role of editorial staff?

On the other hand, Goucher had innovative programs in creative writing and dance, plus one of most well-established Peace Studies programs in the country. Known for strong mentorship of undergraduates, the college’s commitments to feminist pedagogy and social justice ran deep, with more than thirty percent of undergraduates returning to Baltimore City to participate in service learning and community outreach every semester. Could the depth of the institution’s civic mission also support a journal devoted to writing and community engagement? Time would later prove that the flexibility and intimacy of Goucher’s culture would sustain years of collegial faculty-student partnerships, enriching the undergraduate editorial staff immeasurably, serving the journal ably, and providing many of the most satisfying working relationships of my career.

Before fully committing, though, I decided to consult with editors of other small journals. I have a clear memory of calling Mickey Harris, the long-time editor of *Writing Lab Newsletter*. “How many hours a week do you devote to editing *WLN*?” I asked. “If I ever calculated that,” she said, “I’d never do the job.” When I asked Peter

Vandenberg, then editor of *Composition Studies*, he used precisely the same words.

Mickey's and Peter's cautions were overshadowed, though, by their passion for the work and their sage advice. I was forty, with three children, ages eleven, nine and three. Some years earlier, I had temporarily shifted from full- to half-time teaching, and, happily, my requests for an additional course release to edit the journal and for in-kind support from Goucher were granted. Goucher became *Reflections'* home.

THE ETHOS OF THE JOURNAL

Over the next months, Nora Bacon and I cast a wide net, inviting manuscripts not only from the group who had assembled at Cs, but also from K-12 teachers responsible for courses with required service-learning components, graduate students eager to share work in progress, undergraduates blending creative nonfiction with social action to witness their engagement with communities, and experienced practitioner-scholars able to glean lessons from theoretically rich, mature programs. This hybrid formula became our hallmark, enabling us over the next years to include the voices of Linda Adler-Kassner, Linda Flower, Diana George, Joe Harris, Bruce Herzberg, John Saltmarsh, Ira Shor, and Edward Zlotkowski alongside the rapidly developing emerging scholarship that continues to fuel *Reflections'* best work.

We recognized community-engaged work as a unique kind of praxis within a field characterized by praxis, and tried to promote an approach to scholarship and inquiry that honored the pragmatic without being theory-less or research-less. We wrestled with how to tap into the hunger for new approaches that animated our special interest groups without devolving into a recipe swap ourselves. In this way, *Reflections* supported the fledgling subdiscipline of community-engaged work with the manuscripts that moved between authors, reviewers, and readers creating its warp and its woof.

We were after something that was welcoming, introspective, and honest, that could navigate critically between self-congratulatory

and confessional, and, somehow, authors embraced this vision. It was no accident that our initial name was “Reflections on Community-Based Writing *Instruction*.” Tom Deans and Nora Bacon, the de facto “senior editors” of the journal throughout my editorship, are elegant stylists who love language, value logic, and prize revision. We—and the editorial board we formally announced in the second issue—deeply identified as teachers committed to helping all writers achieve their most ambitious intentions. One of the great joys of editing a journal is learning to pair a manuscript with the right reader, and then supporting that author to embrace the challenges the feedback may offer.

Pick up one of the early issues of *Reflections*, and you’ll find that the pieces still read well—crisp, well-edited, neither flabby nor self-indulgent. I credit this to the editorial team’s humility. We had “ridden the van in the dark” with Eli Goldblatt (1994) and appreciated the complex interplay among students, faculty, community partners, neighborhood participants, university staff, transportation systems, and institutional pressures. This humble clarity let us define our scope and purpose as a community *writing* journal that endeavored to make reading about our work itself a pleasure.

THE MATERIALITY OF A DYI JOURNAL

Looking back, *Reflections* serves as a barometer of changes in our field, the academy, and indeed the social transformation of the production of knowledge over the past two decades. Producing the journal was hard work, much of it devoted to wrangling with the infinite annoyances of the now obsolete PageMaker software. But those twenty years also track how the journal helped build the now thriving coalition of community writing, making us visible to each other in the spaces between conferences, creating space for collective deliberation, and providing a nurturing home for many young scholars who, early on, took leadership roles on our production team and who became better scholars and writers thanks to their work with us.

The materiality of the work itself—the indescribable *frisson* of excitement we felt when we were awarded a good discount at the local Kinko’s—was central to our sense of breaking boundaries,

working at the grassroots, and creating a venue for writing studies that was fundamentally different from the flagship journals. In this and other ways, we operated much like the community organizations whose stories filled the journal's pages.

If each issue was a putative invitation to new authors to contribute to the journal, then each annual CCCC was the actual site of recruitment. Packing for the conference is still embedded in my muscle memory: first, the long banner we draped from the Exhibition Hall table, then the signup sheet for editorial board members to volunteer to staff our booth, then flyers advertising the journal, the subscription forms, the polite "Display Only" stickers, the business cards and push pins for posting notices, the change for people who paid for subscriptions in cash.

Once at the conference, loyal editorial board members Tobi Jacobi, Amy Taggart, Brooke Hessler, Melody Bowdon, Blake Scott, Adrian Wurr, Glenn Hutchinson, and others, infused with a community bake sale spirit, would attend sessions, each of us stacking a small pile of *Reflections* flyers at the back of the room, and inviting people to take one on the way out and then visit our table in the Exhibition Hall.

CCCC was everything to a startup journal like ours—not just a time to share research, but to hawk our wares, host gatherings, develop policy, recruit talent, harvest articles, build relationships, and *sell subscriptions*. We left Four Cs in 2000 with 270 names on our initial mailing list. Later, we got ISSN numbers, arranged for MLA indexing, and struggled to account for revenue and expenses as paid subscriptions and production costs increased.

A LIFE-CHANGING TURNING POINT: THE PRISON ISSUE, 2004

Reflecting on the impact of the 1997 *Writing the Community* collection, Edward Zlotkowski said, "It's hard to overestimate the importance of having something one can rally around and use as a point of departure... *Writing the Community* was always meant to be the starting place for a much more extensive conversation" (2000, 3).

This was the certainly also the case for the 2004 Special Issue on Prison Literacies and Narratives, guest edited by Tobi Jacobi and Patricia O'Connor. For several years, I had attended Tobi's talks at Cs, impressed not only with the innovative writing workshops she led with incarcerated writers but also with her sophisticated questions about the circulation of prison writing and her familiarity with the flourishing work conducted in prisons across the country. It was Tom Deans' suggestion that Tobi, a newly appointed assistant professor at Colorado State University, and Patricia O'Connor, a well-established scholar at Georgetown University who had been teaching in prisons for years, coedit the issue. For me, as well as for our profession and community writ large, the prison issue was life- and career-changing. It advanced the reach of the journal, brought *Reflections* into broader conversations about justice and equity, and firmly established prison teaching and writing as an essential subfield.

From the start, we envisioned a hybrid issue that would showcase writing by people who are incarcerated and place that writing in dialogue with more scholarly sources. To that end, we contacted prison librarians all over the country, asking them to collect and send us manuscripts. These soon arrived in such huge, unexpected quantities that every table, chair, and windowsill in my Goucher office was covered in stacks of prison submissions. Reading these opened a world of experience and insight that commanded my attention. I still remember lines from some of them like "I haven't seen a cat in 37 years." What could it mean not to have seen a cat in thirty-seven years? I feel enormously privileged to have worked closely with Tobi and Patricia in this three-way partnership, which broke new ground for the journal, for the field, and ultimately for my own work in the decades since as a leader in the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program and founder of the Goucher Prison Education Partnership.

The success of the prison issue paved the way for three additional special issues, "Service Learning and Professional Communication," edited by Melody Bowdon and Jim Dubinsky, "Rewriting Community Writing and Rhetoric Courses," edited by Amy Rupiper Taggart and H. Brooke Hessler, and "Exploring Diversity in Community-Based Writing and Literacy Programs," guest edited by Adrian Wurr.

Although much more deserves to be said about these special issues, what seems most salient today is the way each one enacted the dialectical processes traced so brilliantly in Taggart and Hessler's analysis of how experienced teacher-scholars sustain community pedagogy. "Mature community-engaged courses are not merely instituted," Taggart and Hessler remind us. "They are calibrated, requiring constant response and change" (2006, 153). "What makes this possible is the instructor's attention to goals, responsiveness to myriad contextual factors, and pedagogical theory building—a set of strategies best described by Donald Schn as "reflection in and on action" (1983, 154). Tracing experienced practitioners' commitments to critical consciousness, community collaboration, increased civic engagement, and the development of knowledge beyond academe, Taggart and Hessler provide a mirror in which we can see our field deepen our questions and extend our reach.

THE ART OF LEARNING OUR PLACE

The 2007 Special Issue, *Exploring Diversity in Community-Based Writing and Literacy Programs*, holds a unique place in *Reflections'* evolution. The dissonance could not have been starker between the intersectional arguments for reconceiving community literacy the articles promoted and the still mostly white editorial board—bemoaned for years, of course, but largely unchanged (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012). It was most fitting that the issue called for a new editor who could lead the journal in fresh ways.

The volume, itself, explodes with energy, from Paul Butler's "GED as Transgender Literacy" to Isabel Baca's "Bilingual Service-Learning Workplace Writing Approach," from Michelle Hall Kells' New Mexico-based transformation of Writing Across the *Curriculum* to Writing Across *Communities* to Mary Kay Mulvaney's analysis of oral history recovery within a capstone course devoted to memoir. (With Americans living thirty-five years longer than our grandparents did, and with more than half of today's seventy-four million Boomers likely to live past age eighty-five, I hope that our field continues to engage in the intergenerational work that holds such deep wells of meaning both for students and for the elders with "stories to tell.")

The issue's beating heart, though, is Steve Zimmer's "The Art of Knowing Your Place: White Service Learning Leaders and Urban Community Organizations." Rather than summarizing it, I urge you to reread the essay itself—for the complexities it invites us to navigate, for the nuanced analysis of the slow building of trust, and for the more-urgent-than-ever rules it proposes for white allies and accomplices working in community organizations.

Many of us today are asking, what is our role in transforming this moment into a movement? Looking back on our twenty-year history, perhaps the most valuable gift of our shared enterprise of *Reflections* is the capacity we have developed to learn our place—our *many* places—within and beyond the university.

All of us who have worked on *Reflections* since 2000 can be proud of our ongoing accomplishments. Over and over again, the journal has proven the value of our collective ability to identify a theme, idea, or practice, bring it to the surface, and connect people around it in a kind of community organizing approach to publication. We can be proud, as well, that our work has been inclusive, experimental, and multigenerational, drawing on deep roots in communities where we have built lasting relationships.

The "public turn" we fostered in community-engaged writing requires us, more than ever, to place ourselves on the front lines of social justice in our community projects, research, and writing, and to be sure that the pages of this journal amplify that work. I hope the next decade will continually renew the feeling of those first heady days of the *Reflections* newsletter and its ethos of care, critical awareness, and reflective participation in the world beyond university walls.

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Barbara Sherr Roswell, Professor Emerita of Writing at Goucher College, served as Editor of *Reflections* from 1999–2007. Her community-engaged work fueled the creation of the Goucher Prison Education Partnership, which offers a liberal arts degree to over 130 men and women incarcerated in Maryland each year while stimulating meaningful dialogue about justice, incarceration, and educational access (www.goucher.edu/gpep). Among her greatest pleasures has been to bring community and scholarly voices into dialogue in such co-edited collections as *Writing and Civic Engagement* (Bedford, 2010), *Turning Teaching Inside Out: A Pedagogy of Transformation for Community-Based Education* (Palgrave, 2013), and *View from the Hilltop* (Passager, 2015). Barbara is inspired by the innovative ways writers across communities have responded to quarantine and is hopeful about the role community-engaged writing can play in transforming our current moment into a movement.