

An Interview with Paula Mathieu on the 20th Anniversary of *Reflections*

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In this interview, Paula Mathieu reflects on the twenty-year history of Reflections. She discusses how the journal has influenced her teaching and research, and she talks about being the co-editor of Reflections as Rhetoric and Composition was developing newer understandings of community-engaged relationships and practices.

In the 1990s, Paula Mathieu spent years working with homeless writers in grassroots street newspaper movements in Chicago. “The most important lessons about writing I have learned come from working with writers who are or have been homeless,” she writes in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005). In her book, Mathieu shares her experiences on the ground and describes what she calls the *public turn* in composition studies, a move towards uniting and establishing relationships between the writing classroom and local communities and organizations. She encourages writing teachers and researchers

to listen and learn from voices outside the classroom. At the same time, she questions teachers who send students to places where they don't go themselves, and teachers who make plans with community partners to benefit their own teaching and research agendas. She criticizes *strategic orientation* that seeks to manipulate or control street initiatives, and she offers a *tactical orientation* that recognizes spatial and temporal politics. Mathieu invites teachers to venture into "the streets," but to think about their purposes and approach for going and to establish community partnerships that are ethical and sustainable. In short, she wants teachers to see and understand street writing and initiatives as *tactics of hope*.

As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of *Reflections* and reminisce on its history, it seems fitting to express appreciation for the pioneers who have influenced the development of community-engaged teaching and research, and show gratitude toward the teachers, scholars, and activists who have come before us: Ellen Cushman, Thomas Deans, Diana George, Anne Ruggles Gere, Eli Goldblatt, Steve Parks, Barbara Roswell, and many others. Like Mathieu, these teacher-scholar-activists have invited us to consider local communities as partners to the writing classroom (and vice versa) and as sites for social actions and initiatives. Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope* is one example of a commitment to meaningful community work. Her other writings on activism, community-engagement, empowerment, and mindfulness have influenced our considerations of community partnership pedagogies and community literacies.

When I saw the call for submissions for this special issue, Paula Mathieu was the first person to come to mind. I emailed Paula to ask if she'd be willing to talk about the importance of *Reflections* to rhetoric and composition and community-engaged teaching and research. I was interested in hearing her thoughts on the history and progress of the journal over the past twenty years, including noticeable transitions like a move away from the term "service learning." She was on her way to the 2019 Conference on Community Writing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to be a keynote speaker when she generously agreed to be interviewed for this special issue. What follows is a shortened and slightly edited version of our conversation in December 2019.

Shane Wood (SW): There's been a lot of great work in *Reflections* over the past twenty years that has made significant contributions to our theories, practices, and understandings of community-engaged teaching and writing. In the 1990s, before *Reflections*, the first journal in composition and rhetoric to provide a venue for community-based scholarship, you were writing your dissertation on community-engagement and empowerment. Do you mind sharing what that work looked like, and perhaps talking about parts of your dissertation that have never been published?

Paula Mathieu (PM): First of all, it was my second dissertation proposed because at first, I had been working at *StreetWise* newspaper for about two years, and I thought, "I don't want to do this. I don't want to write my dissertation...on the backs of homeless people." I had a completely different dissertation about economic narratives and how we talked about money. It was a rhetoric of economics dissertation completely unrelated to *StreetWise* that I proposed and had approved, and I wasn't making any progress on it. Finally, James Sosnoski, my dissertation advisor, said, "You either have to quit working at *StreetWise*, or you have to find a way to write about it, because you're not making progress."

I didn't want to quit, so I thought, "Okay, well what would be a way I could write about this experience?" I called my dissertation an "institutional narrative." *Questions of Empowerment* examined how street papers were trying to empower homeless people. Empowerment was a big word in the 1990s, and it was a big word in composition scholarship. I looked at how there were competing definitions of that term that were at work within this nonprofit. The director and the fundraising people had a very entrepreneurial idea of empowerment, where men and women would go out and sell newspapers and make money, and that was what empowerment was. The editorial office had a critique-based, structural approach to empowerment, where they were saying the paper needs to critique the policies of Chicago that were causing homelessness.

One chapter I never published looked at those competing definitions and connected it to what claims composition was making at the time and a larger pedagogical theory. There was a lot of discussion about writing as empowerment—questioning, who’s empowering whom? Then, there were critiques of empowerment and how that works. It was kind of a fascinating discussion that seems to have fallen away in our field. I feel like, in our discussions of disciplinarity, things have gotten, in some corners, away from questions of what writing does. There had been much talk and questions related to teachers empowering students.

I liked that those questions were at the heart of what was happening. So, that was the beginning of my dissertation; it was looking at, how do you teach writing when you’re not in a credential-granting place? What are you offering? What do you give? Then, I looked at the different claims of empowerment being made in entrepreneurial sectors, in kind of leftist critique sectors, and then in the field of writing studies.

SW: In 2000, *Reflections* emerges with a vision to provide a forum for public rhetoric, community writing, civic writing, and community literacy. Can you talk about the timeliness of the journal’s emergence and what it meant for community-engaged teaching and research?

PM: I think talking about the history of *Reflections*, you have to mention Barbara Roswell, who when I was a graduate student, was *Reflections*. It was a very small journal in 2000. It had a hand-drawn cover. It was really the first place where I saw people doing work like what I was doing. I thought it was amazing. It was, for me, a sign that, “Oh, people are doing this stuff,” and that was exciting. I went from my dissertation, which I finished in 1999, to *Tactics of Hope*, which I probably finished writing in 2003. I had at least fifteen references of *Reflections* articles in *Tactics of Hope*.

My first introduction to “service learning” was on the receiving end of service, because working at *StreetWise*, we would get a lot of universities wanting to work with us. But my first kind

of reading about [service learning] was *Reflections*. It was the only place to go to read about that kind of work and see all the nuances and all the range of what happens in community-based work. What I appreciated about those early years of *Reflections* is it started mapping out what scholarship could look like and how rich it could be.

SW: You mentioned you had over fifteen references of *Reflections* in *Tactics of Hope*, which seems like a lot in such a short amount of time. *Reflections Vol. 1, No. 1* was published in Spring 2000. You finished writing *Tactics of Hope* in 2003. That's a three-year window.

PM: Yeah, I'm looking at the dates. 2000-2001; this interview with Ed Slotkowski. This great article from Fall 2000, "The Best of Intentions: Service-Learning and Noblesse Oblige at a Christian College" [by B. Cole Bennett]. David A. Jolliffe, Caryn Chaden, and Peter Vandenberg and Roger Graves' article on confronting clashing discourse, "Writing the Space Between Classroom and Community and Service Learning" (2002). There's an interview with Tom Deans that was in Spring 2000 about institutionalizing service learning. Then in 2003, Bruce Herzberg revisits community service and critical teaching with an article.

So, just in that three-year time period, there's so many...there's guiding principles for redesigning composition courses.

And for me, very importantly, there's an article in 2002 by Diana George called "The Word on The Street: Public Discourse in a Culture of Dissent." I had known Diana's work, but that's where I developed my academic crush on her and thought she was amazing. I went to see her at the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). I went up to her and kind of gushed. I was a brand-new assistant professor and just said, "I think you're wonderful, and I think you do interesting work," and that's how we got to know each other.

We ended up doing a panel together the next year, and we've written between, I don't know, half a dozen things together. If it hadn't been for that *Reflections* article, I don't think I would have had the nerve to just go up to Diana George and say, "I think you're amazing." It both helped my scholarship...I mean, it shows up throughout my book. But also, it became personally super important to me.

SW: You mentioned how many articles you referenced in *Tactics of Hope*. Are there other articles that stand out to you from *Reflections* that have informed your research and teaching?

PM: Well, this is actually in that three-year window, but it's one I didn't mention. There was a great article by Teresa Redd called "In the Eye of the Beholder: Contrasting Views of Community Service Writing." I think it was one of the first that I had read that asked questions about what ways are we doing a good job, and what ways are we not doing a good job?

Additionally, Tobi Jacobi and Patricia O'Connor first edited a prison literacy issue of *Reflections*. I think seeing what a big presence that has in the field now, realizing that special issue came out in 2004, is amazing to me. They were such visionaries. Tobi and Patricia helped shape the direction of community writing in a lot of important ways.

I have enjoyed the interviews that *Reflections* does, too. Like I said, they had an interview with Tom Deans, and really, his book *Writing and Community Action* defined and framed service learning for the field. Then, Bruce Herzberg's article, "Community Service and Critical Teaching" in *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) framed important questions: What are the students getting out of this? Are they helping? Are they learning what we think we want them to be learning? He revisits that in an interview in *Reflections* that I thought was useful.

That's one thing that has affected me as a teacher. I've never forced my students to do community projects in a class. Whenever I

offer community-based projects in teaching, I always make it an option, because I don't ever want to send unwilling students out into the community and have them be forced to do work, because I feel like the potential for damage on all sides is great. I think his work helped me see that in important ways.

SW: You were the co-editor of the journal at the time composition and rhetoric was developing newer understandings of community-engaged theory and practice. In the "Editors' Introduction" in *Reflections Vol. 11, No. 2* in Spring 2012, Diana George, Cristina Kirklighter, and you write about a change in the journal's subtitle, a shift from "A Journal of Writing, Service Learning and Community Literacy" to "A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning." There was a decentering of the term "service learning." Can you talk about that transition, and why you felt it was important for our field and the journal to detach itself from service learning?

PM: In some ways, I think the biggest problem with service learning is the word "service," and maybe all the imbalance and inequity that underlies that. I think the actual practices people were doing, and the actual pedagogy, and the actual community-based work people were doing in many cases was much more sophisticated and involved than that word allows. So, in some ways, maybe part of the de-centering was away from the word "service," which I think implies a deficit, implies sort of an imbalance of capacity, which a lot of people doing "community engaged-work" wanted to get away from. I think part of it was that.

But also, like I mention in my scholarship with Diana, to not just see the writing that happens in community spaces as just kind of, "Oh, that's good work. That's good in the moral sense, good." Like, "Oh, isn't that nice that people in prisons write?" Or, "Isn't that nice that homeless people write?" But seeing communities as sources of vital information ... stories that need to be shared. So, centering the notion of public rhetoric as part community writing, to us, seemed important.

We published an essay by Tamera Marko working with displaced people in Colombia, and how they keep their family albums, and how they keep a family history even as they're getting further and further displaced, higher and higher up into the hills, out of Medellín. Marko sends students every summer from Duke to help try to record some of these stories and maintain some of these stories. But she talks very eloquently about this double displacement; that people are displaced from their own stories and their own belongings. But then she and her students get to cross the border, and these stories get to cross the border, but those people don't. So, trying to think both about the embodied complexity of this work, and what are the challenges of doing it, but also what do we learn by listening to those stories? That's part of the difference; seeing the community-based work not just as service, but as creating important, public rhetoric, I think, to me is an important shift that has happened, and is continuing to happen.

SW: "Civic writing" was added to the subtitle in *Reflections Vol. 11, No. 2*, too. Did you feel like civic writing was spelling out those kinds of complexities more precisely as opposed to, maybe, what the original subtitle offered?

PM: Yeah, I think so. We also in our time as editors published some work on documentary film and other kinds of work where there is a public audience. The focus was trying to affect public discourse: create either a counter-public or seek to change the terms of the public debate in some kind of ways. Steve Parks, Tiffany Rousculp, and I co-edited a collection called *Circulating Communities* in 2011. The introduction was all about how groups, all the different writing groups, were trying to change the public discourse in different ways. So, the word "civic" has, I think, yeah, sharpened a focus on writing with a commitment to trying to affect the community. That doesn't mean communities always successfully make change, but that it has an eye on it.

And to think about how hard that is to do. I think it's more art than science. How do we change public opinion? How do we shape public discourse? I think those are issues on the mind of a lot of people who are involved in community writing, whether

it's trying to change the conversation about a recycling program in their community, or how to not have a toxic dump put right next to their home. Or to confront broader issues, like how people do or don't see homeless people or incarcerated people, and it's a more abstract idea.

SW: There's recently been another transition for the journal. In *Reflections Vol. 18, No. 2*, the subtitle shifts to "A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric." Laurie Grobman and Deborah Mutnick decided to shift back to the journal's original title. What advantages and opportunities for future research do you see for the journal with that in mind?

PM: Well, I think one advantage is it leaves open in what ways the community-engaged relationship can look. I'm sure there are ways of thinking about what community-engaged writing and rhetoric can be and look like that we haven't conceived of yet. So, I like that it feels aspirational as well as descriptive.

I think, at the time, when we made the change in 2012, we were trying to not throw "service learning" out because we were trying to respect the history of the journal and trying to kind of keep everything in. I mean, it was a bit of an unwieldy title. There's something nice about the elegance of "community-engaged writing and rhetoric." It's simple, and I think a lot of people doing a wide variety of work could see themselves under that umbrella in a way, where service learning is very descriptive of a specific model of community engagement. So, I think that's great. I saw that this past year at the 2019 Conference on Community Writing. Seeing such different ways of structuring community projects, different ways of people engaging, people being on the boards of Planned Parenthood to really grassroots kind of small projects. And being involved in different levels of what community means, and thinking about fundraising, both large and small, and thinking about circulating messages digitally, visually. All these different kinds of ways.

I do wish there had been something about public or civic in there, but I think that that's one of the many ways you can engage

community. And certainly not all community-engaged work is civic focused, nor should it be. Sometimes it's thinking about the kind of group, like a women's writers' group, where they're just there to support each other and do work, and that the writing in itself is the point. I think that neatly falls under that, where they're not necessarily publishing for a wider audience, but it's about, dare I say, empowerment and creating community.

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Paula Mathieu is an Associate Professor of English at Boston College and Director of First-Year Writing. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses, including writing as social action, first-year writing, composition pedagogy, mindful storytelling, creative nonfiction, and rhetorical studies of culture. She is author of *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005) and co-editor of three essay collections, including *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* (2012) co-edited with Tiffany Rousculp and Steve Parks. With Diana George, she has co-written several articles about the rhetorical power of the dissident press. She has published in *Rhetoric Review*, *College Composition and Communications*, *JAC*, *Composition Studies*, *Community Literacy Journal*, and more. She is a current editorial board member for *College Composition and Communication*, *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* book series, *Community Literacy Journal*, and an executive board member of the Coalition for Community Writing.

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