Valuing the Diverse Literacies in A South Texas Community

Susan Loudermilk Garza, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

This article describes how the technical and professional writing pro-gram at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi defines, identifies and val-ues the diverse literacies that exist in our community. It demonstrates how our students use these literacies to build agency and enhance their identities as well as the identity of the community.

The most powerful resource any of us can have as we study and teach in university settings is full understanding and appreciation of the richness, beauty, and primacy of our familial and community backgrounds.
—bell hooks

Fernando, *who wrote a plan to help a youth center located in a low-economic area of the community secure computers for its after-school-tutorial program, had himself played basketball at this center as a teenager. He understands, in a very personal way, the center's significance in the lives of young people in the neighborhood. He also used connections made through his job at a local refinery to create a network of support for the project. He drew on both his youth and adult experiences to develop a greater sense of agency in the community.*

Steve, a computer programmer at a local refinery, developed a web site for the YMCA. He was able to apply skills he developed at work to increase his agency as a member of the community. After finishing the technical writing course, he continued to oversee the website for the YMCA, earning community service credits in his job.

A group of students in a professional writing class worked with an architect and the executive director of the Boys and Girls Club to write a grant for a new facility for the Club. One student who had grown up in the community took a leadership role,

providing key information and perspectives. Although the initial grant was not funded, the impetus from the project resulted five years later in the realization of a new facility.

And, Sandra, who grew up in the area, wrote a funding proposal for a new roof for a low-income housing community. In a second class she developed a personal statement that enabled her to secure a summer internship at the Smithsonian. Building on both her agency at the local level and the curatorial knowledge she gained during her internship, she is working to enhance the community by developing Hispanic historical venues in South Texas.

When I first began teaching in the Technical and Professional Writing program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC), our students believed that no opportunities existed in our area for technical writers and that they would have to relocate to Houston or Dallas to secure jobs. That belief was part of a broader misconception that our part of South Texas, known as the Coastal Bend, lacks opportunities and resources. Corpus Christi is uniquely positioned. Our international port on the Gulf of Mexico is open to trade with Asia, South America, and Mexico. We are two hours from the Mexico border, and two hours from any other major city, so our boundary to the West is small town Texas, home to many of our students. Our large industries are military bases, refineries, and health-care institutions, and we are still the kind of town where small businesses, many family-owned for generations, operate and thrive. Of the 320,000 residents in Nueces County, 58.1% are of Hispanic or Latino origin, 35.9% are White, 4.2% are Black, and 1.4% are Asian; the median household income of $35,126 falls significantly below the state median of $39,967.[1] We hear discussions all the time of the need to grow the economy and create more jobs. Although there is rapid growth on the south side of town, the west side of town is struggling, and not far from the outskirts of the city there are several colonias, areas where even basic water and sewer services are often unavailable.

A survey sent to more than one hundred organizations, businesses, and agencies helped address the misconceptions about technical writing jobs in the area, and more importantly, began a process that has helped my colleagues and I at TAMU-CC to build a more positive view of our community.[2] We see our area as rich with opportunities, as the opening scenarios illustrate. We the leadership of Diane Cardenas, we have built a service-learning program that embraces this broader, more positive view of our community, one that values the diverse literacies that are in our community and that our students bring to the classroom. This article discusses our development of a program that builds on local opportunities in order not only to make a difference for

the community, but also to help our students build agency and enhance their identities.

Defining Service-Learning for Our Program

Much of the tenor of the scholarship on service-learning focuses on "saving" people who live in areas that "lack" resources in order to solve "world problems" and create "social change." For example, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe approach service-learning from the perspective that many students "see little connection between traditional literacy and the world problems [we all] face" and see a need to develop models of service-learning "that offer strategies for acting productively in the face of social change" (3). Similarly, Bruce Herzberg designs service-learning courses to promote critical analysis of social problems (58). While we see value in these approaches, we wanted to go beyond identifying and trying to address "problems." We wanted to develop a program that values the literacies that our students possess, that understands and builds on the literacies at work in our community, and

> We wanted to develop a program that values the literacies that our students possess, that understands and builds o the literacies at work in our community and that provides opportunities for students and community members to create agency.

that provides opportunities for students and community members to create agency. We wanted students to engage in writing projects in the community where "strategies of collaboration, planning, argument, and reflection are explicitly negotiated" and where "instead of trying to enter or join an established discourse, learning to trade in its commonplaces and authorized meanings, the writers of community literacy are engaged in the process of constructing negotiated meaning,… building meanings or interpretations in the awareness of multiple…goals, values, ideas and discourses" (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 213).

We built the program on the Stanford model in which students write "as their community service rather than write *about* it" (Bowdon and Scott 4). Not every technical writing project creates immediate social change, however. Although many of our projects are done in collaboration with not-for-profit agencies, we have students working with for-profit organizations as well. In each case, we seek to develop "reciprocal relationships between the college or university and the community in which it is embedded," as Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott advocate, so that these relationships provide for a deep level of learning engagement for our students (6). We have sometimes had to help our community partners push against the notion that the work students produce will always result in finished professional level documents.

From our perspective, students are enhancing rather than constructing documents, and also enhancing the strengths of the community rather than "solving problems" for a community in distress.

Our vision, then, grounded in Paulo Freire's dictum that "we cannot ignore that we are beings inserted into the social structures in which we participate as objects and subjects" (54), is that students will draw on and view positively the community experiences they bring to our program. We share this perspective with Cezar M. Ornatowski and Linn K. Bekins, who complicate the concept of "community" within the context of service-learning, advocating for a move away from "essentializing notions" and "romantic visions" of the concept of community (257).

They argue instead for a "symbolic/rhetorical view, which regards 'community' as a discursive construction whose creation or invocation is always expedient in a rhetorical sense" (265). As Ornatowski and Bekins explain, ideally students will "actually help construct this community through [their] writing in both response and in relation to some temporary exigency" (265).

Many approaches to service-learning rely on pre-determined templates and procedures for engaging in community projects. Based on the pedagogical assumption that students from underserved populations need to receive the "knowledge" that will enable them to succeed in the university and then in the professional world, students are taught "correct" methods. Although we provide direction and teach methods for ways to engage in community-based projects, we also want students to see that the skills they bring from their experiences, even—or especially— in working class environments, can be applied in these academic and professional settings as well. We ask our students to build on what they already know, to use the templates and methods that are already at work in the community, and to use their knowledge to enhance communities and organizations where they may already be active agents. Michelle Navarre Cleary similarly reinforces the importance of providing opportunities for service-learning that students can feel a connection with, stating that "students will benefit from service-learning only if it responds to the realities of their lives as well as to their academic needs" (57). More specifically, Mike Rose reminds us of the importance of valuing the language of work and workplace literacies and the language of working

class family members, recognizing that these literacies connect with "agency and competency" (xvi). We want our students to connect and build agency—the ability to be active in constructing and influencing their own reality—as they enhance the community, gaining new literacies to become "beings for themselves" (Freire 74).

Redefining and Identifying Literacies

Literacies can be understood both as sets of skills and as paradigms for understanding and engaging with the world. Robert P. Yagelski, in *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self,* defines literacy as "a local act of self-construction within discourse," as "a matter of individual empowerment in the way that it can enable one to negotiate the complexities of life; it is empowerment in a broader sense in that literate acts are always inherently social within the political, cultural, and economic contexts within which we lead our individual lives" (xiv, 3). Through the information gathered from the initial survey conducted with the local community and the connections that developed based on responses to the survey, we have been able to better identify, understand and create a broader definition of the literacies of our community: political, cultural and economic.

Literacies in Political and Cultural Contexts

Sandra's work documenting community history is illustrative of the types of political literacies that our students may engage. Sandra chose to work with a non-profit agency so that she could help those in the community who are struggling. Other students engage with local ecological issues. But another political dynamic at work in our area, one that illustrates the positive view of our local resources, is that many local community leaders are homegrown first-generation college trained professionals, committed to working with our students who are also first-generation college students. The distance between leaders and the general population is smaller than may be the case in larger cities, so we enjoy the advantage of a diverse group of leaders who make themselves available to work with our students.

There is a tendency to make assumptions of deficiency about our student populations based on cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For example, reports on Latino student populations such as those produced by the Pew Hispanic Center document the challenges for Latino students who are first-generation college students, who come from low-income families, and who may be less academically prepared. We need to balance these findings by studying what Luis C. Moll, Norma Gonzalez and Cathy Amanti term funds of knowledge, "those historically developed and accumulated

strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being" (91-92). It is important to study literacies from this perspective, since as Moll and his colleagues point out,

> Educational institutions have stripped away the view of working-class mi-
> nority students as emerging from households rich in social and intellectual
> resources. Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to
> school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on
> what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge
> sanctioned by the schools. (90)

This concept, we've learned, is relevant for all of our students. A survey I conducted recently with two colleagues showed us that even though our area is majority Hispanic—mainly Mexican American, and rich in the heritage of Mexican, Spanish and Tejano cultures—White and Hispanic students at TAMU-CC are very similar in terms of language use, academic experience and parent education attainment levels (Araiza, Cardenas and Loudermilk Garza).

Literacies in Economic Contexts

In his book, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, Mike Rose ponders what he calls "this business of intelligence" or "the way we decide who's smart and who isn't, the way the work someone does feeds into that judgment, and the effect such judgment has on our sense of who we are and what we can do" (xi). Having grown-up in a working class environment himself, he understands that the "language" of hands-on, physical labor gives "a certain authority" and "know-how" (xv). He cautions us about the assumptions concerning the "educationally at-risk" and the powerful effect those assumptions can have "on the way people are defined and treated in the classroom, the workplace, and the public sphere" (xvi-xvii).

Many of our students come from working-class families, so their experiences with the literacies of the professional jobs to which they aspire may be new to them. However, the literacies they bring from their home and family can serve them well in the professional world. These working-class students value hard work and take pride in accomplishment, in doing whatever it takes to get the job done with whatever resources are available. Our program enables students to understand the value of these literacies, cultural practices that James Paul Gee terms "mushfake" and that Carlos Velez-Ibanez terms "confianza." We share Moll and Gonzalez's conviction that "much

of a household's knowledge is related to its origins and, of course, to family members' employment, occupations, or work, including labor specific to household activities" (160). Our students—and their communities—"contain ample resources...'funds of knowledge,' that can form the bases for an education that addresses broader social, academic, and intellectual issues than simply learning basic, rudimentary skills" (Moll and Gonzalez 158).

Rose, in turn, points to specific skills that can be viewed as funds of knowledge:

- Observing and interpreting behavior and expression, inferring mood and motive, taking on the perspective of others, responding appropriately to social cues, and knowing when you're understood
- Manipulating tools and instruments, studying refinement of stance, grip, balance, and fine motor skills
- Knowing what a particular tool can do in a particular situation—and do better than other similar tools
- Weighing of options, the consideration of multiple variables, and occasionally, the creative use of a tool in an unexpected way
- Planning and problem solving
- Socializing, interacting, coordinating, and negotiating, shifting among ways of explaining or demonstrating, and, depending on the crew, shifting among shared languages as well. (199-203)

Our Technical and Professional Writing (TPW) program is designed to engage students in using these types of skills, focusing on planning, decision making, studying and manipulating data, demonstrating that the literacies that students bring from their working class backgrounds are useful. For example, Fernando worked in a familiar environment, which enabled him to build on the agency he already had from having been a member of the neighborhood youth center community, and he "depended on the crew" that he was a part of as a working class member of the refinery team.

Yagelski creates a poststructuralist framework for literacy "to help us construct ways of understanding literacy that lend themselves to developing the kind of Freirean pedagogies that can help promote social and individual transformation" so that we can "recognize that literacy is both potentially transformative in a broad social and political sense and empowering on a local, personal, individual level as well" (64).

When we view literacy in this manner we understand that our students are not just working "to enter an unfamiliar academic discourse community but also...to construct a self that can claim agency within as well as outside that community and its discourses...negotiating among various complicated, overlapping discourses and claiming agency...within and against them" (103, 105). It is this focus in our program on "claiming agency" and constructing a self within a community that we believe enables students to use those same "insider" skills in both community and academic contexts. Redefining the literacies that are at work in our community is also part of the larger project of helping students—and faculty—recognize and value local assets and opportunities.

Building on Diverse Literacies Through Service-Learning

Robert Yazelski argues that "we will serve our students best...if we teach them in a way of understanding and engaging in literacy that enables them to imagine themselves as active participants in their world: to do so is to help them find ways to write themselves into the discourses that affect their lives and thus to begin to close the gap between school-sponsored literacy and the vital role of literacy in their lives as citizens" (56). Building on Yagelski's concept that literacy is a local act that students engage in to claim agency, we let students select their projects and decide how to approach them. Yagelski explains that this approach places different emphasis on how students engage:

> Each of our students, as a function of his or her *self-interest*, participates
> in these discourses differently, and their respective texts manifest these
> differences. Thus, their decisions—about the assertions they make in a
> specific assignment for the class, about how they position themselves in that
> assignment, about the sort of texts they write—reflect their agency. It is in
> this sense that literacy is inevitably local. (83)

The TPW program emphasizes the concept that "literacy is inevitably local." In this way, we connect with what Robert B. Barr and John Tagg call "A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," shifting the focus of education from an instruction paradigm to a learning paradigm that focuses on local, individual student contexts. In this paradigm, the purpose of education is "not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems" (3).

In the TPW program, students are responsible for making decisions in order to use writing to solve problems. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer argue in *Information in Action*, the technical writer is influenced both by the context in which documents are produced—understanding purpose and goals, utilizing prior knowledge and skills—and by the context of use—the audience or consumer of the document, expectations, needs, previous background and knowledge. Using these principles, we individualize assignments based on what students bring to a project and what they encounter in the setting they choose to work in. This approach, we believe, not only enables students to draw on funds of knowledge to develop new literacies, but it also more fully engages the students with the contextual issues that all writers, and especially technical writers, need to address.

Students decide how to develop and manage each project. In all of our classes we use the portfolio method. The students make the decisions about what organizations they work with and the types of documents they want to produce; then they work with a contact person in the organization to identify the exigencies, the types of information that need to be gathered, how best to analyze/assimilate the information, and what kind of document(s) needs to be produced. Rather than giving them the structure for a project, we introduce them to the setting where some type of work needs to be done, and then have them develop the structure and all the decisions that go along with the work.

Students learn to find the right tools to get the job done, and they learn that the right tools come in many different forms, from subject matter experts to fellow students who know how to use a particular technology.

Students learn to find the right tools to get the job done, and they learn that the right tools come in many different forms, from subject matter experts to fellow students who know how to use a particular technology, from the right computer program to a parent who can explain a process or provide neighborhood history. Students are encouraged to partner with other students, both from the same class as well as from other classes in other disciplines. This enables less experienced students to pair up with students who have more experience and a stronger sense of agency.

On particular benefit to the service learning approach is that, because of the community involvement, students have worked on projects that required several revisions, a process very different from producing the "drafts" or "rewrites" that a teacher may demand. When a student is part of a committee that is trying to bring together information from several different groups, the need to update/revise/redraft after each

meeting is made obvious. Students find themselves serving as members of committees on occasion, and one student was asked to serve as a moderator and speaker at several meetings related to the work she was doing for a "Week Without Violence" campaign for the YWCA. These types of experiences effectively place students in the role of agent of change.

Perhaps most important, work on projects does not always conclude at the end of one semester. Students often choose projects that require more work than the initial information gathering that can be completed within a few months. Some students work on the same project over the course of two or even three semesters in different courses, or they may begin a project and then hand it off to a different student. The initial student team then becomes part of the network of resources for understanding and working on the project, which also gives the students a sense of agency that they rarely experience elsewhere in the undergraduate curriculum.

We want students to write texts that effectively engage a particular audience. We want our students to collaborate with others as they create, develop and revise the texts they produce. And we stress that collaboration with others may certainly build from their own political, cultural and economic contexts and the many people who make up those contexts. We create our curricular designs to assure that students determine what valuable writing is for them. And, we stress that making knowledge in technical and professional writing includes experimenting, encountering challenges and setbacks, and re-thinking and evaluating one's approach to learning in order to make decisions that will produce the best documents. If we were to say we value students being active agents in the learning process, but then to make all of the choices for students—such as prescribing the purpose, audience, and the kind of documents they should create—our theory would not be aligned with our practice.

In our Technical and Professional Writing program, writing is understood as a complex set of decisions, and students internalize the processes of decision making as they produce documents. Students become more responsible for their own learning as they become engaged with community organizations and understand how the diverse literacies at play in these settings, including their own, affect the community. Recall Fernando. His grant writing work for the community recreation center has enhanced his identity as a competent writer and active agent, capable of contributing to the community, and it has also enhanced the community by creating opportunities for others.

Notes

1. Population data is based on United States Census Bureau data for Nueces County (2005 estimate) from which TAMCC draws about 50% of its students. Household income data based on Unites States Census Bureau 2003 data.

2. The survey was conducted in 2000 with a 10% return rate. Respondents were randomly selected. The complete survey results can be accessed at http://critical.tamucc. edu/~loudermilk/twpro/tw_survey_report.htm.

Works Cited

Araiza, Isabel, Humberto Cardenas, Jr. and Susan Loudermilk Garza."Literate Practices/ Language Practices: What Do We Really Know About Our Students?" *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned at Hispanic Serving Institutions.* Eds. Cristina Kirklighter, Diana Cardenas and Susan Wolff Murphy. New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2007.

Barr, Robert B. and John Tagg. "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change* (Nov/Dec 1995): 13-25.

Bowdon, Melody,and J. Blake Scott. *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Writing.* New York: Longman, 2003.

Cleary, Michelle Navarre. "Keep it Real: A Maxim for Service-Learning in Community Colleges." *Reflections* 3.1 (Winter 2003): 56-64.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum Books, 1993.

Gee, James Paul. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses.* London: Taylor Francis, 1996.

Gonzalez, Norma, et al. "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching in Latino Households." *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities and Classrooms.* Eds. Norma Gonzalez, Luis C. Moll and Cathy Amanti. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005. 89-111.

Hawisher, Gail E., and Cynthia L. Selfe. "The Passions that Mark Us: Teaching, Texts, and Technologies." *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies.* Eds. Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan: Utah State UP, 1999. 1-12.

Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition.* Washington, D.C.: AAHE, 1997. 57-70.

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black.* Cambridge: South End Press, 1989.

Killingsworth, M. Jimmie, and Jacqueline Palmer. *Information in Action*. New York: Long-man, 1998.

Moll, Luis C. and Norma Gonzalez. "Lessons from Research with Language-Minority Children." *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*. Eds. Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 156-171.

Ornatowski, Cezar M. and Linn K. Bekins. "What's Civic about Technical Communication? Technical Communication and the Rhetoric of 'Community.'" *Technical Communication Quarterly* 13.3 (Summer 2004): 251-269.

Peck, Wayne, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 46.2 (1995): 199-222.

Rose, Mike. *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2004.

United States Census Bureau. Quick Facts: Nueces County. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/48355.html. August 5, 2006.

Velez-Ibanez, Carlos. *Bonds of Trust*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1983.

Yagelski, Robert P. *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.

Susan Loudermilk Garza teaches at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, where she also directs the Writing Center. She is the author of *Every Audience Has a Different Purpose: New Ways to Engage in Technical and Professional Writing* (Fountainhead Press, 2005), a text for classroom use that builds on service-learning applications.