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## Change is Really Hard Work: An Interview with Jeffrey Grabill

Paula Mathieu, Boston College



Paula Mathieu is an associate professor of English at Boston College, where she directs the First-Year Writing Program and the Writing Fellows Program. For more than a decade she has also worked with the international movement of street newspapers, local publications that provide income and a public voice for people who are homeless or living in poverty. With David Downing and Claude Mark Hurlbert she co-edited *Beyond English Inc: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy* (Boynton/Cook, 2001). In 2005, Mathieu published her seminal text (in my humble opinion), *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. In 2007 she received the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) Rachel Corrie Courage in the Teaching of Writing Award. She has published articles in *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) and in *The Public Work of Rhetoric* with Diana George. Mathieu is a CCCC's executive committee member and has been a member of the *Reflections* Civic Scholarship Outstanding Book Award committee for the past two years; she graciously agreed to conduct this interview at my request.

Jeffrey Grabill is a professor at Michigan State University (MSU) and co-director of the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center (<<http://wide.msu.edu/>>). Grabill's work is, to borrow from his departmental profile page, "located at the intersection of professional and



technical writing, rhetorical theory, and literacy theory, and focuses on the literate and technological practices of citizens, users, students, and others within communities and non-academic institutions” (<[https://www.msu.edu/~wrac/faculty\\_staff/grabill.html](https://www.msu.edu/~wrac/faculty_staff/grabill.html)>). Because of this unique and multi-faceted focus, Grabill is seen as a cutting edge scholar within in fields of community literacy, public rhetorics, and civic engagement.

Grabill has published in *College Composition and Communication*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and *Computers and Composition*. Concomitantly, he has won the Richard Braddock Memorial Award for best article published in *College Composition and Communication* (2001); the Ellen Nold Award for best article published in *Computers and Composition* (1999); and the Nell Ann Picket Award for best article published in *Technical Communication Quarterly* (1998). His most recent monograph, *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action* won the 2010 *Reflections* Civic Scholarship Outstanding Book Award.

At the time of this interview Dr. Grabill had just returned from West Virginia where he was working with junior high and high school students. Grabill’s work in West Virginia was as a member of the Writing in Digital Environments Research Center (WIDE), which came out of a grant designed to develop young leaders in the Mountain State. The project was concerned not only with youth leadership development, but also asked the members of WIDE to use Photovoice and digital media as ways to identify community problems and—more importantly—methods so as to fruitfully intervene and solve those problems (this was a collaborative effort; Grabill and the other members of WIDE worked in conjunction with a national drug prevention organization and members of MSU’s community psychology program). Dr. Grabill was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule and have a conversation with Dr. Mathieu, and during this conversation Grabill and Mathieu discussed Grabill’s book, *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for*



*Citizen Action*. In the space of this interview they cover what *Writing Community Change* means within the current context of comp-rhet scholarship; the dangers of hyper-specialization as comp-rhet matures; the place of service-learning in the ever solidifying discipline of comp-rhet; the history of civic engagement in comp-rhet; and the role of comp-rhet in training people to be socially conscious, critically literate, and rhetorically savvy writers of traditional and digital texts.

—*Editor's Note (Brian Bailie)*



PM: As *Writing Community Change* (WCC) demonstrates so well, some of the most powerful rhetorical tools communities use to solve problems—like policy statements, databases, technical studies—can be considered dry or mundane. How do you help yourself or your students engage material that is sometimes intentionally dull or obtuse?

JG: I think the question is a great one: how do you get people engaging in dry, mundane processes? The people who seem to have the biggest problem with this are university faculty, often in the humanities. Most of the conversations I have had about engaging dry texts have been with other humanists and in the review process for articles and books. Some colleagues have suggested that what I'm interested in is not sexy enough—people like individual hero narratives, the “great man” speaking well. I think it's a field problem more than a problem in actual practice. My students have no problem with mundane processes and texts at all. They tend to know this is how civic processes work. They're not blank slates. I should also say, though, that at Michigan State my students are often interested in technical and professional writing. So they're not inclined to be history and English literature majors. They are more inclined to want to learn how writing does work in the world.



PM: In chapter six of *WCC*, you discuss your desire to create a media center with other citizens in Lansing, MI, along with your fear that the project might fail “precisely because we have failed to write persuasively” (109). First, can you update us on the status of the media center?

JG: We’ve mostly failed. And that’s okay. It’s nothing new. The Lansing area has been trying to do community media for 30 years. When we first organized, the idea was surprisingly un-political and highly successful. We were able to put the idea of creating a community media center on the political agenda of the relevant municipalities in the area. Once it got on their agenda it became a political issue, literally—the municipal areas had to consider changing policy and to dedicate money toward it. All three municipalities agreed to do this in principle. But then two to three went their own way—planning and executing smaller community projects have followed from it. But the original vision that I reported in the book has largely faded. So the original group has fallen away but the issue and idea of community media is not dead. See for example, ITEC Lansing. (<http://www.iteclansing.org/>) One of its initiatives is to make science and math learning more exciting by getting kids to experiment with digital media music composing in schools. Community media is happening, just not with the original group of people assembled. The most positive way to understand what we did is that we injected new energy around community media into the system and things happened. Or we can be seen as failing to achieve our original vision.

PM: To what degree would you attribute the failure of this original group to an inability to write persuasively? And if a professor of rhetoric and other colleagues can’t master this process, is there some other issue at work than lack of expertise?

JG: We were persuasive enough to get community media back on the



agenda. That's relatively easy persuasion. It's me—and many other people I was working with—cornering the mayor at a cocktail party until I've had my 20 seconds. It's about conversations in coffee houses and bars. It's about putting together documents about community media that get shared. We were able to get the community to sign onto the idea, to vision statement of community media. That is important, but it is also the easiest part.

We didn't put together things like a meaningful business plan, however. The assembly of people we had gathered at the time didn't have the capacity to tell that story persuasively. We didn't have the people to finance the idea. We had to be realistic about our ability to actually create a community media center without adding new elements to the assembly. The persuasive work of documents and processes like this are terribly important.

This all speaks to a notion of rhetoric as assembly. In my work, I try to offer some sense of conceptual coherence about who really does public rhetorical work: It's groups of people. Any given assembly can only do some kinds of work. Assemblies come and go. If there's a key change of players, that assembly can be disabled with respect to certain kinds of work, enabled to do others.

PM: I love the question that you ask in *WCC*: “What would it mean for writing programs to be explicitly civic, public, in ways informed by what I have learned in communities?” (112-113) Is there anything more you want to say about this question?

JG: What's fun about that idea is that it's not new. If you look at the history of composition studies (as people like Jim Berlin and Sharon Crowley have written) you'll see that many people, Fred Newton Scott, for example, had a philosophically pragmatic idea that writing programs should be concerned with making citizens. Yet while it's an old idea, it's never been a dominant one.



I'm not in a position now where I have any direct impact on first-year writing. But I like the ideas in Greg Colomb's article ("Franchising the Future" CCC Sept 2010) with respect to a franchise for first-year writing. He's right that the public has given us the responsibility to teach reading and writing. Traditionally, if an English department 'owns' a writing course, it prepares students to do only certain kind of humanities work. It's exceptionally difficult to help prepare students for how communication works in the world outside, say, the humanities when working with a set of stakeholders that are limited to a department, a discipline, a university.

That's where Colomb's article is interesting. There are problems with the idea of writing as a franchise, but what I like about that model is that it makes it possible to imagine a different set of stakeholders for a writing program. If a writing program is limited to an English Department's intellectual history, having a public face is likely impossible. If you have enough public stakeholders, then a writing program might have the rhetorical space to make an argument for change—which can then be leveraged into the intellectual space required for a writing program to be concerned with helping students do the writing work that the world expects of them as citizens, workers, and intellectuals.

A writing program that is explicitly civic and public would be hard to implement. Not just because it's hard to make those kind of changes, but because it would have to take the public part of its franchise seriously. To take it seriously also means to take composition's disciplinary history and current knowledge commitments seriously. One of the historical stories we can tell ourselves about our discipline is that we have a history of and a responsibility for teaching people how to write in their lives as citizens.

PM: The composition field today seems divided into specialty niches, but your book seems to address both the fields of civic/public writing and writing technology areas. Do you have the same message for



each group, or do different readers need to hear or learn different things?

JG: The field of composition does seem to have become increasingly fragmented. As disciplines become more mature, scholars are rewarded for hyper-specialty.

In the book, I try to talk across a set of boundaries: literacy studies, computers and writing, technical writing, rhetoric. There are moments in WCC when I ask people explicitly to read other things. The fragmentation of the field is not productive for the kinds of community-based and public work that we like to do.

The way writing really works in the world cuts across the ways the university organizes itself. I came to technical and professional writing through my dissertation. I was doing a study of a community literacy program, and nearly everything the people wanted to do was writing about or for work. At the time, little in the literature of literacy studies or community literacy helped with workplace writing. People in professional writing weren't looking at how community writers try to use writing in their lives. All were overlooking how these areas intersect. Much of that has started to change—not because of anything I did specifically, but because many people noticed these unproductive divisions.

Now technical and professional writing is talking more about civic issues. The harder nuts to crack are community literacy, which seem willing to ignore technology and work, and rhetoric and composition, which doesn't look carefully enough at the role of work in the lives of writers. Both areas are understandably interested in development—in how people learn literacy. But if we really want to look at how people use writing in their lives and make a difference in helping them do this work more effectively, then we need to look across field and disciplinary boundaries and learn from each other.



PM: When you write about how writing really works in the world, you suggest “making infrastructural awareness part of the intellectual context for all productive writing projects.” Can you give an example of what this would mean or look like?

JG: It’s easier to see in digital media or in a community-based setting. For example, a group of us were working with a very small community-based organization for women in Lansing. They have to propose to stay in existence. No money, no organization. We first gave them interns who knew something about proposing and could write grants. That helped a little, but not much. Then as the relationship evolved, we got under the hood to look at the organization’s infrastructure for proposing: How had they filed past grant proposals? Do they have budgeting models? Do they have templates and spreadsheets, so that volunteers can use them to propose? They had very little of this infrastructure, and so they struggled more than they needed to struggle as a writing organization.

PM: Those are often the very last things a community organization has time to think about. It leads to lots of reinventing of the wheel.

JG: Right, the organization couldn’t think about those things. But WE could. The “we” in this instance was some graduate students, professional-writing interns, and me. Then another grad student got interested in content management by small nonprofits and really started to deepen the work. This became her MA thesis and a really nice bit of work for the organization itself.

PM: Was service learning a part of this project?

JG: I don’t think this particular project had any service-learning component, but it wouldn’t have been hard to have added one. The predicate is the ongoing relationship: to do some of the project in one class and then come back to it in another.





PM: I love your book's recommendations for how writing curricula can be more responsive and adaptive to citizenship participation:

First that students need to be understood “as already citizens before they come to us and as citizens while they are with us. Accordingly, it is necessary to understand the writing required to be a effective citizen as work—as knowledge work—and teach the rhetoric necessary to do that work” (114).

Second, “A little less time might be spent studying the rhetorical acts of individuals (e.g. great speeches) and a little more time studying how groups of individuals or organizations perform rhetorically” (115).

Third, an emphasis on teaching not close reading but strategic reading: “the ability to understand quickly the purpose of a text. . . once understood. . . skim to sections relevant to them, often setting aside much of the document” (115). Often the texts are scientific or technical in nature.

And fourth, a clear focus on what rhetorical activities do organization do when they write? They make rhetorical actions—they propose, report, analyze, motivate—and it's important to understand the genres that best carry an activity.

I love these recommendations. Is there anything more you want to say about them?

JG: You have no idea how happy I am you picked up on that. What we're trying to do at the Writing in Digital Environments Research Center (WIDE) is to understand how writing works in the world: What are those specific rhetorical activities that people do and how do we come up with effective ways of teaching and supporting those activities?



This is where rhetoric hits the road. If we're building a rhetoric and composition program to help students do writing in the world, we have to teach them to report, to propose, to build and maintain relationships, to motivate stakeholders. You have to build groups to make change in the world. If this is what we taught in first-year writing, for instance, a program animated by these ideas would look fundamentally different than most existing university writing programs.

This reminds me of something interesting that happened while teaching digital media at that leadership-development workshop in West Virginia last week: the facilitators taught that change is really hard work. Full stop. If you want to be a change agent, you have to do really hard work. No way around it. In this way of thinking, leadership is a function of activity. It's not about being a great individual. It is about doing all of the difficult, often invisible work required to help others assemble and to help them be successful. Rhetoric can help facilitate that work—does facilitate it in fact—but I suspect that this is not a common understanding of what rhetoric does or of what we might do in a writing program. I don't know if I have ever heard of a writing program concerned with leadership development, but it seems like a good idea to me.



## Works Cited

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