

Spring 2020

## When Tactical Hope Doesn't Feel Like Enough: A Graduate Student's Reflection on Precarity and Community-Engaged Research

Megan McCool  
*Indiana University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

---

### Recommended Citation

McCool, Megan. "When Tactical Hope Doesn't Feel Like Enough: A Graduate Student's Reflection on Precarity and Community-Engaged Research." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020. pp. 138-143. doi:10.25148/14.2.009041.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

## When Tactical Hope Doesn't Feel Like Enough: A Graduate Student's Reflection on Precarity and Community-Engaged Research

*Megan McCool*

### *Abstract*

In this reflection, using the work of Ellen Cushman and Paula Mathieu as a framework from which to extend, I explore how my positionality as a graduate student affected my experience wading into community-engaged literacy work. Specifically, I reflect on my time with a nonprofit organization that provides no-cost legal support and safety planning for survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and harassment. Indeed, because of the ethical imperatives that thoughtful community-engaged research requires—such as reciprocity and a tactical orientation—many graduate students find themselves occupying a precarious position. I assert that, yes, we must realize the precarious nature of graduate students doing community-engaged literacy research. However, we can also turn to useful approaches, such as tactical responsiveness, to help us navigate these relationships with community partners.

In the spring of 2019, I found myself everywhere from courtrooms to classrooms, from the county clerk's office to crisis housing facilities. Enrolled in a graduate service-learning course about community writing research at my university located in Bloomington, Indiana, I went through the growing pains of trying to do thoughtful, ethical community-engaged work for the first time. I had a working understanding of some of the theoretical concepts central to the field of community writing, but as I continued to develop community partnerships, I began to think about how the ethical imperatives of this kind of work required me to pause and consider what Paula Mathieu calls the “risk and responsibility” of community-engaged work (17). Not only should I consistently and openly negotiate the power dynamics at play within these relationships, but I also had to critically examine how this person-centered research compelled me to navigate the ways my own precarious position as a graduate student affected these connections, as well as the experiences of vulnerable populations of people.

This experience began when I attended a day long volunteer orientation for Middle Way House, a nonprofit organization that provides various kinds of support and resources to survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Admittedly, I knew little about Middle Way before that training session. While my instructor knew staff members of the organization, she had not worked with them extensively in her previous service-learning courses. But, I knew that its mission was so important for so many different members of the community and that

---

---

it would be an opportunity to learn more about broader social issues in which I was not incredibly well-versed. I went into the experience with few expectations or intentions about the kinds of work I might do with the organization.

While providing everything from transitional housing for survivors who are moving out of violent relationships, to a twenty-four-hour crisis hotline, I decided to volunteer with the legal advocates at Middle Way House. The role of Middle Way's legal advocates is to help guide survivors through the legal system, whether that be through court proceedings for divorce, custody issues, or legal orders of protection. Unlike attorneys, however, advocates serve as informative guides and another support system survivors can use as they navigate an often daunting, intimidating, and confusing legal institution. A central component to legal advocates' work is for them, and those who volunteer with them, to attend the various court hearings and case proceedings pertinent to a survivor's safety and well-being. I went with advocates to the county courthouse as they whispered in hallways with clients about developments in their cases or provided reassurance with how the events would proceed. I, along with other volunteers, sat with them in courtrooms so they did not feel alone in their experiences within a system that often alienates and diminishes one's sense of self. Ultimately, I was just there to be with, and there for, the survivors. I could provide no legal support or expertise like the advocates did. I simply sat in support and belief of the survivors and their stories, only able to offer a small smile of encouragement or nod of affirmation. I had not been on their journey with them from the start as the advocates had, but instead popped up along the way and tried my best to, often silently, let them know that even though we did not know each other deeply, they were still cared about and were not alone.

Through the time I spent with Middle Way's legal advocates, I learned of and began working with another local organization Middle Way is partnered with called the Protective Order Assistance Partnership (POAP), which provides no-cost legal assistance to survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment. POAP is a co-locational, collaborative organization that helps individuals seeking safety through legal orders of protection by providing an overview of the process of petitioning for a Protective Order, help with completing the document, as well as safety planning and referrals to other helpful resources. When someone petitions for a Protective Order, they are seeking for a judge to grant them court-ordered safety from threats or acts of violence such as those listed above, and the POAP staff member's main role is to lay out this process for those individuals in addition to helping them complete the legal document itself.

I observed and learned from staff members at the main branch of the organization, the Monroe County Clerk's Office, about how to help individuals file for a Protective Order and the ways that survivors must go about writing down their stories, reasonings, and evidence onto the legal document. I, with guidance of POAP staff members, sat in on countless meetings asking questions and having conversations in order to help survivors complete the Protective Order document which would hopefully be granted by a judge. I was completely fascinated with the legal process that went into petitioning for a Protective Order, such as the ways the document is

constructed and the small yet important moments that proved to be crucial to the outcome of the filing process. Simultaneously, however, I was also worried about the well-being of the people sitting across from me and the material consequences of the lives held in the balance by these documents. While much of my work with the legal advocates at Middle Way consisted of passive support from courtroom benches, the work done with POAP in large part ultimately determined the outcomes of what happened in those courtrooms. And as a graduate student with no legal expertise who was ultimately only there because of a semester-long class, I felt conflicted about both my role as a volunteer with POAP in addition to the brief yet important relationships I had with the many petitioners who came through the Clerk's Office week after week.

As my work with Middle Way House and POAP continued throughout the semester, I had the theoretical underpinnings of a tactical orientation and mutually reciprocal relationships at the forefront of my mind. Indeed, Paula Mathieu's attention to the ways public-facing, community-focused research is fraught with issues of power, privilege, and ethics seemed not only relevant to the work I was doing with my community partners but was at the very core of the experience. After all, I was entering into some of the most intimate and private moments of survivors' lives without any formal training or expertise but as a clueless yet well-meaning student from the university in town. Further, as Ellen Cushman explains, because of the ways power relations are often quickly and invisibly formed with community partners, those from the university ought to pay attention to the "ethical debt" accrued through these relationships (16). As someone who initially entered this experience with earnest intentions, I am still working through the ethical implications that come from relying on the deeply personal trauma of others as the basis for a class project or a short reflection in a publication such as this one.

Thus, to take on a form of tactical hope and to strive for an imperfect yet carefully considered reciprocal partnership, I found myself constantly weighing the "risk and responsibility" of my work with Middle Way House and POAP (Mathieu 17). As a graduate student, I found myself restricted by the ways I couldn't seem to shake the strategic hold I felt from my academic institution. For example, the ebbs and flows of my work with these organizations was often influenced by my class schedules or the requirements of my doctoral program. If it was a busy time in the semester, I prioritized my coursework before making sure to spend time working at Middle Way or POAP. Or, because of the rigorous requirements of graduate work, I prioritized recharging and trying to prevent burnout by traveling across the country to visit my family, whom I only see a few times a year, as opposed to staying in Bloomington during off times like Spring Break. And while these may seem like minor ways I wasn't achieving a tactically oriented and reciprocal relationship with community members and partners, these small moments of absence felt like they accrued quickly especially because I knew that without the requirement of fulfilling service-learning hours, life as a graduate student would pull me in so many directions after the semester was over. I was unsure if I would be able to continue working with them during the summer months and future semesters despite my interest in doing so. It was difficult to shake the feeling that I was peeking in on such important work being done in

---

---

the community only to eventually turn away after having written a paper for a class, which ultimately supports my own goal of earning a PhD.

Additionally, I also questioned the risks and responsibilities I needed to attend to since I was working directly with survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment, individuals whose personal information and stories I had a responsibility to protect. I needed to consider the “ethical debt[s]” that could come from the risks they were taking in allowing me into, oftentimes, some of their most traumatic experiences (Cushman 16). These risks could include accidentally breaching their trust or putting my own stakes in our relationships before theirs, among others. As a graduate student, I needed to pay attention to the ways my approach to this work not only placed more responsibility on myself to openly negotiate my interactions with survivors, but also to be intensely aware of the ways my research interests and course requirements could expose them to more risks than they might have initially anticipated.

Despite the ways that my personal position as a graduate student has made it difficult for me to cultivate the kinds of partnerships I originally sought to develop, I also must recognize the privilege I carried (and continue to carry) with me while wading through these experiences with community partners. The first semester I worked with Middle Way and POAP, for instance, I was not yet required to fulfill the obligations of my teaching contract. Additionally, I never needed to seek outside work to help support myself throughout the semester, which would have required even more time spent away from the organization. Even though I never had to take on those additional burdens, I know many of my peers do. These privileges relating to time and financial security are no doubt compounded by the benefits my whiteness afforded me in my approach to these relationships. Ultimately, then, the precarious nature of graduate students cannot be separated from the ways in which we try to ethically participate in community-engaged research. Indeed, the risks involved with balancing academic requirements while also maintaining ethically responsible relationships with community partners can be seen as a burden not all graduate students can afford to bear.

Knowing that a standardized, one size fits all mentality does not account for the unique nature of different community partnerships, I still want to mention some of the possible ways graduate students specifically can best go about navigating the risks, responsibilities, and precarious nature of their community partnerships and community-engaged research, while also being fully aware that I am just beginning to scratch the surface of these issues. I am obviously still working through possible answers when it comes to my own future research, so my hope is that the following simply serves as a springboard from which to jump into further conversations. After all, Mathieu reminds us that tactical hope implores us to partake in a critical and “frank questioning of the ethically troubling aspects of work in the streets” in order to work toward a more just, and those questions have to start somewhere (20).

One way to begin approaching community partnerships in situations similar to the one I describe is to turn to what Mathieu explains as “rhetorically responsive” approaches to cultivating reciprocal relationships in community spaces (21). This could

mean asking community members and partners to be open to a dialogue about how they might see a graduate student's position as enhancing or limiting the experience; listening to community members' and partners' expectations when it comes to not having a clearly defined timeline or outcome for the partnership; and consistently being open to learning about ways to rework and redefine the kind of relationship necessary for the work being done.

Further, turning to more recent scholarship focused on reciprocity allows us to build upon the foundational work of Cushman and Mathieu. For instance, Jessica Shumake and Rachel Wendler-Shah assert the need to continually value reciprocity in university-community partnerships with a strong focus on the ways that it can—and should—have a “material impact” on the work being done (32). Megan Opperman also claims the vulnerable populations with which we work and whose privacy is inextricably linked to safety “must be protected” by our research approaches and methodologies. Lastly, Cynthia Fields articulates the idea of a dangerous reciprocity that speaks to the advantage of “radical openness to the ways in which the process of research affects the researcher” as well as the “risks we take on with reciprocity” (52).

Though all of these theoretical insights might seem daunting when listed in the abstract, my hope is they can be returned to as useful approaches to a tactical responsiveness that is especially needed by graduate students in university-community partnerships. I find it easy to get bogged down when thinking about the ways my own relationships with community partners failed to meet a standard of perfect ethics or reciprocity or tactical responsiveness. I try to recall the ways that Mathieu encourages us to redefine what we take to be a success story since “[w]orking tactically in a university setting may be unpredictable and inefficient, but it is an act of hope” (134). Steve Parks also urges us that as we are responsive to our current predicaments and experiences, we must also “understand there is no pure space to stand in such work—we simply must begin” no matter how humble the act (194).

### Works Cited

- Cushman, Ellen. “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change.” *College Composition and Communication*. 47.1 (1996): 7-28.
- Fields, Cynthia. “Dangerous Reciprocity: Creating a Madness Narrative Research Methodology.” *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, & Learning*. 14.1 (2014): 40-57.
- Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2005.
- Opperman, Megan. “Intentionally Public, Intentionally Private: Gender Non-Binary Youth on Tumblr and the Queering of Community Literacy Research.” *Community Literacy Journal*. 12.2 (2018): 65-71.
- Parks, Steve. “Writing, Democracy, Activism: Palestine, Israel, and Community Publishing (Circa October 17, 2014).” *Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action*. By Mary P. Sheridan, Megan J. Bardolph, Megan Faver Hartline, and Drew Holladay. Lanham: Lexington, 2018. 185-95.

Shumake, Jessica, and Rachael Wendler Shah. "Reciprocity and Power Dynamics: Community Members Grading Students." *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing & Service Learning*. 17.2 (2017): 5-42.

### *Author Bio*

Megan McCool is a PhD student in Rhetoric at Indiana University. Her research interests include community-engaged writing, antiracism, and composition pedagogy.