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The Drake Community Press

Carol Spaulding-Kruse
Drake University, carol.spaulding@drake.edu

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Community Literacy Project Profile

The Drake Community Press

Carol Spaulding-Kruse

Abstract

The Drake Community Press is a collaborative publishing project involving students and faculty from a variety of disciplines along with a non-profit community partner with a compelling story to share. Over two years and eight production phases, campus and community participants create the content, format, design, promotion, and distribution plan for a high-quality publication that aims, through sales and advocacy, to advance the partner's mission. In so doing, the Press creates an intentional framework of encounter—education as dialogue—in which participants negotiate across cultural and disciplinary boundaries as equal stakeholders with a shared purpose.

Website

Readers are invited to find out more about the Drake Community Press at www.drakecommunitypress.org, watch a student's award-winning documentary film, and view the Education Supplement, a student-produced media kit and testimony from our funders at: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/0J8qtmpyoGE46/>

In the introduction to *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing*, editors Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp describes community publishing as a “locally created system of circulation” that combines individual voices in a “collective attempt to understand the past and to project a future” (1). In its scope, aims, and process, the Drake Community Press takes its cue from Mathieu et al.'s *Circulating Communities* as well as from the foundational work of Thomas Deans (*Writing Partnerships*) and Stephen Parks (*Gravyland*). Similar to the projects described in these titles, the Drake Community Press creates a strategic space in which community participants engage in an inclusive, relationship-centered process of content creation, typically with the goal of sharing stories and creating awareness around a community concern.

Established in 2014, the DCP is a curriculum-based publishing laboratory that brings students and faculty from several academic disciplines into conversation with a non-profit community partner that has a compelling story to tell. The Press serves a community readership on issues of interest and concern to Iowans while providing Drake undergraduates with practical knowledge of book editing, design, and promo-

tion utilizing a cross-disciplinary and collaborative focus. Our projects create awareness, advocacy, and funding through book sales to help non-profit partners advance their mission and enhance the university's community profile.

The Press's most recent title, *A Spectrum of Faith: Religions of the World in America's Heartland* (April 2017), showcases the "unexpected melting pot" of Iowa's diverse religious communities (vii). The DCP teamed up with a Drake campus interfaith organization, The Comparison Project, and a beneficiary partner, Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC), to produce fifteen student-researched chapters on fifteen area faith communities representing six major world religions: Judaism, Sikhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Religion students attended weekly services for a full academic term, learning about the actual embodied practices in these communities. Concurrently, writing students helped the researchers develop and refine the chapters for publication. In the next phase, design students worked with the team to create a visual structure for the chapters and photographs. And in the final phase, public relations students helped to market the book, creating focus groups, book signings, and related community events. The photography of a local artist accompanied each chapter, and a student videographer documented the entire "making of" the project from initial brainstorming to press check. In all, over one hundred students engaged with dozens of community members over two years and eight phases of our publishing cycle.

As a community press, the DCP strives to feature events that actively engage its readership and involve project participants. For *A Spectrum of Faith*, events included the Iowa Interfaith Exchange, which is a conference featuring youth and religious leaders from across the state, and a Tour of Sacred Spaces, in which visitors attend local houses of worship and interact with members of those faith communities. Public radio host of *On Being*, Krista Tippit, served as keynote speaker at a fall event featuring presentations from each of the fifteen communities, food from the cultures represented therein, and an opportunity for religion students to share their project research. The launch of the book in April 2017 was another major opportunity to engage readers and project participants. Dr. Eboo Patel of the Interfaith Youth Council served as keynote speaker, remarking that he had never seen such a successful model for bringing together campus and community in pursuit of a common good. Also that spring, Iowa Campus Compact recognized the Press for its "unique and innovative contributions that demonstrate strong future potential" with its Emerging Innovation Award of 2017.

Just a month after its release, sales of *A Spectrum of Faith* had already raised \$20,000 to support DMARC's Food Pantry Network, a portion of the \$60,000 total expected once all copies are sold. The book and its accompanying student-produced Educational Supplement is used as a resource in schools, religious education programs, book groups, and community dialogues to create awareness about the rich diversity of religion and the lived practices of Des Moines' religious neighbors. Beautiful in physical design and photographic content, it is also used as a gift, as a promotional tool for recruitment of students and university sponsors, and in state and regional work-force recruitment and economic development.

In all, the Press adds to a growing list of community-based publishers whose goal is to create space for local, non-mainstream voices to inform the civic dialogue necessary to create social change. At the same time, key features of the Drake Community Press offer alternative perspectives to those of some current practitioners on the structure, value, and use of this unique form of engaged rhetorical practice called community publishing.

A Paradigm of Encounter

Inspired by the words of Linda Adler-Kassner in her work on “Writing in Service Learning Courses,” the Press seeks to “expand the discussion in the hope that writing can take service-learning in directions that do not merely serve the process of replication of elite ‘otherizing’ structures” (9). This has meant creating a collaborative framework in which all campus and community contributors have a crucial voice in the book production process, from inspiration and planning to content production to editing, design, promotion, and distribution.

As *Circulating Communities* shows, no single structure or approach defines community publishing. However, Rachel Meads’ chapter titled “Unfinished,” about the Diverse City Writing Series (DWS), describes a recognizable goal. As Meads explains it, the DWS is founded in the democratic notion that “any voice with words that need speaking” could participate in their writing group process and achieve publication (112). In so doing, the project makes possible community members’ access to the means of producing and disseminating their own stories. Similarly, in his discussion of the work of the New City Community Press in *Gravyland*, Stephen Parks links the Marxist philosophy that economic exploitation can only end when workers have control over the means of production with the story of the “Glassville” community, where the project only began to succeed when residents took charge of their own representation via the stories they had contributed to the project (78-82). Informed by the culture of resistance activism, writers can “tell their truth unfiltered by established organizations” if the barriers to publication are removed (84).

The structure of the DCP, however, offers a contrast to the idea of unfiltered truth. For one, student production is central to the structure of the Press, and their work must be overseen by teaching faculty as well as community participants. Our content is highly mediated because it circulates among all stakeholders, undergoing countless revisions on many levels of review prior to publication. “Truth” does not reside in one person’s story or collection of stories. It must be established by processes external to the writer. As Parks notes in his description of the *Urban Rhythms Project* in the opening chapter of *Gravyland*, participants gain a sense of voice as “necessarily hybrid”—a “seeming contradiction,” but one which has the potential to transform relationships across cultural boundaries (2). Thus, in a community writing framework, “truth” is established—enacted, if you will—by the process of ongoing negotiation and encounter.

In Spring 2016, we produced the bulk of the content for *A Spectrum of Faith* in a co-taught course that served as both a Capstone for my Religion colleague's students and a Community Writing course for mine. Each week, Capstone students attended religious services for their assigned faith community and prepared field notes for discussion with my students who were studying developmental editing. Preparatory work for the entire class included readings in ethnography (the insider/outsider phenomenon, the native informant) and comparative religion; Jerry Stinnet's work in critical ethnography and ethical representation; and articles recommended by colleagues in other disciplines on the rhetoric of religious spaces and on concepts of design theory and illustration. In addition, our theoretical grounding in community writing included Linda Flower's concept of intercultural inquiry, Thomas Deans and Linda Adler-Kassner on writing communities and partnerships, and Steve Parks' "Glassville" chapter in *Gravyland*.

We regularly utilized a set of critical questions that helped to articulate the insights and challenges arising from community-engaged writing partnerships. Our inquiry included questions that engage our awareness about participation and outcomes as having multi-faceted effects on self and others. Questions included:

- ▶ What do we want this book to do—and for whom—and how will we assess its impact?
- ▶ What language or gender barriers do we anticipate with the faith communities, and how will we address them?
- ▶ Do all community partners understand how they benefit from their participation and how the interests of the collective are served by their participation?
- ▶ How do the role of literacy and intended project outcomes differ for our participating faith communities?

As we wrote and revised chapters, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural learning opportunities continually and unexpectedly emerged. For example, students expressed anxiety about doing justice to the "authentic" voices of their communities, an expectation underscored by the community members themselves. At the same time, our class discussions problematized the concept of the authentic as an unstable, interested construction that would not sustain the stability or definition that members of those communities might seek. In a previous Press title (*The Ones I Bring with Me/Los Que Llevo Conmigo*, 2014) on Latina girls and women in Iowa, conflict arose within the Latinx community—more accurately, communities—over whether to include the story of a girl with lesbian parents; at the same time, my community writing students refused to participate if the story was *not* included. In another example from that earlier title, DCP's own editorial board—comprised of students, faculty and community partners—disagreed deeply about whether and how to include the stories and photos of families with members who had undocumented status.

Conflicting perspectives—otherwise known as opportunities for negotiation—continue in our current book project, which looks at cancer in the state of Iowa from a variety of perspectives. For example, our partnering organization, Above & Beyond Cancer, is deeply rooted in the notion of individual triumph over adversity; at the

same time, one post-structural philosophy professor is encouraging us to critique the narrative of cancer as primarily the experience of an individual. Meanwhile, my senior editorial intern, whose majors include Public Health and Writing with a minor in Anthropology, reminds us that we must think carefully about the pressure such narratives place on cancer patients to experience their illness in codified ways. To complicate matters, I brought to a recent meeting of the planning council Lois Agnew's recent article in *College English* on "Ecologies of Cancer Rhetoric," which looks carefully at the deployment of war metaphors in the "battle" against cancer. When we can talk even during planning meetings about ways that language choices "constitute perceptions, attitudes, and decisions pertaining to health" (274), those meetings are about more than grant deadlines.

Interestingly, the current DCP planning council includes physicians, health insurance executives, no-nonsense administrators from Drake's powerful professional schools such as the College of Pharmacy and the College of Business and Public Administration, and cancer survivors from all walks of life. Just the fact of our being in the same room together is new for most of us, much less collectively wrapping our heads around post-structuralism. Conversely, the artists, writers and philosophers among us might not spend time pondering how and when cancer medications get discounted, or what factors contribute to the pressure on premium rates, or how Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield uses patient data to determine coverage. But this, too, constitutes a form of inter-cultural inquiry. Flower's concept of "rivals" pushes all participants toward "truth" negotiated in a space of shared purpose. Our fundamental responsibility with regard to ethical representation is to one another.

"Rivals" must work, of course, to build trust with one another. While historical inequities won't be solved by one project or even many projects, neither are they glossed over. Our contingency is our resource, as many scholars of post-composition have noted. This means that sometimes our viewpoints get challenged. Our worldview gets challenged. Even the idea of what counts as knowledge undergoes challenge. This is the difference between information acquisition and real learning. We are all "students" in some form and "teachers" in another, negotiating across boundaries of culture, campus, community, academic roles, and disciplines.

No one book can represent all of the aspirations of a community writing partnership, nor should it be expected to. Just as the production of knowledge in any given discipline progresses through stages or eras of understanding, so should our publications be permitted to reflect the understanding that is possible given the configuration of participants, resources, time frame, and journey we undertake together. Some readers of *A Spectrum of Faith* have argued that a truly inclusive book would have included more or different faith communities than are represented. Others criticize the profiles of the faith communities for underscoring a too-easy version of diversity—what Peter McClaren calls a "benign compilation of cultural spheres" (192).

In fact, I expressed my hope that the book could be structured to engage more productively with issues of comparative religion and that the faith communities would take part in more interfaith activity *with one another*. But such is the nature of community publishing—the content was up to the community, not to any one per-

son. The book that resulted is the book that felt possible given the configuration of competing needs and wants. While some more established faith communities would have welcomed a comparative study, the newer and immigrant communities saw this opportunity as their first “close up.” The Burmese Hindus in Des Moines, for example, still struggle with feeling established in their communities. As new Americans, they face significant challenges such as lack of access to resources due to language barriers and a high suicide rate among their elderly members. Interfaith understanding is the least of their worries, and, quite justifiably, they view their chapter as something of a PR campaign to correct misperceptions and to present their best face to the community. But community publishing can and should take the long view, as it were. Its outcomes take their place among many outcomes that move the dial on intercultural inquiry.

Role of Writing

Producing a high-quality publication within a community-engaged framework requires writing tasks that answer to a range of functions and effects. In addition to research, drafting, editing, and designing the book manuscript, students in my courses reflected in their journals on writing as a form of service and communicated with one another in their roles as writers, editors, and designers; they planned and executed appropriate rhetorical actions or interventions such as letters to the editor or email exchanges with community participants; and they produced pragmatic texts such as grant narratives, outreach to consultants and service providers, ongoing weekly content for social media, and promotional content for advertising, events, and communication with the media.

Writing tasks in a large-scale community publishing project may require students to assert creative or intellectual initiative that a syllabus did not assign and to employ soft skills in unanticipated ways. The deadlines are real. The edits aren't personal. Indeed, many of the transferable skills of the workplace happen through these experiences. At the same time, when learning takes place differently, different abilities emerge. For example, near the end of the project, we conducted focus group sessions with the *Spectrum of Faith* communities in order to gauge how to help them use the books in religious education. Public Relations students found themselves attending services at a local mosque, where the female students were required to cover their hair and sit for the entire service behind a large screen in a back room where it was difficult to follow the service amidst the sound of crying babies. In a setting with unpredictable variables, it is sometimes the high-achievers from regular classrooms who get thrown a curveball by the different stakes, processes, and expectations of a sustained project, while the normally recalcitrant students might suddenly find they shine.

Likewise, learning is also differently consequential: the “correct” spelling of the Sikh place of worship known as a *gurdwara*, for example, depends on which of the two local Sikh communities you talk to—and both communities are featured in the book. Or, what seems like a charming detail in writing workshop, where the entryway

to a Hindu temple smells like a combination of “incense and human feet” becomes a potential insult when considering a community readership. Or, tension between one Muslim community’s desire to aggressively counter negative stereotypes with positive messaging vis-a-vis one student’s work touches deep-running nerves among participants. Or, student editors discuss what to do about the near-ubiquitous trope of sunlight “streaming through the window” onto the altar, temple, shrine, sanctuary, or nave of each religion student’s faith community. Object lessons like these arise from and are resolved by the community contexts within which we work, not by editorial fiat.

Whether directly or indirectly, students continually examine their discursive purposes as well as the shifting and sometimes conflicting conditions that give rise to them. They come to see that those whom they would presume to represent in any given document have an important role in its creation. And that all manner of texts, even pragmatic ones, produce cultural meaning.

All of this happens, of course, during a time of enormous change in what it means to be literate. As a teacher of creative writing, I am witness to the impact of digital culture on the world of literary publishing. With *A Spectrum of Faith*, we have begun to employ 21st century modalities such as e-books, collateral and interactive content for reading groups, and podcasting. But it’s about more than keeping up with technology; the very ground of literacy has shifted. Concepts of authorship, intellectual property, originality, form, length, pace, value, and even what counts as reading and writing have already undergone enormous change. And as Thomas Kent has observed, there is still not enough theorizing about how digital environments transform the act of writing (5).

One compelling idea derives from systems theory, in which the post-human “networked condition” of the writer—as opposed to the notion of an inner self that stands at the center of expression—becomes the dominant paradigm. I’m well aware that belletristic notions of the writing self still predominate in college creative writing classrooms. At the same time, creative writing students staff the ranks of the Drake Community Press. More than a century ago, Martin Buber articulated the idea that the self is a process created through encounter. No writing student would be in error to discover that meaning and value reside not in individual output but in the possibility presented by the spaces between us.

A Word on Publication

In most community publishing projects, scholarly attention is heavy on community, but light on the role of publishing. In a model like Meads’ from *Circulating Communities* or Parks’ in *Gravyland*, democratic access to the means of production suggests that publication is controlled in the positive rather than negative sense. In other words, publication is a de facto outcome of project participation.

A closer look at Meads’ account of the DWS project, however, suggests that participants were not of one mind about the circumstances governing publication. One woman refused to contribute until she felt her writing was good enough to be consid-

ered for publication. Another group of participants broke off and formed a group of “advanced writers”—Meads’ scare quotes—who wanted to work with others writing at a similar level of literary expertise (119). But a democratically-inflected project like DWS project does not easily allow for distinctions of literary value among community writers, even though “real” writers make these distinctions all the time.

The function of value in this community writing setting differs from that which circulates among literary publishers. In Meads’ description of the DWS, the literary value of one’s contribution is presumed by virtue of participation, and therefore in the economy of actual publishing, might be said to be artificial. The network of cultural and commercial forces that arbitrate value in the literary marketplace might be equally artificial at the end of the day, and far more fetishized. But what, then, happens with the writers who are doing more than giving voice to their experience, the writers who love writing for writing’s sake and may very well want to *publish* publish? How is literary value determined in a non-evaluative context, and how do we regard the relationship between value and the literary marketplace? Do participants have the right within the sphere of community writing to aspire to the values of the literary marketplace that excludes them?

Publication is a potent form of legitimation for any writer, but the ways in which it establishes its authority are often obscured and ever shifting. The DCP engages questions like these, and more, as one way to think critically about our undertaking. What, for example, happens to literary value and on whom is it conferred upon publication? In what circumstances, and how, does value accrue, and in what circumstances is the fact of publication itself the height of achievement? At the very least, the distinctions that academics who write *about* community writing make between their own forms of publication and those of the writers they serve could be productively illuminated.

Conclusion

Sustained engagement initiatives can benefit from centralized support of service- and community-engaged learning. Drake University has a supportive and well-established Office of Community Engaged Learning that helps the DCP strategize about how to position itself favorably within ongoing and upcoming institutional commitments. The CEL office has also supported my research in community literacy by calling my attention to conference, award, and publication opportunities and supporting my involvement with Campus Compact.

This contrasts with a traditional notion of community publishing as a scrappy, underfunded entity schooled in subversion and the rhetoric of resistance, so it is fair to ask whether institutionalized support of the instruments of social change can really be trusted. I maintain a healthy skepticism about the answer to this question, even as I, along with many of my colleagues, work toward what Paul Feigenbaum calls “relationship-centered practice” that can become “part of the academic paradigm itself” (47). With many institutions’ now established commitment to engaged learning, the

goal to “develop institutional mechanisms to support collective responsibility for sustaining relationship-based praxis” is more realistic than ever before (49).

My university’s mission is to provide an “exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship.” *A Spectrum of Faith* and DCP’s other projects provide a framework for students to reconcile academic concepts with immersive experiences and contribute to outcomes that matter beyond a course or a grade, all while engaging in what one of my interns called “education as dialogue.” And, while books do not directly produce social justice, making books collectively is an appropriate form of intervention that can lift up the human lives in our community. This joint academic and civic function is, for me, a hallmark of high-quality civic engagement.

Outcomes matter, especially when justifying requests for funding and, of course, in assessment. But experience, too, is an outcome. A process that foregrounds the mutually constitutive nature of our writing contexts and our discursive communities makes possible the choice to consciously share—and shape—our common destiny.

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Author Bio

Carol Spaulding-Kruse (carol.spaulding@drake.edu) is Professor of English at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, where she teaches writing and American literature. She is the author of several award-winning short stories, as well as poetry, essays and scholarly articles in the field of Asian American literature. She directs the department's Writing Internship program, and is founder and director of the Drake Community Press.