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The Story of Sound Off: A Community Writing/ Community Listening Experiment

Erica M. Stone

Abstract

This provocation reflects on Sound Off, a community writing project with listening as its central activity and storytelling as a key component. Understanding Sound Off as an experimental site for community listening, I highlight the need for listening in localized contexts, while exploring how we might design community writing projects as listening spaces. Perhaps most provocatively, I identify challenges that teachers, scholars, and activists need to address for community writing to become fully multimodal and reflect reciprocity among participants.

Community writing and community listening require participants to be mindful of story, place, positionality, and culture. Similarly, community-engaged work reminds us that we are comprised of many identities and experiences (Goldblatt and Parks), and that, “when we enact community listening, we may be academics and activists, students and organizers, community members and leaders, and more” (Fishman and Rosenberg). Although community-based researchers often study community writing and the rhetorical agency associated with it (Cushman; Flower; Long; Peck et al.), we have spent less time defining community listening and illustrating community listening processes. How do we design opportunities for community listening that respect and interrogate boundaries while engaging community members in the hard work of listening to individual stories? How do we use community writing to facilitate such listening both in and of itself and as a part of organizing for community action?

To foster amplified listening, community writing projects must be intentionally designed to cultivate dialogue and create opportunities for listening-centered conversations. When community writing projects are participant-centered, they operationalize listening in ways that slow down the communication process to locate common ground (Powell; Ratcliffe); they bridge the gap between universities and their communities (Cushman; Flower; Long; Mathieu); and they act as agents of change and enculturation, allowing storytellers and listeners to consider their stories, positions, place, and cultures as their capacity for empathy grows (Faber; King; Peck et al.; Powell). This provocation article acknowledges the need for listening in localized contexts and explores how we might design community writing projects as listening spaces by reflecting on Sound Off, a community writing project with listening as its central activity and storytelling as a key component. Using Sound Off as an experimental site for community listening, I identify challenges that teachers, scholars, and activists need

to address for community writing to become fully multimodal and reflect reciprocity among participants.

In the days and weeks following the 2016 Presidential Election, I found myself in a constant state of disbelief. My entire family and many of my close friends had voted for President Trump. Like many others who were struggling to reconcile our new reality, I desperately searched for ways to understand the choices of my family and friends. On November 16, 2016, CNN launched their Voicemails from American Voters project (Ahuja and Wills), an open voicemail line where callers could leave messages describing their reasons for voting and feelings about the election. While the prompt asked callers to reflect only on the election, dense and personal stories filled the voicemail box and corresponding webtext. Not only did reading these stories help me process the election results, but over time, they gave way to the kind of clarity and empathy that I might not have been able to cultivate in a face-to-face conversation with my loved ones. As a community engaged teacher and PhD student who is often examining community rhetorics, I found this type of mediated, time-lapsed communication to be refreshing and humanizing.

Listening to strangers' stories shared through the Voicemails from American Voters project also raised questions for me about how we might create related spaces for listening in our classrooms, our research, and our community projects. As community writing researchers, shouldn't we be working to develop spaces that encourage such negotiations of story, place, positionality, and culture? We recognize that "[t]elling stories doesn't always feel good. It's not easy to bring them into academic spaces" (Powell 390). But community literacy has been defined as "a search for an alternative discourse" (Peck et al. 575), "with an aim for supporting social change, intercultural conversation, inquiry, and a strategic approach to conversation" (Mathieu 5). As a doctoral student at Texas Tech University (TTU) and an adjunct faculty member at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), I am interested in studying how community listening, community writing, and community organizing rhetorics can be used to design localized spaces for conversation. With this focus in mind, I began to consider how a listening-centered community writing project might support social change in my current home, Kansas City, Missouri.

I shared my experience with Rhiannon Dickerson, a fellow faculty member at UMKC, as she was planning an inaugural civic and community engagement conference. As scholars, teachers, and community organizers, Rhiannon and I believe that academics should work within their communities instead of within the silos of universities. While we had hoped to create a listening booth or a place to record audio stories like the Voicemails from American Voters project, the geography of the conference could not accommodate that type of project. Together, we brainstormed Sound Off, a community writing project that emphasized community listening and unfolded in three phases: digital story collection, a visual exhibition of stories, and facilitated listening via hashtags on social media. Responding to Cushman's call for us to consider how we might decentralize the university and abandon the colonizing

nature of research by “breaking down the sociological barriers between universities and communities” (12), Sound Off served as an experiment of sorts, asking and answering the questions: How would we bridge the town/gown divide by *listening to* and *learning from* stories offered by community members? Who should be responsible for interrogating the false boundary between the university and community? What is the best way to honor participants’ vulnerability and privacy while also presenting their stories in an authentic form that amplifies listening and encourages empathy?

In the call for this special issue, Fishman and Rosenberg define community listening as a “deep, direct engagement with individuals and groups working to address urgent issues in everyday life: issues anchored by long histories and complicated by competing interpretations as well as clashing modes of expression.” Aligned with their definition, Sound Off engaged in a kind of intercultural knowledge building that, like Flower’s community think tanks and Community Literacy Center projects (Peck et al. 572), emphasized mutuality between the university and the community. Sound Off also encouraged participant-centered, community-focused dialogues (Long 106), which invited Kansas City community members, not just those associated with the university, to compose anonymous, personal stories about urgent and sociopolitical issues with the hope of facilitating listening-centered conversations.

Sound Off invited Kansas City denizens to tell their stories at a booth we set up in a communal area during the 2017 Educate-Organize-Advocate conference at UMKC, which was designed to give local community activists and grassroots organizing groups an opportunity to gather with teacher-scholar-activists and student organizers to discuss, plan, and eventually execute collaborative community projects. Anyone who wanted to participate could record a story in writing at the Sound Off booth using the iPads we provided. Sixteen people contributed to Sound Off by telling personal stories or reflecting on the topics of gun violence, marriage equality, immigration reform, climate change, health care, jobs and economy, and standing with survivors of sexual violence. Sound Off facilitators transposed the stories onto posters that hung in the entryway of Miller Nichols Library on the UMKC campus for six weeks. There, in a building readily associated with reading, we invited passersby to look and to listen to community members’ stories and respond on social media using specific project hashtags.



Photo of the four Sound Off panels hanging in a horizontal line. Design credit: Sean McCue, UMKC User Interface and Graphic Designer

Imagine walking down the main UMKC concourse, past a mural map of Kansas City, strangers engaged in conversations, an outdoor amphitheater, and chained bicycles, approaching the library through a set of double glass doors. To your left is a set of three elevators, a lobby, and two conference rooms, and to your right is the main entrance to the library. As you walk through anti-theft scanners, you notice something out of the ordinary: four colorful posters on a wall that is usually blank. You pass by them on your way to a meeting on Monday and again on Friday on your way to grab a coffee. The next week, you consider pausing for a moment in front of the Sound Off exhibit. You begin to read, and two of the stories draw you closer to the posters. Suddenly, the space around you disappears; you're no longer aware of the people walking in or out of the library behind you. You're thinking about the lives of two strangers whose stories are told on the posters:

America is a place where refugee reform isn't taken seriously enough. Today, I learned that since the 1980s, the US has only accepted 3 million refugees, while less affluent countries have hit that number within this year. The main takeaway from this is: Educate yourself and others to make change. —Anon

As a third generation Mexican American, I believe that everyone should have a right to a better life. Leaving everything behind, my great grandmother immigrated to California from Mexico around 1925 with only her mother and father. They immigrated legally, but it was not an easy process. America was built from the foundation of immigration. Immigrants helped shape our nation today and continue to help grow our society's diversity. Our children deserve to learn from that diversity. —Anon

Since many of the conference sessions addressed the refugee crisis and the plight of DACA students, the most compelling stories we collected were about immigration. Because most of the stories shared were from members of the Kansas City community, Sound Off attempted to answer Royster's request for us to construct rhetorical strategies for cross-cultural communication, "crossing boundaries and creating a common ground for engagement" (40). Situated at the entrance to the library, one of the highest traffic areas at the university, the posters were positioned to serve as a catalyst for boundary work (Moore 250; Peck et al. 578), inviting library patrons to translate "listening into language and action" (Royster 38) and to become active participants in the community listening process.

Community writing projects that focus on community listening can use stories like the ones above to "affirm both the personal *and* the public and both the individual *and* the collective aspects of rhetorical action" (Flower 207). When we design rhetorical spaces as catalysts for listening-focused rhetorical action, boundaries are pushed (Moore 251), and we can move towards more inclusive and reciprocal community writing and civic engagement. By positioning stories together in a curated collection, Sound Off privileged the individual voices of the participants while emphasizing the importance of the collective value of community, reminding exhibit listeners of their own vulnerability and interconnectedness. While each story stands individually, together they encourage inclusivity by asking listeners to consider their own positions, place, and culture.

Reflecting now on the hours we spent in the Sound Off booth as facilitators collecting stories, I think about how, in writing classrooms and community writing projects, we often miss opportunities to slow down communication and locate inclusive ways forward through amplified listening. The choice we made in the Sound Off project, to mediate listening by translating the stories we collected onto physical posters, reminds us that we can design spaces for community listening that are intercultural, multi-vocal (Peck et al. 587), and listening-centered. Much like the Voicemails from American Voters project helped me process the 2016 election results, the Sound Off poster exhibit provided a space for localized community listening to occur through delayed, asynchronous communication between storyteller and audience.

Conversely, a more diffused, public conversation occurred on Twitter. By using specific hashtags on the exhibit posters, my hope was to create the opportunity for Kansas City community members to share their stories, locate common ground with broader audiences, and serve as catalysts for ongoing and interconnected conversations. While Sound Off's hashtags were inevitably integrated into Twitter threads that included a multitude of larger narratives about the American Dream as understood by #millennials, #refugee and #immigration reform, and access to affordable #healthcare, none of the conversations expanded past a few responses or retweets. The lack of response revealed something about the limitations and connotations of Twitter, a complex digital platform that is not designed for community listening. This format impacted the project focus, and Sound Off shifted from being a listening space to a

fragmented collection of stories bound by hashtags instead of a particular context or culture. Perhaps community listening projects require a format similar to the Voice-mails from American Voters project, one that combines audio with writing in a dedicated online space. In future community listening projects, I will consider the ways community writing might become fully multimodal and reflect reciprocity among participants. This process may involve asking community members to develop a strategy for activating the participants' existing networks, providing the original storytellers with specific directions for their Twitter engagement, or designing my own digital space for story collection and community listening.

Sound Off shows us how community writing projects can facilitate community listening, serving as a provocative model for how we might "listen to and hear voices often neglected or silenced, and to notice more overtly their own responses to what they are seeing, reading, reflecting on, and encountering during their research processes" (Royster and Kirsch 86). For Kansas City and UMKC, Sound Off's first iteration was only partially successful, but the story it leaves behind could be the beginning of the next project that explores community writing as community listening. Perhaps more importantly, the Sound Off project has helped us identify the need for teachers, scholars, and activists to create community writing projects that are fully multimodal and reflect reciprocity among participants. Sound Off taught me that in order for community writing projects to function as community listening spaces, they must be designed with the understanding that all conversations are ecological (Rivers and Weber), contextual, cultural activities that require a dedicated space for listening.

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Author Bio

Erica M. Stone is a doctoral student in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric Program at Texas Tech University. Her research centers on public engagement in composition and technical communication classrooms and academics' roles in their surrounding communities. As an adjunct instructor at the University of Missouri Kansas City, she works at the intersection of writing, teaching, and community organizing. Through collaborative projects, Erica creates opportunities for scholars, students, and community members to engage in conversations and civic problem-solving with the hope of building a more equitable and participatory democracy.