

Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Rosenberg, Lauren. "Navigating Difficulty in Classroom-Community Outreach Projects." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp.43-64. doi:10.25148/clj.11.2.009134.

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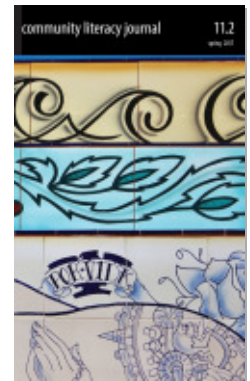
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Community Literacy Journal, Volume 11, Issue 2, Spring 2017, pp. 65-73 (Article)

Published by Community Literacy Journal

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clj.2017.0004>



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Lauren Rosenberg

Abstract

Sustainability in community engagement projects depends on careful attention to the ways we navigate complex, often challenging relationships with our partners, our students, agencies, and the institutions in which we occupy multiple, sometimes competing roles. This article considers the difficulty inherent in developing and maintaining relationships with the community members who choose to participate in our research. Based on the experiences of three undergraduate students in a community literacy seminar, the author traces the ways these students confront challenges in their projects, arguing for the value of difficulty in community literacy work.

Keywords: difficulty, sustainability, relationships with community partners, community outreach, Building Engaged Infrastructure, undergraduate teaching

Developing and valuing relationships is implicit in the work we do as university-community practitioners who seek greater engagement with people in the settings where we come together. Perhaps the desire to nourish relationships is what sparks community literacy workers to want to keep reaching out into seemingly impractical situations and projects not likely to succeed—at least not in manageable, semester-measurable terms. Ultimately, our work is always about relating with people over the ways writing has value in their lives. At one of the Deep Think Tanks I participated in at the inaugural Conference on Community Writing (CCW), we gathered in groups to answer the question: What sustains you professionally in this work? The question bothered me because it encourages narratives of personal fulfillment—as it did in my group: expressions of *I did right*, *I was a good person*, *I developed viable relationships*. My own experiences doing community outreach work, and especially doing this work within an institution that nods and approves, yet with little genuine interest in the impact of my or anyone else's projects—except that such work makes the institution look good—is that the question of what sustains you is not easily answered, and when it is answered, the response

is not so rosy. Sustainability in community engagement projects depends on careful attention to the ways we navigate complex, often challenging relationships with our partners, our students, agencies, and the institutions in which we occupy multiple, sometimes competing roles.

Sustaining relationships is difficult work, a sometimes-overlooked part of building engaged infrastructure (“Building Engaged Infrastructure” was the theme of the CCW). When I speak of difficulty in working through relationships with community members, I am interested in difficulty as a necessary and productive concept. I am not pointing to the worry or sense of failure that community literacy researchers have investigated in discussions of unsustainability. Paul Feigenbaum, in his keynote address at the CCW, encouraged us to get past the trope of unsustainability that has been popular in conversations since Jessica Restaino and Laurie Cella published *Unsustainable* in 2012 by spinning the focus of community literacy work to look at moments of “pleasant surprise” and wonder in the “unpredictable encounters” we have in our work. Most would agree that looking for the joy in what we do is why we keep doing it. But I want to consider the value of difficulty in negotiating these relationships and why that is the most meaningful challenge we have in community outreach work—perhaps, I’d suggest, what ultimately gives us joy. A key part of building infrastructure is engaging difficulty. Paying attention to difficulty encourages us to see that community relations are fluid, unstable, and constantly changing. By looking at our work as always shifting, we may get a sense of greater sustainability than when we assume some sort of successful, static model that can be applied across contexts. As Eli Goldblatt proposed in his talk at the CCW, for our work to be viable, we should be open to continually revising our definitions.

Cultivating Relationships with Participants in a Community Literacy Seminar

At my university, I teach an undergraduate capstone class on community literacy studies. The class is a yearlong seminar for English majors that concentrates on critical literacy scholarship during the first semester and in which students put a small-scale study of their own design into action during the second semester. By applying what they have read to what they then do, students in the seminar problematize the idea of community and what it means to intervene in settings outside the university based on their experiences. Their interaction with the scholarship, and then their enactment of it, join together social and personal concerns as they confront them through the lens of community literacy studies.

I’m not doing the “writing with” and “writing for” projects that Deans identifies (*Writing Partnerships*), or the work with agencies that has been explored by Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt in their ongoing collaborations with community partners (Parks; Goldblatt “Alinsky’s”, *Because*). My course focuses more on understanding *why* and making connections *between* the theories we have studied and the reasons for reaching out into communities. Because students design their own small-scale ethnographic studies, they have to decide what matters and how to examine literacy practices in communities. Their projects range from participant observation in an existing writers group at a senior center to informal conversations with Latino

community members as they stand in line to negotiate benefits at a Department of Social Services office.

I have learned from teaching this class that we must be explicit in guiding students in their interactions with community members if they are to develop meaningful relationships that are valuable for all involved. Like Tom Deans, I focus on “how developing good working relationships with their partner organization is a critical part—usually *the* most critical part—of community-based writing” (“Sustainability Deferred” 104). For me, as a teacher of community literacy studies, one of the significant challenges is directing students in their self-designed outreach projects and helping them figure out how to foster relationships with the community members who participate in their research. As Lorelei Blackburn and Ellen Cushman argue in “Assessing Sustainability,” emphasizing relationships is the most vital component of community literacy work and the area where we need to concentrate more of our effort as researchers and teachers: “[And] if a methodology for developing relationships is interwoven, then relationship building becomes not just a *component* of the curriculum, but a way of *delivering* curriculum” (163). Unsurprisingly, difficulties arose as students conducted their projects. During the semester when the class was actively engaged in their individual studies, our whole group meetings concentrated on how to gauge delicate social interactions more than on any other topic. Navigating relationships with participants, most of all understanding how to address moments of disconnection, was, as Deans observed, the most significant challenge for students in the class and the central point of our discussions. As a group, we problem solved about what each student in the class might do to make appropriate, ethical, timely decisions while always placing participants’ needs first.

Three Snapshots

What follows are snapshots from three students’ projects as they addressed challenges in their relationships with community members when they put their objectives for community outreach projects into action. Their examples illustrate why we need to be open to shifting and redefining our methods and recognizing the changeability of the communities in which we engage—as well as the changeability of our students—for this work to be sustainable.

Michelle: Responding to Shifting Conditions

Michelle knew, even before she proposed her study, that she wanted to work with children in a homeless shelter. She was studying to be an elementary school teacher and was therefore interested in a project that involved children writing in an informal site. The questions of why a shelter environment would be the best possible situation and what she expected to do once she got there shaped her study. She did some research on local shelters that house families. Together, she and I met with one of the administrators, a nun who functioned as a kind of gatekeeper of volunteers, and then Michelle continued on her own to consult with the coordinator of educational programs and eventually to create the writing group that she would lead weekly at the shelter. In

her finished seminar paper, Michelle reflected on the importance of being flexible as a researcher because she was at a place where conditions were changing all the time:

The first week I went in, introduced myself, and had them start right away with two prompts that I had prepared. They seemed to rush through it and I felt I did not have enough planned for them. I left feeling very uneasy about how the session went, and I knew I could not continue to do the same type of activity for the remaining weeks. I did not think they would ever feel comfortable with me being there, but I was proved wrong. As I started to alter my writing activities to make them more relatable to the kids, the participants produced more writing, laughed together at meetings, and generally seemed to be enjoying their time. By the fifth week, I even had one of the kids ask me what they would be doing the following week. As they became more comfortable with me being there, I started to feel more like a part of their group, and the results were rewarding. This was a group that had trouble trusting the consistency of people and activities, so once they saw that I was there week after week, the level of comfort increased as did the stability.

Michelle's problem was that children who resided in the shelter expected conditions to change frequently. They were unaccustomed to routine activities. One child was so resistant to participating in the writing group that he wrote the following note: "Dear Michelle, I do not like doing your creative writing because every day I have to go to school every day [sic] and I need to pay attention to me [sic] school work and home work plus I have to walk home every day from school and it is tiering [sic]. Sorry ☹ not to be mean or any thing. I just need to focus on my work." Soon after delivering the note, however, the boy conceded and chose to participate. Michelle tried to model for the children in her writing group consistent focused activity within their temporary home. Administrators at the shelter supported her efforts, but in order for her writing group to succeed, Michelle had to convince the children themselves. This was no easy task, as the note demonstrates, yet as Michelle kept coming to the shelter at the designated time, week after week, the children began to rely on her presence and eventually learned to appreciate her enough to enjoy writing with her.

Jessica: Integrity of Researcher

Jessica, an older student who is a parent and a worker, was intrigued by some of the published scholarship on literacy and social class, and used it to examine her own experiences as a working-class rural woman. Based on Jamie White-Farnham's research on women's heritage literacies, Jessica designed a study of the personal cookbooks that rural working-class women and men create as an aspect of their domestic lives. She spent the summer between semesters developing the project, and she came to me in the fall with a furrowed brow: What was she going to do? Twenty of her acquaintances volunteered to participate. How would she select? Later, when she had winnowed the potential participants to six and the cookbook interviews were in progress, Jessica was confronted

with a completely different problem. She described the trouble in a section of her seminar paper that she titled, “Integrity of Recipe”:

As a woman who grew up in rural society, I am a member of that community; however, my education and status of researcher makes me an outsider. As an insider, it could have been easy for me to overlook something, or make assumptions. I needed to make it a priority to really listen to what my participants were saying. I knew the participants in my study very well and anticipated what they were going to say. However, during each interview they said one or two things that really surprised me...

As an outsider, I worried that my participants would freeze up and not offer as much information as they could. I found this to be true when I sat down with my participants. As soon as the tape recorder was turned on the interviews became awkward. My participants became nervous and began to clam up. Most of them began to talk differently, in a more formal tone. A lot of the information that I received from my participants was received after the tape recorder was turned off. Beverly J. Moss discusses some of these aspects of research in her article “Ethnography and Composition: Studying Language at Home.” She addresses gaining trust within the community. She also talks about the difficulties that come about when writing up research in a community that you are familiar with. She cautioned about not assuming what participants will say. She also expressed the difficulties about studying people that you know, and not wanting to disappoint them or hurt your feelings when writing about them. This article is a good moral guide as I work through my study.

Jessica’s shift in position from longtime acquaintance to a representative of the university who was approaching people with a series of questions and a recording device, came off as a threat to the participants, her lifetime acquaintances, most of who hadn’t attended college and suddenly saw their old friend as starkly different from them. Although our class offered her advice, only Jessica could know how best to maintain relationships while encouraging participants to contribute to her study. After a few bad experiences, she decided that she would have to concentrate her attention on balancing between unrecorded—and thus less accurate—interviews or risk intimidating those with whom she wished to engage. There was no easy answer. She walked this tightrope throughout the entire study.

Laurel: Unpredictable Encounters

Laurel had serious problems with access. Initially, she hoped to work with residents at a halfway house for women who were completing their prison sentences. She spent over a month calling and visiting the residence, trying to make contact with the program director. But after a long time of ignoring her calls and visits, the administrator informed Laurel that they were no longer working with volunteers.

Various community literacy researchers have reflected on the project that goes wrong (Paula Mathieu in *Tactics of Hope*; Lisa Mastrangelo in “First Year Composition and Women in Prison”; Blackburn and Cushman in the chapter mentioned above, etc.). One of the terrible outcomes can be that the student is left without a project in the middle of the semester; such was Laurel’s plight. But she *had* to have a seminar study, and it *had* to work or she wouldn’t graduate, so after a number of other false starts—and great stubbornness on her part—she found an alternative. Laurel situated her study at the Omega House, a residence for adults with HIV/AIDS who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. At first, she was simply relieved to have a place for her research. But in addition to finding a new location, Laurel also had to redesign the project to suit her new population. She had expected to work with prisoners on the “next step” of their rehabilitation, which involved prescribed writing tasks. At Omega House, there was no writing component. So Laurel designed a writing group with the hope that residents would attend. She came prepared with prompts, paper, and pens, yet she was unprepared for the overall interest the residents had in writing. All of the residents participated in her group, and some asked for additional assistance with editing and typing their journal entries, poetry, letters, and stories. Laurel assumed that residents would have difficulty writing; however, she found that they were enthusiastic writers, and that a few of them looked toward writing as a means of self-therapy and personal fulfillment. She reflected on this in a section of her seminar paper titled, “Exhilaration and Revelation”:

Over the course of the last few months that I spent at Omega House, I realized how much I learned about the residents in such a short period of time. They had all been kind enough to join my weekly writing group and to give me samples of the writing that they wrote with me every Thursday night. I had noticed multiple patterns in terms of content. The most common content themes are related to prior drug addiction, fears and regrets, and a longing for missed family and friends. The residents appeared to have a strong desire to share their writing with me. At the end of each weekly writing activity, they persuaded me to keep their work. What I found most rewarding and shocking was when the residents began to write about topics other than my drafted prompts. A few of them also brought in different pieces of writing that they had been working on. Although I am not aware of their educational backgrounds, one thing is for sure, many of them are quite literate, and they turn to writing to reflect and figure things out.

Laurel could not have predicted that the participants in her writing group would be so willing to write or that they would be so eager to share their texts. What began as a daunting situation transformed into one of openness and productivity as participants created new writing and revised older pieces for Laurel, their new audience.

Committing to Difficulty

Eventually, all of the projects succeeded, and each of the fifteen students in class gained appropriate closure with participating individuals and agencies. Every situation

was different, however, and many relationships were complicated to the extent that all relationships and situations are varied and complex. While some community literacy workers have bemoaned such difficulty, calling it failure or “unsustainability,” I found, along with my students, that these are precisely the moments that are most valuable because they offer opportunities in which significant learning occurs. These are the “unpredictable encounters” that Feigenbaum refers to as possibility, as sustainability.

But I find it necessary to continue viewing instances of difficulty as they are, as moments that threaten a student’s and/or a participant’s sense of stability. In order to work through the challenges, students and their community partners need to pay attention to instability as an opportunity to reconfigure their community partner relationships. The three snapshots demonstrate how negotiating difficulty can lead to a more engaged relationship: How could Michelle develop and maintain trust? How could Jessica hope to conduct ethical research with the recorder off? How could Laurel listen to participants’ accounts, talk with them, and record their words as they wished them to be documented? Michelle, Jessica, and Laurel completed their projects knowing that, along with their participants, they had created something together. They had invested mutually in this work.

None of these relationships could have succeeded within a single model of a community partner relationship. Michelle, Jessica, and Laurel’s experiences suggest that we need a more fluid model for how to interact in outreach projects. Moments of difficulty can be heavy with frustration and anxiety for all involved; yet, they contain opportunities for collaboration, for problem solving, both in and outside of the classroom. In this way, difficulty can yield to greater meaning. That is when the critical self and social examination occurs. Having to work through difficulty was, in the end, what made the projects valuable and meaningful.

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Thank you to all the students in the 2014 Community Literacy Studies seminar at Eastern Connecticut State University who gave permission for their experiences and work to be mentioned in this paper and especially to those whose writing is excerpted here: Michelle Hoetjes, Laurel Payzant, and Jessica Wainman.

Author Bio

Lauren Rosenberg is the author of *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*, CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, 2015. Rosenberg's literacy research extends from the study of adult learners in her book to a current project on the writing practices of military personnel while in service in relation to the practices they develop as university students and faculty. Her writing on literacy issues has appeared in *Community Literacy Journal* and *Reflections, A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*. She has also co-authored a number of book chapters and articles on feminist rhetorics and on writing program administration. At her home institution, New Mexico State University, Rosenberg teaches courses in literacy studies and composition theory. She is director of NMSU's writing program and associate department head in English. From 2006–2016 she was on the faculty at Eastern Connecticut State University.