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Editors' Interview with Founding Editors Michael Moore and John Warnock

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Veronica: Michael and John, we have a photograph that you sent us of the day that you decided to found the *Community Literacy Journal*, and I'm wondering if you could tell us a little about where you were and how the conversation came about to launch this journal.

John: It was Michael who proposed it, so Michael you should tell the story.

Michael: We were at the 2005 Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco. It was a great conference, and John and I took the opportunity, since we were both there, to catch up on things, just talk. I think we had both been maybe not at the same session but a related session where people were doing service-learning presentations. One of the things we started talking about, just conversationally, there really was no plan or agenda here, we talked about whether people were using the terms service learning and community literacy synonymously, as though they were the same thing.

I don't know if anyone has written about this, but apparently in the mid 90's, … campus administrators had begun asking service-learning

practitioners and programs for some sort of assessment data and explanations of their methodology. ... Apparently, there wasn't a lot of it available. So simultaneously people started using "community literacy" for their work, possibly as a way to not get caught up in that other conversation.

John: Michael, could I take us back to 1997 even?

Michael: Please.

John: That's the year that at the University of Arizona in Rhetoric and Composition in the Teaching of English, we founded a course called the "Practicum in Community Literacy." The premise of that course was the distinction that Michael is talking about and another distinction, as well. I'd begun to feel that in discussions of literacy, there was a kind of a tendency to think in an uncomplicated way of literacy as academic literacy. Or rather the other way around, thinking of academic literacy as some kind of fulfillment of the idea of literacy. And, I didn't think that was the case. I thought that was parochial and so forth. So, we established this course that invited our graduate students to go out into the community, into Tucson. ... We knew there were a lot of different associations doing what was obviously literacy work, but it was not academic literacy work. It was all kinds of things that we now recognize as being part of community literacy. I see professional writing in those terms too. We had the strong sense that we wanted to get our graduate students out into the community and to develop an outside perspective on academic literacy. And so, that's what we did. We didn't set up any situations for them. We began to develop relationships with people who were doing community literacy with refugees and with reentry populations, and so forth, foster families. And, we wanted [students] to go out and develop a kind of critical perspective on academic literacy through this experience. It also turned out to be, and this was a benefit of the course that I thought was quite lovely, for our first-year graduate students who came from elsewhere, it was a terrific opportunity to get to know Tucson because they got out amongst the different communities.

          And, I just wanted to say that when we were on the sidewalk in that picture, this came, as far as I was concerned, out of the blue. We were standing on the sidewalk. And, Michael turned to me and said, "You want to start a journal?" It was kind of like that. And, after I caught my breath, I said, "Hey, that sounds kind of fun." And, we started to do it. And, in the mission statement we very consciously installed this distinction that Michael was just talking about between community literacy and service learning.

Veronica: If I'm understanding then, it sounds like initially the idea was to see how academic literacies functioned in community sites, and what developed was a conception of community literacy as something distinct. Or, something worthy of separate study. Is that what I'm hearing you say?

John: I would say it a little differently. Because at this point, because of my background in legal writing, I really didn't think of academic literacy as representing what was needed in all situations. In fact, what I was interested in, in the Practicum, was giving our graduate students a perspective on academic literacy as but one kind of literacy.

Veronica: Ah, yes, I see.

John: So, it was more along those lines.

Veronica: Right. Okay. And then, how did you see the development of the *Community Literacy Journal* as different from or offering different kinds of scholarship from what some of the other scholarship happening in our field offered?

Michael: Well, that's a good question. We thought about it a lot, actually. The distinction at the time, at least the level of manuscripts, was if we received a manuscript that was clearly more based in service-learning methods, having students go out into the community to do things is framed as service learning [rather than what we understood as community literacy], we would contact [other] journal editors ourselves and ask, "would you like to see this manuscript if it's a good fit for you?" So, it was never really a big problem.

John: It was a very clear distinction. We had two very different angles on the project. Though, as Michael says, sometimes there would be a submission that might look like it could be either/or. But, surprisingly infrequently. In my experience, it's often really easy to tell whether somebody is doing what we call service learning or what we consider to be community literacy work.

Paul: Can you say more about the difference between them as you understand it, because I think a lot of people probably ... Well, especially if they're newer to this work, they probably assume that those mean essentially the same thing.

Michael: It's still true now. … Community Literacy has always struck me as having research traditions. That's actually going back to "Ways With Words", you know, Shirley Brice Heath. That had a sort of research tradition behind it and scholarship.

John: Here's the distinction that has worked for me. The expression "service learning" has in it the word "learning." And, what that does is it privileges the learning of the students who go into the community setting. And, we in our Practicum made a very strong point in the beginning of saying to the students, when you go into these settings, they are not there for your purposes, you are there for their purposes. And, yes, sometimes you can end up doing research, and, yes, it can turn out to be research that leads to

a dissertation and whatever, get you going in an academic sense. But, the first criterion is that the research be something that they want to do.

Now, that's a real challenge in community settings, as you undoubtedly know. The question they would often have is why do people drop out at such a high rate of our programs. And, of course, a research project like that is not something that can be pursued in a semester.

So, anyway, there are all sorts of wonderful challenges here in coming up with research projects that do serve the purposes of the community literacy setting. If research was not involved, that was fine with us. We weren't thinking of this as something that people would be examined on or that would produce new knowledge or anything like that. We just wanted to provide our students with that new angle on things.

Paul: I think that will be helpful for people to hear.

Michael: Yes. Me too. I do too. It seems unresolved to me.

John: But, it's a challenge because a university, when they set up something to support what some people call, "community literacy," it's almost always service learning because that's the business they're in. They're in the business of learning. The students learn stuff. So, almost all of the formats for that have to do with the students -- measuring the students' learning or assessing the students' learning at the end of it. And, that's the main project.

[A] guy Greg Hart was the head of the Pima County Community Literacy at the time, that has now merged with the community college. But, what he said was, "You know? We've got a lot of programs here that we support and we're funded at about 1/4 the rate that you guys at the university are funded. So, in fact, when university people come into our community literacy settings, you can expect to experience a certain kind of suspicion and resentment because people have seen university researchers come in before for a semester and use the community literacy setting to get a research paper out of it and then they're out of here."

And, that's not our project. So it's tricky to get the university to sponsor this kind of work. But, as Michael says, I think the University of Arizona in particular is quite interested in being able to say it's doing this kind of thing.

Paul: I think what you're talking about connects well with one of our other questions. What were some of the critical issues scholars were wrestling with back then? That was certainly the core of Paula [Mathieu]'s book, this tendency of scholars and students to go out into the community and do something that benefited themselves. And, who knows whether it helped people in the community or not. Or, maybe even was harmful in some ways. So, I think that's one of the critical issues. I wonder if there were other issues that scholars were working on at this point in the development.

Michael: Yes. I think in our first few issues, the first three or four, let's say, we were conscious of the methodology around this, and does community literacy have one. What is it? And, how are people designing projects? Because for some people it's purely ethnographic. You know? Just going into a community and doing ethnography or participant observer type things. For others, it's discourse analysis, things like that. So, we tried. I still think that's a critical issue: what counts as a methodology for community literacy? That is still a generative question, I think.

John: I agree. Your reference to ethnographies is certainly apt because the way we had things set up, the graduate students when they went into a community literacy setting, it was all together analogous to an ethnographer going into [a community of study]. There was an arrival story there to be told. And, there were relationships to be built. And, I think a lot of what I've seen from our students, and I think Michael has a much better sense of what the manuscripts have been dealing with, but from our students, I got a real sense that they were interested in that kind of thing, in studying ... Giving an account that was ethnographic. And, of course, the field of ethnography struggles with the question, too: are we doing this for the benefit of tenure back home or are we doing it for the benefit of the communities we're studying? And, lately they've gone in the second direction, which is, I think, great. But, there's nothing to prevent a student from doing an ethnography that both serves the purposes of the community literacy group and their own academic career.

Veronica: When you were putting together that first issue, were there particular voices that you wanted to include? Did you solicit articles or did you have an open call?

Michael: Both. I'd always been curious, and I'm still curious to this day, about the role of Linda Flower's work in people's training. Their own training in graduate school, or what they do with it later. The extent to which people draw on her work in Pittsburgh in their own projects. So, we did solicit. I think that first issue contained a co-authored piece by Linda, Lorraine Higgins, and Elenore Long.

Veronica: Michael, when you say that you're still curious about her impact, can you talk a little more about what you mean?

Michael: Well, there's still good stuff online from that organization that she put together, which is the Community Literacy Center. She has been generous in keeping this stuff available. It is still interesting to go back and look at it. That work, in terms of problem solving in the community, cultural conflicts, and things like that, it seems to me so timely still. That was something we did accomplish in the first issue, is getting her in there with a number of her colleagues.

Paul: In terms of the history of the journal, could you tell us a little bit about how you've seen the journal evolve over the past eleven years?

Michael: Well, issue by issue. We really did take it issue by issue. And, it took a few years to get over the anxiety of worrying whether we'd have enough manuscripts. We've never had a problem. And, that was a relief. It took me a long time to experience that relief. I was nervous for several years that we probably had tapped everything we were going to tap, and we'd have to shut down. I mean, I had nightmares about that. But, it never came to pass. It's always been a nice robust journal.

I think one of the things we did without planning it was publishing many graduate students' very first publications in a peer reviewed journal. And, some of them have been part of that *Community Literacy Journal* community ever since as book reviewers, as editorial board members, and that part has been fantastic.

There are some things we haven't accomplished. One of them is we seem to have too narrow a focus on print and not digital media. There's a lot of interesting stuff going on in community literacy that's digital. After-school programs giving people cameras to take into the community and make photo essays, for example. We never seem to get our hands or our arms around how to get that into the journal. Or, on the website. With a couple of exceptions that we happen to know about personally. I feel like we really limited ourselves to alphabetic text after making the opposite claim right in our mission statement, our interest in multimodal or multimedia approaches and projects. So, that's largely unexplored but still easily accomplishable, I think.

The other thing is I didn't anticipate it being so challenging to get community partners to publish in the journal. And, the ones I've reached out to have shown interest. They want to write about what they do, and they would like to be able to post a case study of their own work. For some of them, that would actually help them. It's that some of them are thinking about going back to school and things like that.

But, the one consistent problem is, and this is something that came up when I took the community literacy practicum in the '90s, the logistics are almost unbearable, hard to do, because many community organizers, people who direct the community programs, they work 80 hours a week for nothing, basically. They're already overwhelmed. The concept of them putting together a publication, even though we've reached out and offered to help with grad students and other forms of support, it's been really, really hard to connect and support them in doing that. Even though, it would demonstratively help them.

Veronica: You mention that it would help them, and I guess that's one of the questions I have. How does publishing in a predominantly academic journal help them? What does it offer?

Michael: Well, like I said, some of them have Bachelor's degrees and would like to go back and get a Master's degree. They're either in Social Work or Anthropology or Social Justice. We know that the writing would help them get their foot in the door. And, a lot of them have had very untraditional careers. They've done school, they've done activism, or they've done refugee settlement programs. They've had amazing experiences, but to package that is hard.

Veronica: Yes. Paul and I are hoping through the Project Profiles section that we've just launched to create a space for a less traditional kind of essay, where people can talk about their programs.

Michael: Oh, yes. They're sitting on wonderful material in many cases.

John: Yes. Partnerships seems to be kind of key here. Rather than just having them do it, you know?

Michael: Right.

John: But, it's a form of the thing I know you've done so much of, Michael, which is mentoring. And, to think of it in those terms... without it being the kind of top-down stuff that universities typically do.

Michael: Oh, absolutely. This was one of Tilly Warnock's [one of my professors at University of Arizona in the RCTE practicum] main, almost weekly, prompts in her practicum. And, that is the role of logistics in this work and why are they so predictably difficult? What causes it to be so predictably challenging? When, in fact, we live in the same communities, many of them, with our community partners. And, it's worth reflecting on every week. Why is this so hard? What are the forces that cause that?

John: I think that's a huge question for all of this, isn't it. Why is it so underfunded in relation to the university?

Michael: Yes.

John: This is one thing that I've been thinking about where the field might go, or the research might go, or writing might go: how does this underfunding serve the purposes of the status quo?

             It clearly in some ways does. And, I think unfortunately it's the case that service learning may serve the status quo better than community literacy work does. And, it's still "learning." It's still what schools are all about. And, community literacy work can be about other things, but as soon as it gets, just to use the word, as soon as it gets "political," it gets in even more trouble. So, I think it's a terrifically important and interesting question that hasn't been dealt with very much by people working in the area yet.

             And, on the point of the media thing, I agree entirely that that's something the new journal could find ways to support.

Michael: Right.

John: We did some. And, of course, you got us to put together our social me-
             dia editor, but only a couple of years ago. And, actually, way back at the
             founding of the journal, we had hoped to get enough support to be able
             to set up a very elaborate website ... And, to call it the Community Lit-
             eracy Forum. And, that it would be even a job site for community litera-
             cy workers.

Michael: Yes.

John: And, it would do all sorts of things in the electronic forum. But, there was
             just ... We just never had the budget to really get serious about that. And,
             anything that has happened on the website has happened because Michael
             has done it. So, that's just the end of that story.

Veronica: Well, I have a question. You were both so excited by the first Conference
             on Community Writing.

Michael: Yes.

Veronica: And, it led us to first think of having the connection between the journal
             and the conference.

Michael: Right.

Veronica: I'm wondering what synergies you imagined between the two, and wheth-
             er you see the larger field of rhetoric and composition shifting in any ways
             you can talk about to embrace this kind of work as more mainstream or
             more central to the field? It seems like there's a kind of critical mass.

Michael: Yes. I think the short answer is yes. I've noticed. One of the things we
             tapped into in 2006 or 2007, without realizing it was [people] were sitting
             on work that they couldn't get published anywhere else. They were pretty
             explicit about that. I've sent this out, they would say, to two different jour-
             nals in our field and in, you know, *College English* and *CCC*, and they just
             weren't getting published. And so, without noticing we were doing that,
             we tapped into that very deep well. But, I think that has changed. There
             are now more publications and venues for them in our field. I do see that
             expanding. I don't know if it's mainstream yet, though.

John: I think the field of rhetoric and composition has in it fundamentally an
             issue here to which community literacy work could be highly relevant.
             And, it has to do with the fact that the word "rhetoric" has two very differ-
             ent senses in our usages, doesn't it? Rhetoric is what Donald Trump does.
             And, rhetoric, well not just Donald Trump, but, you know, lawyers in
             court rooms and people applying for things, and so forth. And, rhetoric is
             also an academic field where people write academic articles and theorize.
             And, what's favored in almost all cases in the academy is the second one of
             those. But, I think one of the growth points for the field that really hasn't

seen a whole lot of growth yet is into more of the other kind. Of the first kind. Of the practice, of the action, rather than the analysis. One example project is with videos. This was a media thing actually that a student in the Practicum got involved in. The funding was zeroed out by the Arizona legislature for community literacy work. So, they started a video storytelling project. This was Brad Jacobson, ... remember that name. You'll be hearing from Brad. And, he did a video storytelling project where they got people who had had wonderful life experiences by virtue of their literacy work and had them produce these videos that were then delivered to the legislature, which then, restored funding the next year. You can't claim cause and effect, but it was a very important sort of action project that involved something other than academic discourse, but definitely literacy of a modern kind. And, it was an action, not just analysis.

Veronica: We wanted to hear from you about some of the most joyous parts of this work. What were some of the most positive aspects of working on this journal?

Michael: It was day to day a pleasure for me. You never know what emails you're going to get first thing in the morning. All four of us probably share that experience. But, as Journal Editor, you get these unanticipated queries and manuscripts from people who've been working on these projects for months and years. And, for them to think of us as a venue for that work is overwhelming sometimes. That they would trust us with that work is always a source of inspiration for me.

Michael: Having published many graduate students' first publications is of course a treat. And, having the opportunity to develop ... A lot of grad students work on a lot of journals. They really do. But, you don't read much about that. You don't read much about the professional development. Copyediting their first manuscript or corresponding with senior scholars in our field that they may have just read two weeks ago in an anthology. Those kinds of moments were wonderful, memorable, and generative. Those kinds of things are hard to put in an official curriculum. It's sort of the hands on, day to day, professional development. Shaping, helping, supporting writers in their work. And, I think it has paid off for several of them in terms of their own confidence, their own writing, and their own willingness to put words into a manuscript. I think it has helped. That has been a joy.

John: Yes. You spoke to me about that often, Michael. And, it made me realize that I think you and Tilly are the best mentor-teachers that I know. And, that's the area of joyous activity -- working with the graduate students. When you had us put together that list of all the graduate students we had worked with, that was a kick because -

Michael: It was.

John: I remembered all of them... And, it was a long list of people. And, every one of them ... It was exciting.

Michael: Right.

John: And, in all instances, we never paid anybody anything for anything they did. I felt guilty about it, but I had to realize that, well, in fact, in the interactions, you could see this was really meaningful stuff to them in just the way you were describing, I think.

Michael: Oh, absolutely. It was meaningful. Absolutely. That was my sense, too.

Veronica: Michael, in terms of the quality of manuscript that you would get from some of these graduate students or junior faculty who were first time authors, if you felt that it was not journal-ready yet but you wanted to support the idea, how did you deal with that in terms of mentorship?

Michael: This is part of the job. You get a manuscript. So, let's use the graduate student example. Clearly it was a seminar paper, and all they've done is renamed it. And, I don't disrespect that. That's trying to do the work and get a publication. But, it was clearly written for a seminar. It's overly jargon-y maybe. It has that feel. I don't have the words. But, they weren't a friendly read. How's that? It wasn't really as accessible as you would like. Or, as accessible as many community literacy projects result in. And so, I would just tell them like that. As a reader, as this one reader, I had a hard time getting through that five-page literature review, which they were probably required to do for their seminar paper or for their course grade. And, I'd just suggest ways they could cut that down to two or three paragraphs by prioritizing their inspirations to the work. They often want to make connections to other writers because they're still situating themselves in the field as a new member of that community. But they could say more about the people they worked with and less about other things. Does that make sense? It's just good old-fashioned editing.

John: It's not unlike … the thing that we do with graduate students when we talk with them about what you do with your dissertation to make it into a book.

Michael: Right. Exactly. Well, that's the model. You have to revise it.

John: And, part of it ... I love your word, "friendly," Michael. Academic writing is looking at generic conventions typically, and so forth.

Michael: Right.

John: But, it doesn't really have a relationship with an audience, with a reader.
          What you said there, Michael, reminded me of something that I wanted to say... And, I may already have shared this with Paul and Veronica, but I think one of the ways that the *CLJ* has contributed something to thinking about literacy in ways other than print is with the covers. I mean,

those covers, if one sat down and did a kind of a study of what they say about literacy, I think you would see wonderful ... And, that's entirely, of course, your doing, Michael… wonderful people who have contributed to these things. I think those covers have done, have spoken, very loudly about that kind of thing.

Michael: People have [been] generous sharing their art and cover art and letting us use it like that.

John: We got the cairns in Boulder Creek on there, too.

Michael: Yes, we sure did.

Veronica: There is such an interesting balance that we're trying to grapple with right now. We got an email from someone working on a tenure review asking what the rejection rate was. And, there are these academic standards for journals, you know? Do you reject enough manuscripts? A high rejection rate shows that it's a good journal. And then, on the other side, wanting to mentor and to offer something really different from typical academic journals. And wanting to publish people who might not be able to publish in *CCC* or *College English* yet. It is a balance that Paul and I are grappling with right now. What do we want to be as editors?

Michael: I've always grappled with that because I get those requests too. Going up for tenure especially, that very thing. And, it's hard because we accept many manuscripts after significant revision. We never accept right out of the gate, but we have a very high acceptance rate compared to *CCC*.

Veronica: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Paul and I have started sending manuscripts back for preliminary revision before we'd send it out for blind review. But we believe in the concept of the piece, so we don't want to reject it outright.

Michael: And, the ones that we reject are clearly more meant for education or another field. An education journal or health literacy. Things like that. But, I understand. There was one year we had a 40% acceptance rate, which is considered very high. But, that's, I think, I don't know. I don't have a problem with that. But, I can see where it's a problem at the other end. Especially for those who have to quantify.

Veronica: Yes. It's a kind of radical work. It's really revising concepts of what constitutes a strong academic journal.

Michael: Sure. And, we could be more ... could make it harder for them and ask for different kinds of methods or framing. It's possible. I preferred always to revise. That's why we have such a high acceptance rate.

John: I don't know any way out of that problem, actually. I think it's just a choice. And, it's unfortunate. It's just too bad. But, I think at some point, the editor's just going to have to decide what kind of thing they want to support and for what reasons. And, I just don't see that they're quite compatible.

Paul: Yes. Definitely. This [interview] was actually helpful just for me personally. And, it has me thinking about things we might do. Understanding the history behind decisions you've made helps me think through where we want to go because we've had some similar conversations. And so, this was very helpful for me. Thank you.

Michael: I'm so glad. Oh, no. Thank you. And, I hope, neither of you, I hope will hesitate to holler if you need anything. Or, any help. Don't ever hesitate.

Michael Moore (left) and John Warnock (right) at the 2008 MLA Conference in San Francisco, where they received the Best New Journal Award from the Council of Editors for Learned Journals (CELJ).