Cultivating the Flow of Community Literacy

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Emerging from the keynote address at the inaugural Conference on Community Writing, this snapshot examines how an engaged infrastructure for community writing might operate as a flow-cultivation milieu. Such a milieu would facilitate self-determination, which suggests that people do their most compelling, rewarding, and innovative work when they exercise autonomy, pursue competence, and feel purpose; wise mentorship, in which mentors and mentees interrelate in an ongoing manner that supports mutually high expectations and achievements, and a listening stance that broadly distributes participation and shared learning. This snapshot also argues that, should an engaged infrastructure ever cease operating as a flow-cultivation milieu, it should be dismantled.

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As we consider the various permutations of what a national infrastructure for community literacy might look like, I want to consider how this infrastructure can facilitate our collective ability to do our best work—our most inspiring, productive, and ultimately transformative work. As in my keynote address in Boulder, I argue that what brings out our best is the experience of *flow*, or the condition of being so resolutely focused on an activity that one loses sense of external time and space. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—the scholar most associated with the term—and others have detailed over several decades of research, flow enables people to realize higher levels of performance than they can achieve outside this mental state. Key here is that people are most likely to experience flow when practicing activities they are *intrinsically* motivated to pursue. Csikszentmihalyi explains:

> The following words from a poet and rock climber apply to all the thousands of interviews collected by us and by others over the years: 'The mystique of rock climbing is climbing; you get to the top of a rock glad it's over but really wish it would go on forever. The justification of climbing is climbing, like the justification of poetry is writing…. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow.' (54)

Opposed to intrinsically motivated activities are those that people perform primarily for the sake of tangible rewards: money, grades, prestige, career advancement, etc.

Crucially, I imagine that many of us practicing community literacy do so for intrinsic, flow-friendly reasons, not because we expect to make more money or win awards, and certainly not because such projects make our career paths easier. Experiences such as participating in communities and networks of allies, disassociating our work (to the extent we can) from the larger educational factory, and creatively maladjusting to the status quo of a deeply unjust society (Kohl), *are* the primary rewards. I argue, then, that whether or not we establish a new institution or adhere to more informal relationships; whether or not we make the Conference on Community Writing a biennial event tied to a journal or book series; whether or not we court philanthropic money; whether or not we create titles, hierarchies, and bureaucratic procedures; this engaged infrastructure should operate as what I call a *flow-cultivation milieu*, three basic principles of which I'd like to describe briefly.

One key factor of a flow-cultivation milieu is to enact Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's concept of *self-determination theory*, their explanation for why intrinsically motivated people outperform extrinsically motivated people on creative tasks. People experience self-determination in contexts where they exercise autonomy over their work, they have the opportunity to pursue mastery of desired skills, and they feel a sense of purpose and connectedness to others. A second factor is *wise mentorship*, my expanded conceptualization of *wise feedback* (Cohen et al.), whereby teachers maintain high expectations of all students, convey the message that everyone can achieve these expectations, and provide rigorous feedback so students have a support structure for doing so. Wise mentorship reflects a sustained relationship in which a mentor acts as a reliable and ongoing presence in the life of a mentee, and vice versa. A third factor involves fostering a *listening stance* amid distributed rhetorical activity, à la Jeff Grabill, who argues that acts of public rhetoric always reflect dynamic, multifaceted interactions among groups of people, and that to embody principles of egalitarianism and inclusivity, such processes must be structured so that everyone listens as robustly as they speak. For Grabill, "infrastructural access […] means not only a 'place at the table,' it means the rhetorical ability to participate effectively and the structured requirement to listen to what others say […] Actual discourse between others is required for ethical institutional design, and it is required as well to build community" (124).

Fortunately, as I see it, flow-cultivation milieus are already flourishing in many sites of community literacy, as evidenced by the innovative and inspiring stories, practices, and experiences that circulated among hundreds of practitioners at the inaugural Conference on Community Writing. In my keynote, I focused primarily on the power of wise mentorship, specifically the crucial ways I myself have been mentored by people situated in both academic and extracurricular spaces. In fact, as I have come to self-identify as an engaged scholar over the past decade, I have been struck repeatedly by the pre-existing (if unstructured) networks of mentorship in our field—some locally based, some spread out over a wide geographic region—networks I tapped liberally in order to write my dissertation, to position myself as a community-literacy scholar on the job market, and to write and to complete the book

I needed to publish in order to obtain tenure. At multiple moments along the way, my path would have been blocked had I not met certain key people at just the right time. And one of the most exciting aspects of this Conference was to see so many of these mentors together under one (literal and figurative) tent.

We may not have our own infrastructure, even though our work is tied deeply *to* infrastructures, but *something* substantive, if more serendipitous than systematic, already exists. These networks of relationships and ideas circulate through real people—scholars, students, and community partners—and the artifacts of their work, namely the scholarship and community-based publications that appear in local, regional, and global forums, venues, and mediums. In my case, wise mentorship has been the most important source of flow in my development as a scholar and citizen. This has included meeting and getting to know mentors, working actively with them, and exchanging ideas and stories.

Particularly opportune was my convening with Alex Salinas and Carlos Gonzalez, two Miami Dade College professors who welcomed me into the Imagination Federation, a nexus of local, national, and international community partnerships that deeply shaped both the content and goals of my book, *Collaborative Imagination*. This was at a time just after I moved to Miami as a self-proclaimed community-literacy practitioner who was on the tenure clock but who had no South Florida community ties. My interactions with Carlos and Alex led me further to the Algebra Project, a nonprofit organization that promotes math literacy as a vehicle for community organizing and social-justice work in underserved communities. I also had the good fortune to meet and learn from the Algebra Project's founder, Bob Moses, whose resolute efforts to use mathematics as a force for social change inspired my thinking about how people in our own field might use rhetoric to do the same— or what I call the Rhetoric Project.[1]

While mentorship is most readily considered in face-to-face terms, I too want to stress the collective legacy of community-literacy scholarship. In my case, flow has emerged from many scholarly sources, including Paula Mathieu's insistence that relationships precede projects and programs, Steve Parks's and Nick Pollard's vision of the *vernacular university*, Eli Goldblatt's conception of *joint sponsorship*, Jeff Grabill's questioning the rigid distinctions between institutions and communities, Kirk Branch's educational literacy practices that always point toward the world that ought to be, and Ellen Cushman's rejection of false consciousness. In some sense, each of these encounters with wise mentorship—whether in person or more distally—was made possible by the previous one, which reminds me how the intertextuality of scholarship and the inter-networking of people are themselves further interlaced. And of course so many of the people I mentioned here have enriched each other's work as initial contacts evolved into relationships that tapped into, shaped, and were themselves shaped by inter-institutional, inter-disciplinary, and inter-generational networks of community engagement and activism. Flow is all over the place in our work.[2]

Of course, as so many scholars have written, the creation of formal infrastructures and their corresponding bureaucratic procedures, policies, practices, and rituals can threaten the spirit and vigor of the relationships that gave rise to these infrastructures in the first place. Too often, community-literacy practitioners experience flow *in spite*, rather than *because*, of strategic involvement from the institutions for and with which they work. And this is a future we must vigilantly guard against. Nevertheless, I think we can productively ask ourselves what it would mean to build engaged infrastructure that enhances, sustains, and further networks the flow-cultivation milieus that faculty, students, and community partners are already striving to create, *even while* remaining connected to institutions that tend to disrupt flow. In other words, how can engaged infrastructure create new opportunities for people already doing great work while enabling more people to participate in such opportunities?

These are ambitious goals, to be sure, and their full realization will not occur without the ongoing collaboration of many hundreds of people, but I would like to offer the following guiding ideas that I see as consistent with the sustainable cultivation of flow.

Sharing stories frequently

In particular, people should have regular chances to circulate their origin stories as community-literacy practitioners, stories that would, I hope, centralize both the giving and receiving of wise mentorship. Such stories would enable us to collaboratively recall and reconsider what it is that drives us to this work so that we can adapt to evolving circumstances and nurture tactical flexibility amid a larger strategic infrastructure rather than allowing institutional rigidity to insinuate itself in the work and, through the unrelenting power of bureaucratic inertia, consume it. Making these exchanges possible might mean setting aside a fair amount of time and space at forums like the Community Writing Conference for unconventional and relatively informal presentations, the kinds of practices that traditional scholars might find distasteful but that I hope community-oriented practitioners would embrace. As just one of many possible examples, I recommend structuring some workshops around the concept of PechaKucha 20x20 presentations (see pechakucha.org).[3]

Reimagining the mission

People making up this infrastructure should regularly, and authentically, re-justify its reasons for being, a process that storytelling might facilitate. That is, we should regularly pose questions such as:
1. What is the purpose of this organization?
2. Who is *supposed* to benefit from it (and how)?
3. Who actually *is* benefitting from it (and how)?

Should wide gaps emerge in the answers to questions 2 and 3, for instance, there will be a clear exigence for reimagining how to better align practices with the core values, purposes, and goals that animate us. And if answers to these questions ever become automatic, assumed, and predetermined, it will be time to consider the following:

Letting the infrastructure crumble and (maybe) building anew

The future of engaged infrastructure should never be a given, for when this happens, priorities shift from intrinsically to extrinsically motivated goals, passions and compassions become duties and obligations, and flow gets impeded. Though such processes can be unpleasant, people need to be ready to tear down what they have built if the benefits no longer outweigh the costs and if the infrastructure has become an end in itself rather than a means to promoting social change, community building, and flow. I suggest further that as many people as possible should participate in determining *why* and *whether* future Conferences on Community Writing are necessary rather than merely determining *when* and *where* the next one should be.

As we push forward with the primary call for this special issue, building engaged infrastructure, I hope everyone answering this call will prioritize flow. Above all else, this means promoting the sustainability of relationships—the core of any flow-cultivation milieu. The good news is that so many of these relationships already exist, so what we need are ways to further support them while creating affordances for new ones to develop. The known and unknown complexities of this process lie before us, but let us not assume that such infrastructure need be permanent. It should exist insofar as it facilitates strong relationships, and should this no longer be the case, let us seek other ways to build such relationships.

Notes

1.   As addressed in my article "Rhetoric, Mathematics, and the Pedagogies We Want: Empowering Youth Access to Twenty-First Century Literacies," the Rhetoric Project seeks to utilize rhetorical literacy in ways analogous to how the Algebra Project utilizes math literacy, empowering traditionally underserved students to become advocates for quality education in their communities.

2.   In my talk, I emphasized that much of the wise mentorship I received was serendipitous. However, I also suggested that one can "prime serendipity," which I endeavor to do by consistently reaching out to people whose work I admire—not an easy task for an introvert like myself, but one I consider crucial, particularly for younger scholars. Making these connections has often been as simple as emailing someone, or approaching them at a conference, to say that their work has inspired me. To some extent, then, we can facilitate the emergence of serendipity, and in a field with so many conscientious, diligent, and vibrant people, some serendipities are inevitable. Let us be thankful for this, because in an academic system that undervalues community-based scholarship even as it embraces the buzzword of engagement, serendipity must remain part of the process whether or not we build engaged infrastructure. In fact, I hope that a primary purpose *of* this infrastructure would be to prime serendipitous mentorship, and I want to single out Veronica House and Paula Mathieu for spearheading movement in this direction, both by organizing the Community Writing Happy Hour at the 2016 CCCC and for proposing a Community Writing Mentoring Workshop at the 2017 CCCC.

3.   My thanks to Tamera Marko for first making me aware of PechaKucha presentations and their potential both to foster storytelling and to create community. As explained on the FAQ page of pechakucha.org, a "PechaKucha 20x20 is a simple presentation format where you show 20 images, each for 20 seconds. The images advance automatically and you talk along to the images." At just under seven minutes, PechaKuchas require people to tell stories in as concise and (hopefully) compelling a manner as possible.

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Author Bio

Paul Feigenbaum is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Florida International University. His research, teaching, and engagement interests include community literacy, public rhetoric, the science of learning, and anything that promotes people's intrinsic motivations. Prior to completing his PhD at the University of Michigan, he taught English in Uzbekistan through the Peace Corps, and he has participated in community-writing projects in various schools and communities in Detroit, Miami, and a village near Leon, Nicaragua. His scholarship has appeared in journals including *Reflections, Composition Forum*, and *College English.* His book, *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education*, was published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2015.