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## Transformative Learning, Affect, and Reciprocal Care in Community Engagement

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# Transformative Learning, Affect, and Reciprocal Care in Community Engagement

*Ashley J. Holmes*

Drawing on interviews with writing teachers, this article highlights some of the affective responses that may arise for students, community partners, and teachers when we situate our pedagogies in public sites beyond the classroom. I analyze a teacher-narrated moment of student distress to demonstrate how theories of transformative learning might help us productively theorize affect in service-learning and community-based education. To conclude, I offer a reciprocal model of care that employs tenets of feminist pedagogy, such as transparency and decentering of authority, and that acknowledges the valid emotions students, teachers, and community members may experience. I call for community literacy practitioners to see the power of all participants to both give and receive care in transformative education.

Keywords: transformative learning; community engagement; care; reciprocity; service learning; feminist pedagogy

## Introduction

Service learning and community engagement have gained prominence as pedagogical approaches that can lead to deeply impactful, even transformative, learning experiences for students. However, when we open our pedagogies to a more expansive public through community engagement, any safety that a classroom could provide may be entirely absent. Partnering with the local community can be risky, disorienting, and emotionally demanding for students and teachers. Yet these risks also offer the potential for rewards, and many advocates of community engagement value these pedagogies precisely because of the personal growth and profound learning students may experience. Those of us who incorporate service and community-based learning into our courses often hope to expose students to diverse populations, prompt them to confront “real world” problems in their community, and offer a reflective classroom space for students to work through the dissonance that may accompany these experiences.<sup>1</sup> However, more recently, I have begun questioning the affective components of community-based projects and whether, as a teacher who strives to approach students as whole learners, I am fully prepared to embrace the emotions that may arise for students in my courses.

I first began questioning the role of affect in community engagement pedagogies when I interviewed writing teachers as part of a multi-institutional, comparative study of going public with composition pedagogy (see Holmes, “Public Pedagogy”).<sup>2</sup> A number of the teachers who participated in my study explained how they use service learning as one way for students to both learn from and contribute to the local community. Overwhelmingly, these teachers noted their commitment to community outreach because of its positive impact on student engagement and learning. However, paired with the praise were comments that indicated teachers’ awareness of the potential risks and emotional demands of incorporating community-based projects, particularly ones that involve venturing beyond the classroom and/or situating student writing within increasingly public contexts.

The narratives teachers shared, some of which I analyze in the coming pages, raised questions for me about how practitioners of community engagement pedagogies should respond to affective reactions. As much as I value the way service learning can be productively disruptive or unsettling, I also question a pedagogy that purposefully exposes students to emotionally-demanding scenarios without providing the kind of support to help them make sense of their experiences and move toward learning. In spring 2014, debates about the values and risks of purposefully exposing college students to challenging and emotionally-demanding course content arose in response to moves on several campuses to institute “trigger warnings” on syllabi (Medina). Commonly used on feminist blogs, though also used in other feminist and non-feminist spaces, trigger warnings are meant to caution readers/viewers about graphic or explicit content—e.g., rape, abuse, torture—that may be upsetting and which may trigger a flashback for someone who has experienced trauma. While proponents argue that using trigger warnings in higher education would protect students, many faculty opponents counter that supporting such alerts “suggest[s] a fragility of mind that higher learning is meant to challenge, not embrace” (Medina); in other words, many teachers believe that an important part of learning in college means discussing and experiencing texts and issues that may be out of students’ comfort zones. While the trigger warning debates did not explicitly interrogate the role of service learning as a potential trigger, I think many community literacy practitioners would agree that students participating in such programs often encounter scenarios or interactions that could be upsetting. Indeed, such moments of discomfort can be transformative for students’ learning, echoing what opponents of trigger warnings have contended. However, as proponents of trigger warnings continue to question, how much discomfort is too much?

In an effort to find an approach to community engagement that addressed some of my concerns, I turned to feminist scholarship, which I believe provides a frame through which we can problematize disorientation and theorize a reciprocal approach to care. In the following pages, I highlight some of the emotional risks that may arise for students, community partners, and teachers when we situate our pedagogies in public sites beyond the university. I suggest how theories of transformative learning might help teachers and community partners productively theorize affective dimensions of learning in community engagement. Using an example from one of the teachers in

my study, I analyze a moment of emotional distress a student experienced resulting from the service-learning component of her business writing course. Reflecting on the role of affect for students, teachers, and community partners in service learning, I contend that the example should cause community literacy practitioners to pause and contemplate our responsibilities to each other in community-based projects. I conclude by suggesting a reciprocal model of care that draws on the strengths of a feminist standpoint while discarding the traditional, gender-specific positioning of care and nurturance as women's work. I argue that by employing transparency and decentering authority, we open opportunities to acknowledge and validate the emotions that students, teachers, and community members may experience through a transformative, community-based education. I situate transparency and decentering authority within the lens of a well-known tenet in community literacy scholarship: reciprocity; I call for community literacy practitioners to see the power of all participants to both give and receive care in transformative education.

## Risks & Rewards of Community Engagement

Teachers who choose to employ community literacy, service learning, or other kinds of community-based projects do so for a number of reasons, ranging from improving one's local community to helping instill in students a sense of civic responsibility to putting course content into action. However, the foundation of the choice—whether or not to include community engagement in one's course—is primarily pedagogical; we choose to engage students in community-based work because we believe it is valuable for their learning. For community literacy practitioners, situating student experience, learning, and writing in public sites beyond the classroom provides a meaningful context through which to explore social issues while facilitating student learning. The rewards of higher levels of engagement, transfer of knowledge, and potential transformation are certainly attractive, but do they outweigh the risks of situating one's pedagogy in the often messy unknowns of public communities beyond the classroom?

In the interviews I conducted for my study, writing teachers repeatedly noted that students became more engaged when the course design involved community-based and/or public writing projects. For example Jan Cooper, who co-teaches a field-based writing course at Oberlin College, noted that getting students out into the local community to conduct ecological labs in the river watershed and interview local farmers resulted in “a level of immediacy that engaged [students] more thoroughly” (Cooper). Similarly, Crystal Fodrey, who taught composition courses at the University of Arizona, asked students to analyze spaces that “exhibit inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.,” and she found that prompting students to leave the classroom and enter local community spaces “woke [students] up” in ways that made them “more engaged” (Fodrey). High levels of engagement have an impact on how successfully students learn concepts. “Students must engage to learn,” note Peter Felten and H-Dirksen L. Bauman, “and high quality institutions support frequent, deep engaged activities by students to promote learning” (367). In other words, higher levels

of engagement can have a positive impact on students' learning.

Higher levels of student engagement can lead to the possibility of long-term transfer of core concepts from the course. Research on knowledge transfer notes that a learner may have a "life transforming experience" in which she or he "becom[es] someone ... new" (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström 27). When the transfer of knowledge is transformative, learners experience "changes in identity as well as knowledge and skill" (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström 28). A transformative education that alters students' worldview aligns with many of the social justice goals of community-based projects, such as challenging dominant ideologies, deconstructing hierarchies, and critiquing biases. The long-term benefit for students is a new frame of reference for understanding the world, and the benefit for teachers, community members, and society is moving one step closer towards an informed citizenry who asks critical questions and works to eradicate injustice.

When we partner with communities beyond the classroom, however, students are exposed to different kinds of risks that can be disorienting, even if they are ultimately productive for their learning. Community engagement projects pose a unique set of risks, in part because teachers have little control over what students may experience and how those experiences may clash with students' personal worldviews. The risks associated with community projects are part of what makes them attractive to many teachers, including myself, because such contexts prompt students to address issues that may not have come up within the relative safety of the classroom. Some research on knowledge transfer also suggests that risk taking can enhance learning and transfer; however, as David Guile and Michael Young note, "learners need to be supported" through processes of collaboration, discussion, and risk taking (74). How can teachers create a productive tension between risk and safety, and, at what point does risk-taking complicate the goals of learning and transfer in one's community-based pedagogy? Without risk, students may not have the opportunity to address tough issues or face dilemmas that would prompt a transformation in their worldview. However, without some degree of safety, support, and care, students may shut down—unable to deal with the overwhelming dissonances, let alone move towards any meaningful learning. As teachers trained in our disciplines, not in therapy, how can we acknowledge and give credence to students' valid emotions while still moving towards more meaningful learning? To begin answering these questions, I review scholarship on theories of transformative learning and education, as well as the role of affect and emotion in service learning and community literacy pedagogies.

## Transformation & Affect in Community-Based Learning

Most teachers who enact community literacy projects are deeply engaged in transformative learning, but we do not always have the language for interpreting and theorizing this practice. I believe that transformative learning, as a theory coming out of education and curriculum studies, can be a valuable tool for community literacy practitioners to understand the potential disorientation and emotional responses

that may accompany transformation in community-based education. In his theory of transformative learning developed in the early 1990s, Jack Mezirow describes a kind of conversion that can happen when adults wrestle with new information. Through what Mezirow calls “perspective transformation experiences,” learners shift their assumptions to cope with and make sense of newly learned information. He defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation* 8). Transformation involves becoming self-reflective and critically aware of our assumptions and how they “constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world”; as a result of this critical self-awareness, we open possibilities for a new perspective—one that may be more “inclusive, discriminating and integrative” (Mezirow *Transformative Dimensions* 168). Mezirow describes ten phases that learners may go through when experiencing transformation, beginning with (1) a disorienting dilemma and (2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame (Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*).<sup>3</sup> For this paper, I focus on these first two phases—rather than all ten—because they represent the root or spark of transformative learning, but also because they are the most explicitly emotional, drawing attention to the affective dimensions of teaching and learning.

Other education researchers and cognitive psychologists have theorized the disorientation that may accompany new knowledge, but these theories are much less attentive to the emotional components of transformation. For example, Leon Festinger theorizes “cognitive dissonance” as the condition during which one’s existing set of beliefs, knowledge, or opinions are questioned and which leads to an activity meant to reduce the dissonance (3–4). Similarly, Jean Piaget theorized learning as an ongoing cycle of equilibration, with disequilibrium leading to equilibrium (7). Cognitive dissonance and disequilibrium are useful concepts, but because both lack attention to the role of affect, they connote a hyper-rational, masculinized approach to learning that serves to replicate divisions between cognition and emotion. In fact, the study of emotions in pedagogy has traditionally been under-theorized because of the unnecessary divides between cognition and affect, mind and body. Moreover, affect continues to be dismissed as “something dangerous, personal, irrelevant, and counter-productive” (DeGenaro 195). In his analysis of Lynn Worsham’s seminal article, “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” William DeGenaro highlights that even critical pedagogies, according to Worsham, “lack a useful understanding of affect and tend to reinforce a reason/mind-emotion/body binary” (195). While Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is certainly not a panacea for these deep-seated binaries, it perhaps offers community literacy practitioners a more nuanced, integrated approach to theorizing student learning because it implicates emotional considerations in the processes of making meaning.

A number of transformative learning theorists have identified the important role

of emotions—such as loss, grief, and frustration—in the process of transformation. Sue M. Scott likens the process of transformation to letting something go: “an old way of seeing or doing is changed to a new way of seeing or doing. Something that is familiar must be denied” (41); such a loss can be upsetting and disorienting. Similarly, Sue L. T. McGregor found overlap between theories of transformative learning and stages of grief. McGregor analyzes student freewrites from an intensive, seven-day summer institute on consumerism and peace. Like Scott, McGregor ultimately realizes that what her students were experiencing was a sense of loss, what she identifies as “grief before growth” (51). The grief in students’ writing represented feelings of being overwhelmed and powerless, as well as frustrated by their new perspectives. McGregor used the institute as a reflective, supportive space to help students move through their emotions with the goal of helping them arrive at a position of empowerment and agency.

Grief and other emotions can present barriers to learning, but they can also be necessary steps toward transformation. Barbara Schneider argues that we need to more fully explore affective barriers to learning; she looks at affect in terms of students’ racist dispositions when confronting multicultural texts. Schneider employs Cornel West’s conception of discernment, which “requires an examination of consciousness, a search for insight, [and] a self-reflexivity ... [in] affective as well as cognitive processes” (927). Schneider argues that teachers can use discernment in the classroom as a method of “schooling the emotions” to help students avoid habitually racist ways of reading and discussing difference (927). Through discernment students can gain empathy, taking on what West identifies as an “other-centered rather than self-centered” attitude—a change that mirrors the way Mezirow describes a transformed perspective or worldview (qtd. in Schneider 928). To initiate these changes in students’ dispositions, teachers must shift their attention from the “rational or mechanical ... to the affective and attitudinal” (Schneider 928). Schneider’s argument for the use of discernment to change students’ attitudes and dispositions is quite similar to the use of critical self-reflection in order to transform one’s perspective. Part of the significance of Schneider’s contribution is how she directs our attention to the role of affect in this process; in short, attending to students’ emotions is a necessary component for the deep learning that results in transformation.

In “Affective Dimensions of Service Learning,” DeGenaro claims that affect and the role of emotions in the teaching of writing have garnered “much critical attention from compositionists writ large but little attention in the service learning literature” (192). Nonetheless, emotional responses continue to emerge in community literacy work. For example, Ellen Cushman and Erik Green note that an unexpected result of their work with the Cherokee Nation was the “very emotional response that we had with the material”; during the process of sharing research papers, they recall that one student “broke into tears” (187). Like DeGenaro, though, I believe that service learning and community literacy practitioners would benefit from a “more careful consideration of the affective affinities of both students and teachers,” as well as community partners, “involved in the service learning enterprise” (192). Though DeGenaro does not employ transformative learning theory explicitly, many of his ideas align with how Mezirow



has theorized perspective transformation; for example, DeGenaro contends that, as a result of service learning, “students and teachers both have the potential to have their respective world views changed” (197). DeGenaro describes affect in service learning as “initial felt senses”; his work highlights how an encounter with a homeless person at a food bank, for instance, results first and foremost in a sensation: “Before [students] begin to rationalize, analyze, critique, form a response, take action, or even just describe the experience, (all of which are cognitive activities we ask service learning students to do as part of their writing assignments), a sensation occurs, contributing to a potential to feel, act, think, and formulate verbal responses” (197). Like Mezirow’s first phases of transformation—a disorienting dilemma and self-examination with a range of potential feelings—students in service learning courses may very well be disoriented the first time they encounter a homeless person, and they would certainly have initial felt senses resulting from that interaction. DeGenaro acknowledges the important role of affect in service learning experiences, especially because those experiences have the potential for being emotionally-demanding and potentially transformative.

Theories of transformation often distinguish between transformative learning and transformative education (Karpiak; Mezirow; McGregor). The former might be prompted by a life event, such as the loss of one’s job or the death of a family member, whereas the latter involves a “planned for and facilitated” educational journey (McGregor 55). Transformative learning may happen as the result of transformative education, though not necessarily, and transformative learning can happen outside of educational contexts. However, movements toward self-reflection and transformation can be “significantly influenced by educational interventions” (Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions* 161). I see choosing to implement service-learning and community engagement pedagogies into one’s course as a kind of educational intervention because these approaches likely result in a higher probability of students confronting unexpected problems that may result in disorientation. Service learning overlaps with transformative education in significant ways—but this overlap makes me somewhat uneasy. Do I want to purposefully construct learning scenarios that expose students to risks that may be upsetting, even if I believe an emotional response could result in a deeply meaningful, perhaps transformative, learning experience?

In reviewing scholarship on transformative learning, I found very limited coverage of ethics when implementing a purposefully designed transformative education. In the case of McGregor, she critically self-reflects on her own motivations for employing a transformative education that initiates grief before growth: “What do you get out of this for yourself, by exposing people to a planned loss and hopeful recovery or shift? Are you looking for power, for control?’ I am working on that one, with no answer just yet” (McGregor 68). While the transformation McGregor’s students experienced was unintentional on her part—she only came to understand their transformation through analysis of freewrites after the class was over—she concludes that she now sees the importance of an educational experience “intentionally designed as a collection of disorienting moments serving to instill a loss leading to shifts in world views” (51). Even still, her reflections suggest an inner turmoil about transformative education.

The writing teachers I interviewed for my study expressed their own concerns



about how to balance the risks of community engagement—many of which overlap with components of transformative education—even though they found those pedagogies valuable for student learning. For example, Faith Kurtyka, a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Arizona at the time of our interview, reflected on the risks of students going into the community and her responsibilities to them as the teacher who initiated a service-learning pedagogy: “anything can happen, and I worry about what can happen. ... I feel as a teacher, you’re responsible for the things that happen in the classroom, and if bad things happen, that becomes your problem.” Kurtyka also noted that she gravitates toward certain kinds of service-learning partnerships because of what she feels comfortable with as a teacher: “I guess I really only did one type of service learning [a partnership with a local school], but that’s because of my ethical issues of what do I want students to get involved in or what do I feel like I can manage as a teacher—what do I feel like I can ask them to do that’s not too problematic.” Kurtyka’s comments prompt us to consider how students are implicated by the educational choices we make, such as whether or not to incorporate service learning and in what ways, as well as the responsibilities we have to support them through the learning scenarios we develop.

Another writing teacher I interviewed expressed concerns for students’ emotional responses to community-based learning as a result of her own transformative learning experiences. University of Arizona graduate teaching assistant Rachael Wendler said she is committed to critical pedagogies, but she also has reservations about the emotionally-demanding aspects of such approaches: “I really believe in critical pedagogy, and ... I want students to understand structural inequality. But, when I think back to my own experience, ... I came to understand those issues ... in an intensive summer-long [community] program where I had a lot of support. It can be very emotionally demanding to deal with issues of privilege and power, both for students who are new to thinking about these concepts and for those who experience structural inequality in their everyday lives.” Wendler’s remark highlights the emotions that may arise when we ask students to critically reflect on and engage with issues of privilege, power, and inequity within their communities. While many pedagogues would argue that a degree of discomfort may be productive for student learning, Wendler’s reflection reminds us to put ourselves in the shoes of our students and to be mindful of how to provide support through emotional moments in order to lead toward productive learning. In the next section, I analyze an example of a disorienting dilemma from a service-learning course taught by one of the teachers in my study. I use this example to provide a snapshot of the first two phases of Mezirow’s theory and to explore the emotional reactions—from the perspective of students, teachers, and community partners—that may accompany disorientation.

## Emotional Responses in Community Engagement

In my interview with Rebecca Richards, who at the time was a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Arizona, she told me about her experiences teaching a

business writing course that incorporated a service-learning partnership.<sup>4</sup> Richards described how her course design exposed students to increasingly public audiences and experiences. The first assignment was a memo of introduction that students posted to Desire2Learn (a course management system). Students read and responded to each other's memos in ways that Richards described as a kind of "public forum" with "hybrid cyber-interaction" that Richards did not mediate; the public forum created through the online discussion space, though, was closed to a more expansive public beyond the students' peers and teacher. As the semester progressed, students began to engage with more expansive public groups through service-learning partnerships that Richards initiated: "I ... form alliances with non-profit organizations in the community and interview them and establish stakeholder relationships with them across semesters, across years. And then the students ... come in to that relationship and I eventually back out." Students in Richards's business writing course collaborated with the owners of local non-profit organizations to assess organizational writing needs, write a proposal, and work in groups to produce communication "deliverables" that could be used by the organizations.

An additional public component of Richards's course involved students posting reflections about their service-learning experiences to online blogs.<sup>5</sup> She described the blogging assignment as students creating "micro-communities that are more public" (Richards). This assignment required that the students blog about their service-learning project and "invite people in the classroom to join their blog group, read their blog, and comment on it" (Richards). Richards gave students the option of making their blogs public or private, using it as an opportunity to teach audience awareness and differences in writing style and purpose when writing in digital, public contexts. Deciding whether or not to make one's blog public or private—a decision that could change throughout the semester—was something that Richards prompted students to consider carefully. She noted the benefits of "having an online space that can be opened up or closed down" with the possibility of keeping the blog private if the student, for instance, was "having a difficult experience that semester" (Richards). When talking about writing for blogs that students choose to make public, Richards specifically asked students to think about "what kinds of information you should share and what kinds of information you should not share, especially because [students were] blogging about their service-learning project, which [involved] a real person in the community." Having students think about whether and when to go public or stay private with the service-learning blog, noted Richards, was a "good critical thought process for [students] to work out with their collaborators and me."

Despite Richards's recommendation that students carefully consider audience when choosing whether to make their blogs public, she explained that her students were "always surprised when people just show[ed] up on their [public] blog." Richards saw these moments as opportunities to help students reflect on public and professional writing contexts: they were "writing in this different kind of public space," but she used it as a reflective moment inquiring of students: "you've chosen [to make your blog public], and so how does that change your writing?" For one of Richards's students, though, the surprise of a truly more public readership for her blog led to what I argue

was a disorienting experience for the student, teacher, and community partner.<sup>6</sup>

When I asked about problems with students going public, Richards described an issue that arose with the public component of the blogging assignment. As the students' experiences, interactions, and writing became increasingly public through service-learning and blogging assignments, the risk of miscommunication, abrupt reactions, and emotional responses also increased. The moment of disorientation for the student, as narrated by Richards, happened during a class session:

One of my students met with her service-learning client and blogged about the experience—which it was a positive experience—but from it she got the impression that her client ... [seemed] very demanding, hard to please. She wrote in her blog that person's name and put, "My client ... seems like she might be hard to please, so we'll have to work extra hard to make her happy." Well, sure enough, that organization has one of the trackers for looking up on the Web any instance of its organizational name and any of its key stakeholders in that conversation, so [the student's] blog popped up the next day on her client's program. [The client] emailed the student and said, "please do not talk about me in public: if I have given you any reason to think that I am hard to please or difficult, I hope you know I'm committed to this." ... It happened in class that [the student] received the email. ... [The student] blurted out with tears in her eyes "my client's stalking me." (Richards)

I would like to consider this moment of disorientation from a variety of standpoints (e.g., the student's, her peers' in the classroom, the teacher's, and the client's) in the hopes that we may begin to understand the complexity of stakes, responses, and emotions at play here. First, I analyze the student's reaction as a moment of disorientation that has the potential to spark a transformative learning experience.

The student's reaction, as narrated by Richards, represents two key components of the transformative learning process Mezirow theorized: the student experienced a disorienting dilemma with an accompanying emotional response. Receiving the email was clearly disorienting to the student; she may have thought she was being a perceptive observer, using a critical fieldworker's eye to assess her client and the rhetorical context of the service-learning partnership. Indeed, Richards noted that in some ways the student's comment was a fairly "innocuous thing." Richards believed the student "meant no harm by it; she didn't mean this person is impossible to work with, or I don't like this person, or I'm not happy with the project. She just literally was reporting her impressions." For the student who likely thought she was doing a good job of completing her assignment, receiving the emailed reprimand from her client would have been jarring; this would be especially true for a student who Richards described as "a really good student who was conscientious [and] kind."

The student's disorientation was followed by her emotional reaction, what Richards portrayed as the student having "tears in her eyes." Richards interpreted the situation as "painful" for the student; this kind of language maps onto the ways in which Mezirow

describes perspective transformation as a potentially painful process (Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions* 168). Additionally, the student's emotional response aligns with the feelings of "fear, anger, guilt, or shame" that Mezirow theorizes in the second phase of transformative learning. We might conjecture, based on her tearful reaction, that the student may have been feeling angry at the client for sending her an "aggressive email" (Richards); fearful regarding the future of her service-learning partnership, as well as her grade and potential for success in the business writing course; and likely bewildered that the writing on her blog was in fact truly public. The outburst, "my client's stalking me," supports the idea that what was perhaps most disorienting for the student was the public nature of her blog writing, but the word choice of "stalking" also suggests that the student felt betrayed and perhaps threatened. Something about the method through which the client discovered the public writing on the student's blog—the online tracker—may have felt surreptitious to the student, further complicating the situation, mixing in additional layers of emotional response.

If the standpoint is flipped in this scenario, though, we might consider the range of reactions the community partner felt when she discovered the student's public blog. I want to acknowledge that I have very limited data in regards to the community partner in this scenario, but I believe it is productive to consider her possible reactions as well.<sup>7</sup> Based on Richards's explanation of the situation, it seems that the community partner's response demonstrated concern for her public image and the public image of the non-profit organization. It may have been hurtful, even disorienting, for the community partner to read that the student perceived her as being "very demanding, hard to please," especially if she thought that the meeting with the student had gone well and that she was being cordial. Her comments suggest that she was interested in correcting what she saw as the student's misperception of her personality: "if I have given you any reason to think that I am hard to please or difficult, I hope you know that I'm committed to this." Richards described the email as "very aggressive" and noted that, "even though I stepped in at that moment and spoke with the client, told her they're students, they're learning," she was not sure the community partner "ever really got past that," further indicating that the students' words were likely upsetting. Even if the client's email came across as harsh, the overall purpose of it seems to have been to extend an olive branch to the student, to communicate that she wanted to move forward with the partnership, that she was committed to it. Another way to read this community partner's email is as a lesson to the student about the nature of public writing and professional partnerships—exactly what Richards had been trying to get across to her students in the business writing course.

Whether the client purposefully intended it or not, the email came to represent a lesson within Richards's business writing course, in part because of the student's public outburst during class time and because of the way Richards chose to address the situation in the moment. From the perspective of the other students in the class, they were drawn into this student's moment of emotional distress. According to Richards, the student's reaction "created an interesting moment for the class," and she took time to have students work through a response to what had happened: "we unpacked

that.” Richards’s choice to address the student’s issue through whole-class discussion transitioned the scenario into a teachable moment, not only for the disoriented student but also for her classmates. Richards could have brushed the student’s comment aside, not taking it seriously and thus not validating the student’s emotional reaction; she also could have asked the student to see her after class or during office hours to address the issue more privately and/or to give them both more time to process a response. However, Richards’s on-the-spot response acknowledged the student’s emotional reaction, primed the class for a moment of self-reflection, and, thus, facilitated the scenario as meaningful in terms of learning for the entire class. In our interview, Richards began telling the story as an example of a pitfall, but she ultimately reflected on how the experience was positive for student learning: “I think [the experience] was productive in the end, a good learning lesson for everybody about digital footprints and how [students] go about representing themselves and others in their writing and how that circulates beyond the public that [they] intended it for.” Even as Richards expertly handled the moment, validating the students’ affective response and helping her and her peers see this as a moment of learning, we might imagine that this was also a challenging moment from her perspective as a teacher.

From Richards’s perspective, the student’s outburst was somewhat disorienting for her as well. In our interview, Richards reflected that “it took a few minutes for [her] to figure out what had happened; [she questioned], how did this happen?” In recounting the scene, Richards said she was “horrified” for the student, suggesting both her empathy for the student’s emotional response but perhaps also her own emotional reaction to the unfolding events. Richards also noted that the student’s outburst, combined with the follow-up class discussion, “sort of derailed class for the day,” causing her to rearrange her pedagogical plans. Richards’s experiences in some ways represent disorienting dilemmas that may be all too familiar to community literacy practitioners. The messiness of engaging with public groups outside of the classroom means that we, as teachers, often have little control over the kind of responses students receive or the kinds of experiences they have in community-based contexts. Indeed, I see this as a productive tension in community-based pedagogies: the possibility for moments of learning that are unexpected, just like the scenario above. What interests me as a teacher who values service learning and community engagement is how we might be able to both anticipate and support affective responses for students, ourselves as teachers, and community partners.

The moment of disorientation I analyzed from Richards’s course provides a point from which those of us interested in campus-community partnerships can reflect on how affect and transformation impact teaching and learning in our classrooms. Without further evidence from the student herself, we cannot know whether she was transformed and whether her perspective changed as a result of this experience.<sup>8</sup> We also do not know how the community partner was ultimately impacted by the experience. However, I view this snapshot of the student’s experience as important for examining experiences that may spark transformation—experiences that as teachers we might exploit, prompt, avoid, or use as teachable moments. Richards’s off-the-cuff

decision to use the outburst to facilitate a meaningful learning experience provides an excellent model for community literacy practitioners who may be faced with and/or experiencing disorienting dilemmas. Her response also suggests that in moments of disorientation, teachers have responsibilities to students.

In the final section, I consider how we might employ a reciprocal notion of care in community engagement projects with transformative goals, while avoiding the reinscription of problematic gender-roles. Theories of transformative learning and feminist pedagogy prompt us to break down the divisions constructed by dominant discourses that work to subordinate affect to intellect and women's work to men's work, thwarting efforts to develop a pedagogy of care that would more successfully guide students through processes of transformation. This traditional discourse also replicates gender dualities that read feminist pedagogies of nurturance as women's work (Worsham). One approach for community literacy practitioners who also value feminist pedagogies would be to work to change the discourses of dominant pedagogy by reconstructing conceptions of nurturance and care that are not gender-specific. In what follows, I suggest that some of the concerns raised in regards to transformative learning and education might be addressed by employing tenets of feminist pedagogy, such as decentralizing classroom authority, aiming to empower students as agents in control of their own transformative learning, and transparently challenging them to transform within a context of care.

## Decentering Authority, Transparency, and Reciprocal Care

Feminism calls us to be mindful of our positions of power in the classroom and our efforts to subvert those traditionally defined roles. For example, Rebecca Ropers-Huilman, reflecting on teaching her first graduate seminar, explains how she “felt trapped by the constraints of a pedagogy that attempts to enact power in efforts to empower, and care in efforts to ensure comfort, ease, and positive outcomes in learning” (131). The circularity of these feelings reflects many of the dilemmas within transformative education: how can we empower students without exerting power ourselves, and how can we care for students in ways that are not self-serving? Thinking back to McGregor's self-critical line of questioning regarding transformative learning—“What do you get out of this for yourself? ... Are you looking for power, for control?” (68)—we should be prepared to carefully consider our pedagogical choices and what motivations guide those decisions. Moreover, as Ropers-Huilman notes, not all students are interested in the care we may offer. Similarly, Worsham has critiqued the traditional, patriarchal role of the teacher “as the sign of power and the agent of empowerment, as the one who has the power to know students better than they know themselves and to transform their relation to the world” (1020). In transformative education, teachers may be particularly prone to this risk—believing we have the power to transform students' understanding of the world. We, once again, want to empower students, while wanting to avoid exerting power to empower, while also knowing that we can never fully eliminate the power that accompanies our position of authority as the teacher.

I believe we can forge a new path to avoid this circularity by approaching transformative education in community partnerships through (1) reciprocal care that is based on (2) a continual shifting of teacher and learner roles and (3) transparency. Community literacy practitioners familiar with reciprocity know that the give-and-take in community partnerships “need[s] to be openly and consciously negotiated by everyone participating” (Cushman 16). Though not always discussed using the same terminology, reciprocity is a shared value in the feminist classroom. As Ropers-Huilman concludes in her feminist analysis of teaching graduate students: “regardless of the seemingly clear lines between teachers and students in classroom contexts, all educational participants have the ability to enact the power to care” (131). When we consider care in transformative education, especially in community-based projects, I believe reciprocity should be a central value because of its self-critical focus on power relations among students, teachers, and community partners. Without an attention to reciprocity for all participants, we risk abusing our position of authority in the classroom to exert power and control over students or community members—whether that control is through disorientation, transformative education, and/or care. By taking a reciprocal approach, teachers can offer to care for students and community partners, but perhaps more importantly, we can be open to accepting the care that students and community partners may offer to us.

Acknowledging that all participants have the potential for power and the potential to give and receive care can help us move towards decentering authority and shifting teacher and learner roles. Both feminist classrooms and community engagement projects attempt to shift the loci of power and authority, positioning students and community partners as teachers and teachers as learners, blurring traditionally-defined roles. The opening up and shifting of teacher and learner positions is unlikely to happen in a classroom where the teacher does not present herself as ready to learn and, at times, vulnerable. As hooks emphasizes in *Teaching to Transgress*, “engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (21). Integral to this holistic model of empowerment is that teachers are open to being “vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (hooks 21). Presenting oneself as a learner who may be just as vulnerable as a student and community partner may seem too risky to some pedagogues; but, if we support a model of reciprocal care, we can hope that our students and community partners will offer the support we need in moments of disorientation or distress.

In order to be attentive to the dynamics of power and reciprocity, I believe we must also strive to be transparent with students and community partners. In her self-reflections, McGregor questions the extent to which teachers should prepare students for the grief that may accompany transformation; she questions whether telling students they will go through fairly predictable stages of “grief toward growth” would have a negative impact on their transformation. Feminist pedagogies value transparency in the classroom, and I believe that the most ethical approach to transformative education is to be open and honest with students, sharing our misgivings and enthusiasm for the



processes we may experience with them. A transparent approach to teaching service learning might involve telling students from the start that we do not know exactly what will transpire over the course of the semester or how they might respond. In fact, I have started including the following disclaimer on my service-learning syllabi to that effect:

Having taught service-learning courses in the past, I can assure you that there will be many unknowns. I will not be able to tell you exactly how your experiences and assignments will unfold because they will develop through your interactions with our community partners. The unknowns of the process can be disconcerting for some students, but, as long as you keep an open line of communication with me and your community partner, we will be able to work through things so that you can succeed in the course assignments. (Holmes, "English 3120")

This disclaimer on my syllabus functions as a kind of trigger warning for students, even though I am not able to identify what the triggers may be. In fact, in their critique of mandated trigger warnings, seven humanities professors identify the number one flaw with a proposed mandate as the fact that "faculty cannot predict in advance what will be triggering for students" (Freeman et al.). While I agree with many concerns faculty have raised in regards to censoring course content, requiring trigger warnings on syllabi, and protecting untenured and non-tenure track faculty, I also believe that we have responsibilities to be transparent and care for students when we employ pedagogies that may be risky and disorienting. However, we also must be willing to "share our struggles with students as we negotiate relationships supported and disrupted by power and caring practices" (Ropers-Huilman 133). When we share our struggles, students have a better sense of how we as teacher-learners experience disorienting dilemmas and move toward transformation.

Though I am still honing what it means to enact a reciprocal model of care in courses where I incorporate service- or community-based learning, I can offer a brief example from a recent graduate course I taught at Georgia State University called Public Rhetorics for Social Change. One component of the course involved a collaborative "public project" that I did not define for students, in part as an attempt to decenter my authority and in part to provide a context for students to experience the messy and challenging process of finding a meaningful public with which to engage. I tried to be transparent with students at the start of the semester, noting on the syllabus that I did not know what this project would ultimately look like but that we would work together to define how they would contribute and be assessed. After months of discussions about possible prison literacy initiatives or direct service to non-profit organizations, the class decided they/we wanted to lead a series of group discussions (modeled on Linda Flower's intercultural communication strategies) about the experiences of international students with writing on campus. I sent a collaboratively-drafted query on behalf of the class to a faculty member in another department who we considered a stakeholder and who we hoped might be an ally for us in this public project, but our

good intentions were either unwanted or ill-received as the faculty member responded by telling our group about all the programs already in place to help non-native speakers transition into college writing. The email response was upsetting and disorienting to me, in part because the faculty member rhetorically positioned herself as expert and our class (and by extension me) as novices—noting the dozens of world-renowned books and articles she and her colleagues had published on non-native speakers and college writing—but also because I felt our intentions had been misunderstood. We were hoping to collaborate and partner, but the response we received suggested we were stepping on toes, questioning the effectiveness of programs already in place, and/or overstepping our bounds.

During the next class, I tried to be transparent in explaining why I would suggest we move in a different direction for the project. This level of transparency, as I reflect back, made me vulnerable to my students: I noted my concerns about “rocking the boat” by moving forward with the project because I was a newcomer to the campus community, a pre-tenure faculty member, and not an expert in scholarship on composition theories related to Teaching English as a Second Language. I also conveyed my disappointment and frustration that I felt hemmed in by these institutional constructs, and I emphasized that my vote was only one vote, that I would help the class move forward with whatever project we came to agree upon. Ultimately, the class moved in a different direction, choosing a supportive in-house partner within the Lower Division Studies program.<sup>9</sup> I believe that the process our class went through of reacting to the disorienting email aligns with a reciprocal model of care. I attempted to care for students by shepherding a project that they would be invested in and promoting reflection on why we received such a negative reaction to our originally proposed project. The graduate students in the course offered their care for me both in terms of how they carefully considered the complex demands on me as their instructor and how they negotiated with each other and me to decide on a project that would meet our needs in the course and fulfill their interests in public rhetorics.

In many ways, this is a story of my own transformation as a teacher who employs community-based and service learning pedagogies. As I think back to the interviews I conducted with writing teachers, I realize how their narratives prompted me to transform my pedagogical approach by being mindful of the affective components of community-based projects and by shifting to a more transparent and de-centered role in the classroom. And, as I begin another semester of service-learning partnerships, I have already begun considering how I might prompt students to critically self-reflect in ways that may lead to transformative learning. However, I also approach these transformative goals with a mindfulness of the unknowns of the real world contact zone and the emotional responses that may emerge for students. A reciprocal and feminist approach to transformative, community-based education reminds us that we are all learners who need to be challenged and supported. When we position ourselves as learners, teachers, and care-takers, inviting students and community partners to do the same, the traditional gender-basis of those roles becomes further removed, and we begin to see the potential for a truly transformative experience.

## Endnotes

1. I use “real world” in quotes here to acknowledge that while the classroom space is certainly part of the real world, I tend to agree with scholars who have demonstrated how university classroom spaces can be removed from surrounding communities in ways that make the everyday issues that emerge in those spaces feel contrived (Cushman and Emons; Grabill; Heilker). I do not want to set up a false dichotomy between classroom and real world. However, my advocacy of community engagement projects lies in what I see as their power to access and value public, non-school sites for student learning.

2. For this study, I conducted interviews with 19 writing teachers and administrators, including tenure track and non-tenure track faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and writing program administrators. The study received IRB approval at each of the three institutions, and each interviewee gave me informed consent to use her name (though participants were given an option to use a pseudonym) and to quote from our interview. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to read drafts of my writing to ensure the ways in which I represented them and their pedagogy were accurate.

3. The complete list of the ten phases of Mezirow’s original theory of transformative learning are as follows: (1) a disorienting dilemma, (2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame, (3) a critical assessment of assumptions, (4) recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, (5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, (6) planning a course of action, (7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, (8) provisional trying of new roles, (9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and (10) a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*).

4. Because I offer an in-depth analysis of an example from Richards’s interview, I want readers to know that Richards read several drafts of this manuscript, offering feedback and confirmation on how I represent her and analyze her pedagogy.

5. As community literacy practitioners well know, reflection has been theorized as an important component of learning for professionals (Schön), for students in the writing classroom (Yancey), and for students engaging in service learning (Ash, Atkinson, and Clayton). Critical self-reflection is also a significant component of transformative learning theory (Mezirow).

6. In a recently published article on cyberfeminist pedagogy in *Feminist Teacher*, Richards discusses a different dilemma that arose in her business-writing course with a service-learning component (see Richards, “I Could Have Told You”).

7. I want to underscore that the lack of community partner perspectives is a significant issue within community literacy and service-learning scholarship—an issue that has been noted and has begun to be addressed by Marie Sandy and Barbara A. Holland’s research on community partner perspectives, as well as Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon’s edited collection *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*.

8. Moreover, collecting the kind of evidence that would document and track a student’s transformation is particularly challenging because the process could take years; the stu-

dent may experience an emotional trigger that she continues to reflect on and unpack for months or years to come (Mezirow). Despite these challenges, this is an area ripe for future research—tracking whether and how students transform after service-learning experiences.

9. I think it is important to acknowledge that the “public” with which the class ended up partnering (an on-campus group) did not fall within what many teacher-scholars would define as a traditional community partnership, which often involves partnering with an off-campus group that may or may not be a non-profit organization. Within the graduate seminar, students read and engaged with theories of public(s) and counterpublic(s), and much of our discussion centered on defining and locating public(s). After careful consideration of the constraints of our one-semester commitment to a project, the class decided to draw on our already-existing knowledge of the campus community and the first-year writing curriculum in order to contribute a one-time project, rather than initiate an unsustainable project with a community partner off-campus. The resulting “public project” was a collaboratively-written chapter, titled “Civic Engagement and Community-Based Writing,” for the custom published first-year writing textbook and a corresponding online resource guide for writing instructors interested in incorporating civic engagement, service learning, and/or community-based writing into their courses.

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