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## Re-Framing the Argument: Critical Service- Learning and Community-Centered Food Literacy

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## Re-Framing the Argument: Critical Service-Learning and Community-Centered Food Literacy

*Veronica House*

As a WPA and a service-learning director and practitioner, the author suggests connections between food studies, rhetoric and composition studies, and critical service-learning theory that involve mobilizing students to join in or help lead community efforts surrounding the local, organic food movement, food justice, and food literacy. The study is framed by questions of how composition instructors can create courses around issues related to the global food crisis to embed students in community-centered food literacy initiatives, and, more generally, how practitioners and WPAs can effectively promote and explain community-engaged pedagogies to higher-level administrators who question the value of the practice.

I recently had a conversation with a dean at the University of Colorado Boulder about why the Program for Writing and Rhetoric made a curricular commitment to service-learning and civic engagement throughout its lower- and upper-division courses. More specifically, he wanted to understand the benefits of service-learning for students. He was not interested in assessment data about personal growth and civic learning. That students become more engaged and "critical citizens for a participatory democracy" (Berlin 97), as has been shown in numerous large and small-scale assessment studies (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson; Astin and Sax; Eyler and Giles; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray), did not particularly impress him. "Yes," he said, "but is there something about service-learning that teaches students more effectively *how to think and write?*"

As some within Rhetoric and Composition Studies argue to move beyond Paula Mathieu's "public turn" to a "political turn"<sup>1</sup>—one that would focus more deliberately on political issues than the social turn of the 1990s—practitioners, scholars, and WPAs once again face a host of questions that get at the heart of why we teach and what higher education's purposes are and should be. This is nothing new. These conversations have persisted through the last century from John Dewey to Paulo Freire to Ernest Boyer. In Rhetoric and Composition specifically, binary viewpoints about how to teach and the purposes for rhetoric and composition classes incite emotional and compelling arguments. In one camp, for example, are critical literacy scholars such as Henry Giroux and Ira Shor, who argue that critical pedagogy is an "emancipatory" project of "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux 174-175). Critical pedagogue James Berlin declares, "the objectives of English Studies are many. *The most significant of these*

is developing a measure of facility in reading and writing practices so as to prepare students for public discourse in a democratic political community (Berlin 110, emphasis added). For the “first-wave” critical literacy pedagogue, the primary purpose for teaching writing is neither to prepare students for academic life or the workforce nor to help them express themselves more clearly (Seitz 506). Rather, it is “as a political and moral project ... [to] illuminate[] the relationships among knowledge, authority, and power” in order to prepare students for civic life (Giroux “Critical Interview”). Because of its “consideration of ideological issues,” which may also “foreground awareness of social and political inequalities and consideration of ways to resolve them,” critical pedagogy is often linked with teaching for social justice (Durst 3).

On the other end of the spectrum, Stanley Fish boldly proclaims to fellow academics: “Save the world on your own time,” in his 2008 book by that title. In the first of his three 2009 *New York Times* editorials on the subject of composition pedagogy, he writes, “How can I maintain [...] that there is only one way to teach writing? Easy. It can’t be an alternative way of teaching writing to teach something else (like multiculturalism or social justice).” He declares that academics who do the latter are “not doing the job.”

Between the extremes, a rich body of scholarship addresses the complexities and paradoxes in critical pedagogy. Criticisms include the fear that an overtly political or “critical” pedagogy forces students to adopt the instructor’s viewpoints or “reinforces relations of domination,” (Yoon 729; Ellsworth; Gale; Lynch), can ironically be “disempowering” for students (Gallagher 78) and is a pedagogy of affect that seeks to shame faculty who do not adopt a critical framework (Yoon). These “post-first-wave” scholars, as Paul Feigenbaum calls them, focus their discourse “on implications of the challenge itself rather than possibilities for cultivating critical consciousness”<sup>6</sup>.

Others argue for a balanced approach. Russel Durst posits in his qualitative study on the effects of critical pedagogy in composition classes that instructors should mediate between their desire to teach politically-charged material and the students’ desire for instrumentalist instruction that will help them gain jobs after graduation. He urges “the preparation of students *as writers* within the context of the field’s social turn,” or what he calls a “reflective instrumentalist” approach (6, 177-178, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, in his discussion of James Berlin, Joseph Harris argues that while critical pedagogues advocate “a shift in focus *away from the practice of writing* and toward questions about social values, subjectivities, ethics, and ideologies,” he urges “a renewed attentiveness to the visible practice or labor of writing. My aim in doing so is not to depoliticize the teaching of writing but to suggest that our first job is to demystify the actual workings of academic discourse” (577-582, emphasis added). Durst discusses “a strong tendency now in composition studies to focus almost exclusively on ideological matters ... but it is not immediately clear how they map onto our role as teachers helping our students to improve their writing” (5). In other words, many scholars fear that writing instruction is obfuscated when the course is themed around politics, cultural issues, or social justice.

In light of this discussion on the benefits and detriments of incorporating politics

and social justice issues into composition courses, I would like to return to my dean’s question about the value of service-learning as a pedagogy, for his concerns seem to stem from a similar place as those vocalized by critics of critical pedagogy. Although service-learning might seem like the next, even more radical step beyond classroom-based critical pedagogy, it may, when executed well, offer answers to many of the above concerns. The fact is, these need not be black and white choices about education and pedagogy. We need not choose between teaching for the public good and teaching for rhetorical awareness, genre understanding, or skills acquisition. Nevertheless, my dean’s question is an important one that represents the many questions that we must be ready to answer, from those within and outside of our discipline, if we are to encourage continued support for and funding to service-learning programs and courses.

The persistent misconception that service-learning is simply touchy-feely, non-academic, volunteer work threatens the endurance and proliferation of the pedagogy. When it comes to service-learning’s purposes and outcomes, to borrow Linda Adler-Kassner’s terms from *The Activist WPA*, we must more effectively shape and control the “frames”<sup>2</sup>—the narratives surrounding service-learning and community-based pedagogies (37). While I agree with those who argue for a socially conscious curriculum, I fear that to foreground an overtly political approach may not be supported at many institutions and, therefore, may deter colleagues—particularly those on the tenure-track—from teaching service-learning courses. I also take K. Hyoejin Yoon’s criticisms about critical pedagogy seriously in relation to service-learning. This kind of pedagogy should not be about “affect”—about posturing or shaming colleagues who are not equally “enlightened” in their pedagogical choices. Service-learning is a pedagogy that enhances learning. Period. In this article, I use the community-based food literacy projects from three service-learning rhetoric and composition courses as models for reframing the conversation in order to enable the durability of well-constructed service-learning courses<sup>3</sup>.

## Getting to the Root of Food Literacy

Before I discuss the three food literacy projects in detail, I’ll give a bit of context for why I teach food-themed rhetoric and composition courses. In short, the American food system is in crisis. The way most Americans eat is a major contributor to climate change and environmental, economic, and cultural degradation. The industrial food system is dependent upon fossil fuels for chemical fertilizers and pesticides and for “planting, harvesting, processing, packaging, and transport[ing]” (Brownlee 2). While straining to meet the food demands of the growing world population, our food system is implicated in causing and perpetuating hunger and disease in the United States and abroad, and these problems are likely to worsen as the price of oil rises. Our methods for growing food are destroying our topsoil and contaminating our waterways. Large multinational corporations such as Monsanto and Nestle seek to control the world’s access to food and water. As people have been de-skilled over the last half-century, “our communities can no longer feed themselves” (Brownlee 4). As our food system

has changed to feed people ever more “cheaply,” our population, surging under this never-before-seen access to cheap food, is growing exponentially at an unsustainable rate (Bartlett). Quite simply, we cannot sustain infinite growth on a finite planet.

Because of all this, one could argue that colleges and universities have a responsibility to teach students about our flawed food system. Many research-oriented universities have not traditionally seen teaching courses related to agriculture or farming as part of their mission, but as climate change and peak oil loom, so does the need for more universities to expand their scope and re-envision their mission. As Derek Owens argues in *Composition and Sustainability*, “A sustainable society cannot be created without sustainability-conscious curricula” (27).

“The food revolution,” as it is called by many members of the movement, that is taking root in communities across the country, is branching into academic disciplines under the umbrella term “food studies,” which includes “historical, cultural, behavioral, biological, and socioeconomic” approaches to the topic (Nestle 160). What began as a social movement is fast becoming an academic movement with food studies majors, graduate programs, conferences, and academic journals popping up around the country. I suggest connections between food studies, rhetoric and composition, and service-learning that involve enhancing students’ ability to think and write critically about the systemic, root causes of societal problems by mobilizing them to join in or help to lead community discussions surrounding the local, organic food movement, food justice, and community-centered food literacy. By taking this approach, we provide a powerful learning experience for our students that is emotionally and intellectually complex, while at the same time offering opportunities for the students to work toward social change through writing.

In Boulder, CO, where I live and teach, there is an active, visible push on campus, in the city, and in the surrounding communities toward re-localization of the food system, which means moving toward local production of food and goods to support local economies and to decrease our dependence on fossil fuels, agribusiness, and factory farms. A purpose of the food re-localization movement is to educate people, as a kind of cultural literacy, about the origins and contents of their food and about the systems that they support with each purchase. Another purpose of the movement—because approximately 34,000 people, or 12% of the population of Boulder County, are food insecure—is to empower, through knowledge and skill building, disenfranchised members of the community who cannot afford to purchase healthy, organic food (Brownlee 17, 19). The goal is for our community “to meet [its] essential needs locally, and in the process to become more resilient and self-reliant” (Brownlee 1). Because food sovereignty and food justice are some of the most important issues of our time, issues that tie to topics of ecological collapse, peak oil, racism, poverty, corporate capitalism, overpopulation, disease, and hunger, service-learning practitioners are well-positioned to help launch initiatives in colleges and universities across the country, in partnership with our local communities, to address community-centered food literacy.

In the following pages, I examine how current theories of service-learning can help mobilize composition instructors to create productive service-learning projects that

center on campus and community food literacy and food justice in order to enhance students’ writing and critical thinking abilities. I address the following questions: How do we create purposeful assignments that will involve students on the front lines in local communities? How do we teach community-based genres that can intervene in public discourse? How might practitioners and WPAs “frame” this work for audiences less interested in the civic learning goals of the course or literacy work in general?

## Traditional and Critical Service-Learning

In current service-learning scholarship, a distinction has emerged between traditional service-learning and what is now called *critical service-learning* (Mitchell; Cipolle). Traditional service-learning is a form of experiential education that integrates academic instruction and regularly scheduled critical reflection with educationally meaningful community-based work that is appropriate to curricular goals in order to enrich and enhance the learning experience, teach civic engagement, and meet community-defined needs (adapted from the National Commission on Service-Learning). As Susan Benigni Cipolle explains, however, “while there are many worthwhile service projects that meet real needs in the community, for service-learning to be *critical*, students and teachers need to examine issues of power, privilege, and oppression; question the hidden bias and assumptions of race, class, and gender; and work to change the social and economic system for equity and justice” (5, emphasis added). Following critical service-learning scholar Tania Mitchell’s lead, I address below, “How might the curriculum, experiences, and outcomes of a critical service-learning [composition] course differ from a traditional service-learning [composition] course?” (50).

In the first several weeks of an upper-division food-themed rhetoric and composition course that I teach at the University of Colorado, students read about the issues of the food movement and complete assignments such as a comparative rhetorical analysis of readings and an inquiry paper. In the much-echoed trilogy of service-learning, these assignments help ground students in the “What?” and “So what?” questions that will ultimately move them to the “Now what?” question. During this phase, students visit the non-profit sites a few times to get a feel for the environment and meet some of the staff and clients. In the article’s next section, I will discuss two community-based food literacy projects, one at an after-school program for at-risk children and another at a day shelter for Boulder’s homeless and working poor, and one campus-based food literacy project.

For the service-learning component of the course at this early stage, students may help tutor children at the after-school program or serve meals at the shelter to begin to understand how the non-profit operates. This is traditional service-learning at work, and if it were all students did with the partner organization, their experiences could potentially reinforce previous stereotypes and the social status quo. While students begin to make connections between their readings, research, and community-based observations, they are not yet performing work with a “goal, ultimately, [...] to deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that

create and sustain them are dismantled” (Mitchell 50). This is a distinction between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning. But perhaps this distinction is as much about critical thinking and well-constructed courses as it is about a social justice mission for education.

Assignments and discussions in all service-learning courses should help to move students to the “Now what?” phase, but how to do so? I have written about the Reflective Course Model in which I adapt Sarah Ash and Patti Clayton’s DEAL Model for Critical Reflection (House). As part of their critical reflection model, they ask students to answer the following questions: “What did I learn? How did I learn it? Why is it important? What will I do because of it?” (Ash and Clayton). Teachers and students evaluate the reflections based on ten critical-thinking standards such as accuracy, clarity, depth, and fairness, established by the Foundation on Critical Thinking. In my Reflective Course Model, I suggest that we embed Ash and Clayton’s reflection questions into all writing assignments so that the course itself becomes a kind of meta-reflection that moves students through the series of questions as the semester progresses. Students use the critical-thinking standards to revise their work. The second half of the course, then, becomes the embodiment of the “Now what?” or “What will I do because of it?” question.

Here is where social justice work can result, not as an instructor’s imposed political or ethical agenda, which is a major criticism of both critical pedagogy and service-learning, but rather, as a necessary conclusion to any carefully designed theme-based service-learning course whose learning goals include critical thinking<sup>4</sup>. Within the timeframe of the course, students will enact answers to Ash and Clayton’s final reflection question, guided by critical-thinking standards.

I suggest that we revisit the “critical” in critical service-learning as a conflation of critical pedagogy, which is the intended reference, with critical thinking. When students make the leap from studying manifestations of a problem to analyzing systemic, root causes, they move toward a critical understanding that better lends itself to informed action, the “What will I do because of it?” I am reminded of Ira Shor’s students standing at the river’s edge, “toes in the dark water,” who contemplate at the end of Shor’s course how to cross over into “organized action for change” (177). Service-learning helps guide students across the deep river. Mitchell explains:

[a] recent study by Wang and Rodgers (2006) shows that a social justice approach to service-learning results in more complex thinking and reasoning skills than traditional service-learning courses. A critical approach embraces the political nature of service and seeks social justice over more traditional views of citizenship. This progressive pedagogical orientation requires educators to focus on social responsibility and critical community issues. Service-learning, then, becomes “a problem-solving instrument of social and political reform” (Fenwick 6, qtd. in Mitchell 51).

This idea of “problem solving” is compelling. When we talk about teaching—some might say preaching—“social responsibility” or “engaged citizenship,” we can find ourselves in a messy territory where accusations of agenda-pushing liberalism fly (Harris 577). As Paul Feigenbaum explains, “[c]ritical teachers ... invariably trap themselves (and students) by imposing social visions rather than creating dialectical opportunities for reflection and action” (10, original emphasis). Well-constructed service-learning courses create those dialectical opportunities.

While certain audiences will acknowledge the importance of civic learning goals, others, like my dean, will not. Practitioners and scholars must be ready with other arguments. Mitchell stresses, “a critical service-learning approach allows students to become aware of the systemic and institutionalized nature of oppression” (54). This growing awareness, however, is not about students feeling good—or bad—about themselves. It is not about providing charity work. It is not about an instructor’s political or ethical agenda. Rather, when we shift the focus to intellectual rigor, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher-order reasoning, all of which lead to enhanced writing, we make the connection to academic learning outcomes and begin to change the “frame” or narrative.

Well-constructed theme-based service-learning courses immerse students in complex rhetorical debates and community conversations to teach them how to use writing, genre knowledge, and rhetorical strategies to make something happen. This may or may not be a moral or ethical decision on the part of the instructor, but of more importance, it challenges students to think critically and to deeply explore, challenge, and subvert the systemic, root causes of the manifested problems they see.

Figure 1, filled in by my students during a classroom lesson, delineates the students’ understanding of issues at an after-school program in Boulder, where they worked to develop a comprehensive nutrition program.

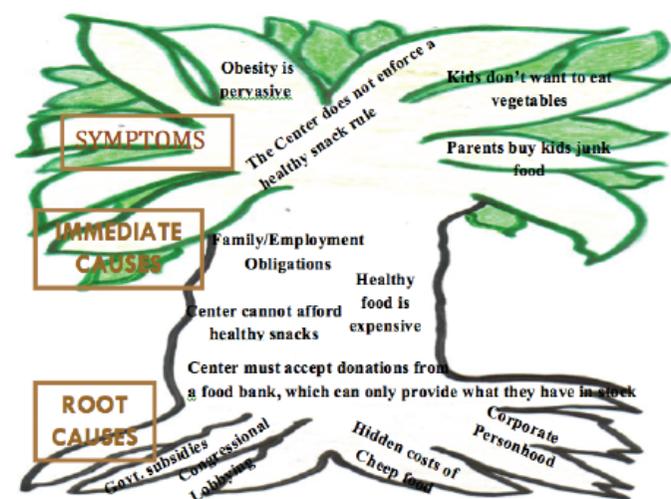


Figure 1<sup>5</sup>

The figure illustrates the ways in which students can develop deeper understanding as they become more aware of the complexities of the issues with which their non-profit wrestles. Initially, students recognize the symptoms, indicated in the leaves of the tree. If students are not encouraged through assignments and discussions to delve into the causes, they may spend their time at the non-profit entrenching previous stereotypes and generating inaccurate assumptions (Bingle and Hatcher 84, Ash and Clayton 26). On the other hand, if they are encouraged to investigate the immediate and, eventually, the root causes of the symptoms, they become ready to answer “Now what?” or “What will I do because of it?” in a more informed and substantive way. Therefore, social justice issues enter the classroom alongside students’ developing knowledge, which grows out of research, readings, and experience, all viewed through the lens of critical thinking standards. Instead of distinguishing civic learning from academic learning<sup>6</sup>, the two become inextricable from one another, which strengthens the argument for the social justice element of the course, not as an ethical obligation, but as an academic necessity. It’s where students end up when they think deeply about the issues.

## How To Do “Critical” Work Through Community-Centered Food Literacy Initiatives

I offer three class projects as examples for moving beyond a service-learning model that might reinforce the status quo to a “critical” model that encourages students to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills to enable change in the community. In my courses, learning objectives mirror traditional composition course goals established by my program but include additional goals that a student will learn to:

1. balance theory and research with analysis of community-based experiences
2. recognize and analyze correlations between theoretical concepts and community experiences
3. produce writing that effectively responds to or addresses a community need
4. distinguish individual manifestations of a problem from the systemic, root causes
5. assess rhetorical circumstances in the public sphere and intervene appropriately through writing and civic action
6. create purpose-driven documents for audiences beyond the classroom

In a class project with the Family Learning Center (FLC), a Boulder-based non-profit whose mission it is to provide learning skills that lead to economic self-sufficiency for children and families of limited incomes (FLC website), University of Colorado students worked with the elementary program to help develop a comprehensive nutrition program for the children. FLC families struggle to afford healthy food, and children

come to the center with their favorite snacks of raw ramen noodles, “hot” Cheetos, and Coke. University of Colorado students learn, through readings and research, to trace the “symptoms” that they see at the FLC to root issues, such as the government’s subsidy policy for grain crops; corporate personhood; and systemic, deliberate failings to provide affordable nutritious food to our country’s poor. “Now what?” they then ask. What might they as a class do because of these “learnings” to help the FLC families to decrease dependency on the industrial food system, gain sovereignty over their food, and become food literate—objectives that the FLC elementary program director and my students determined to tackle?

Group projects grew out of this challenge. One group set out to teach the FLC children how to garden. As one group member, Raven Emmons, wrote in a critical reflection assignment,

In the context of food security, reskilling, and community integration, group (or community) awareness is truly our first step in beginning a cycle of change and growth. The point of the FLC garden is to open the gate to healthy, locally-grown food as well as provide a sense of community for underprivileged, under-recognized youth; in essence, we are fighting many social norms and structures that contribute to these people’s subjugation, which requires attention to the subtleties, a higher level of commitment to the project than what is typical in the university, and, I daresay, passion!

The group wrote letters to local farms and hardware stores to request donations of seed, soil, and supplies for the elementary garden, which the group went on to plant with the FLC kids. The children could share the garden’s produce with their families, thus becoming responsible for helping to feed their own community.

To help ensure the sustainability of the project, the garden group produced two manuals, one for children and one for future University of Colorado students who will take over the garden project in subsequent semesters. Thinking through the lessons they learned about purpose, rhetorical appeals, and audience awareness, they produced a fifteen-page laminated, brightly colored guide for the eight- to ten-year olds, filled with pictures and easy-to-understand language about maintaining and harvesting the garden through the summer and fall. The more technical, 50-page “Garden Handbook” for future groups of college students contains detailed sections on garden program elements ranging from topics such as “Soliciting Donations,” “Preparing the Soil,” and “Companion Planting.”

A second group wrote and designed a 75-page cookbook with and for the children and their families that includes the children’s favorite food memories and family recipes made healthier by my students. It includes an introduction in which the writers tailor, to the education and knowledge level of the FLC parents, the lessons they learned throughout the semester on problems with the industrial food system, childhood obesity, healthy habits, the re-localization movement, and the need to re-skill children in the pleasures of gardening and cooking. The cookbook could be given to the children and sold by the FLC at fundraisers.

To address issues of parental food literacy, another group wrote a weekly newsletter for FLC parents—translated into Spanish by a staff member at the center—about nutrition and food access in Boulder County. The students researched food access organizations to determine alternate ways in which families could attain healthy food—produce in particular. The nine newsletters that they produced cover wide-ranging topics such as “Fast Food and Restaurant Nutrition for Kids,” “Healthy Snacks,” “Cash Saving Tips,” “Organic Versus Non-Organic,” “What are GMOs?,” and several stories about the garden and cooking projects the FLC kids did with University of Colorado students. As with the cookbook, the challenge was to tailor arguments and suggestions, which in initial drafts were too complex and academic, to a low-income and often semi-literate audience, in order to educate and persuade them to change engrained habits and to seek alternate methods of accessing and preparing food.

The learning that took place for the fourth group, specifically, involves a kind of complexity that would not have been possible in a traditional classroom. Perhaps surprisingly, the most significant demonstrations of enhanced learning did not explicitly connect to the thematic material of the course, e.g. the readings and research on food, but rather, to the rhetorical strategies that we studied alongside the thematic content. The fourth group wrote lesson plans for and taught healthy-eating classes and science experiments involving food. While the enthusiasm in the group was high, students quickly learned that audience is key when creating arguments. When the group initially met with the children, they prepared a lesson on nutrition, talking to the eight- to ten-year olds about vitamins, nutrients, and how parts of the body are affected by various vegetables. The kids were bored. Fidgets and whispers quickly devolved into full-fledged chaos. My students were frustrated and felt that the task was too daunting. Over several weeks of trial and error, however, they were able to tailor their arguments about nutrition to their young audience, and the classes became more hands-on, visual, and effective.

The group realized that if they had been given an assignment in a traditional composition course to produce hypothetical lesson plans, they, and I, would have assumed that they would be successful. The service-learning experience forced them to drastically re-think their approach to teaching the FLC kids, and through that process, it also deepened their understanding of the applicability of rhetorical principles in complex, “lived” experiences. The cooking group produced a dozen lesson plans and a fifteen-page resource guide for future University of Colorado students. In their introductory letter to future students who would use the guide, they wrote:

Context, purpose, and audience are extremely important in writing your lessons. It is crucial to recognize your audience so that you can effectively reach them... Pathos, logos, and ethos are important to incorporate into lesson plans and activities. You must gain credibility so the kids trust you and believe the information you give them.

The guide delves into these broad rhetorical concepts in detail. Through these community-based food literacy projects, the University of Colorado students and the

FLC elementary director hoped to lay a foundation for healthy lifestyles and ways of unplugging from the industrial food system for the FLC children and their families. What none of the students anticipated, but all learned, is the essential nature of the rhetorical and genre analyses we practiced during the first month of the course in terms of writing in community contexts. When they misjudged their various audiences, did not provide appropriate context, did not understand the nature of the genre in which they worked, or did not, themselves, have clarity of purpose, the documents failed. An extensive revision process, which included several conversations with FLC staff, parents, and students, helped to ensure that the final products met their intended goals.

Another class worked with the Bridge House, a non-profit organization that aids Boulder’s homeless and working poor. The Bridge House received a grant to purchase a commercial kitchen, which promised to fundamentally shift the way in which they offer food to clients and the kinds of food that they can offer. They asked for my students’ help to determine how best to utilize the new space in a mission-aligned way.

Four groups of students tackled various elements of the project. One group researched national models for culinary arts training programs for homeless clients and, based on their findings, wrote a feasibility report for the Bridge House Board of Directors. Another group researched food sourcing and food-recovery models in Boulder. They contacted over 30 organic farms in the area to determine how they distribute produce and whether they would work with Bridge House to offer donations and skills classes for gardening, preserving, and preparing food. They wrote up their findings in a research report that they delivered to the Bridge House board members. A third group created and wrote all material for a website on which they gathered seasonal recipes of healthy meals that source local ingredients and worked on a plan for the Bridge House to better utilize its community garden space. The website, <http://bridgehouserecipes.blogspot.com>, is accessible to Bridge House clients at the commercial kitchen. Because the Bridge House clients said that they wanted to use the kitchen to provide food for other hungry populations in Boulder County, a fourth group of students researched national models and local competitors and devised a business plan for producing and marketing organic soup, which sources local ingredients, to generate revenue to feed food insecure people. They named their product Sustainabowl Soups. All student groups presented their research and recommendations to the Bridge House Board of Directors and staff during the final class of the semester.

As a class, students helped to educate Bridge House staff about the benefits of locally sourced and produced goods and to facilitate discussion between the Bridge House and local producers, businesses, and non-profit organizations dedicated to food re-localization. In this way, students embedded themselves within a grassroots re-localization and food justice initiative that moved far beyond the typical “server/served” model of traditional soup kitchens to a multi-dimensional model where Bridge House clients actively participate in feeding themselves and other members of the community, receive job training, become food literate, and generate revenue in the process.

When students read about and research food issues, they inevitably consider their own food purchasing and access options. To help facilitate a discussion on the University of Colorado campus about the kinds of food available to students, a group of writing students in another food-themed course set out to work with University of Colorado Dining Services, which had recently hired a Sustainability Coordinator and wanted to increase its purchase of local food. My students drafted a survey, which they distributed to University of Colorado students in front of several dining halls, to determine how the university will define “local food.” The survey and the students’ written report became a means toward discussion and education on campus. One of several definitional questions that students came up with concerned Rudi’s Bread, a local bread company that uses ingredients shipped from around the country. Should Dining Services count Rudi’s in their goal of purchasing 10% local food, students asked? Flour sourced from a ConAgra plant in Denver? Tuna canned in a Denver plant? As they delved into the environmental, economic, and cultural complexities of the issue, the students experienced living examples of multifaceted definitional arguments in working with Dining Services, the hundreds of students they surveyed, and local-food non-profits to create a working definition that the University could adopt.

While each of these examples of class projects illustrates students doing “critical” campus and community-based food literacy work that ties to food sovereignty and food justice, the projects evolved out of the critical thinking and problem-solving work that they did before the projects began and without which the projects would not have happened. Students listened to the community partners’ constituents about what they already knew, what they needed to learn, and what they envisioned. They learned to adapt their arguments to the various audiences to which they presented their information in a variety of genres. Students gained valuable problem-solving skills as they delved into the complexities of the situation and made choices to ensure the sustainability of their projects. In other words, the movement toward social justice happened as a direct result of critical thinking standards deliberately integrated into course discussions and assignments. The depth and nuance of analysis and argument that we hope to see in student writing can grow out of the carefully planned service-learning course that deliberately maps experience and assignments to learning goals and that moves students to gradually answer the “What?,” “So what?,” and “Now what?” questions<sup>7</sup>.

In higher-education institutions across the country, faculty and administrators argue that service-learning and community-engaged work be supported, funded, and included in reappointment, promotion, and tenure considerations. When practitioners tie rhetoric and composition learning objectives to community initiatives that promote social justice, students’ community-based work can offer powerful, active-learning experiences. Clearly articulating the intended *academic* purposes of that critical service-learning work helps practitioners and administrators to achieve greater precision in “generating, deepening, and documenting” desired rhetoric and composition learning goals (Ash and Clayton 27). Assessment in composition studies shows that students learn to be more effective writers when writing in context for particular audiences. More

specifically, studies on the impacts of service-learning in composition classes indicate that service-learning composition students demonstrate higher levels of rhetorical awareness, understanding of counterarguments, understanding of how to tailor language to particular contexts, and understanding of the complexity of arguments than do students in traditional composition courses (Bacon; Wurr; Feldman)<sup>8</sup>.

That is the argument we need to make, and that is an argument my dean would support.

## Endnotes

1. See 2013 CCCCs pre-conference workshop description “The Political Turn: Writing Democracy For the 21st Century” for discussion of the origin and development of this “political turn” movement, introduced by Deborah Mutnick, Steve Parks, and Shannon Carter. Their premise, articulated in the workshop description, is that “In this moment of mounting, worldwide economic, environmental, and cultural uncertainty, we submit that it is time for a ‘political turn.’”

2. Adler-Kassner defines frames as the “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese 11, quoted in Adler-Kassner 37).

3. The food movement is but one of many social issues that one could address in service-learning classes. I offer my work with it as a model, but the theoretical ideas that this article presents could be applied to a host of topics.

4. I’m distinguishing here between what I would call genre-based service-learning courses such as grant writing or digital storytelling, where the objective is that students learn to produce a product in a particular genre for the non-profit partner, and theme-based courses, which more naturally lend themselves to the kind of reflective practice that moves students toward thinking about social justice issues.

5. I would like to thank my University of Colorado Boulder colleague, Elaina Verveer, for providing the tree image.

6. Ash and Clayton create three categories of learning, which they call “personal growth,” “civic leaning,” and “academic enhancement” (29).

7. While I do not believe that all service-learning courses without the social justice component are poorly constructed or have lower outcomes, I do believe that we cannot claim that we want certain kinds of learning without deliberately teaching for those learning goals.

8. Bringle, Hatcher, and Muthiah’s large-scale longitudinal study indicates that service-learning students respond positively to the pedagogy that enhances their learning. These students show higher retention and graduation rates, and students with volunteer experiences, not limited to service-learning, donate to their alma mater at higher levels.

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## Author Bio

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## Assembling for Agency: Prisoners and College Students in a Life Writing Workshop

*David Coogan*

Rhetorical theorists have argued that agency is a communal experience, but material conditions in jail *and* society often prevent prisoners and college students from experiencing it in meaningful ways that embrace difference. Challenging those conditions by bringing both groups together in a writing workshop enables everyone to resist discourses that would name them and to inquire, collaboratively, about pressing social problems like gun violence. This essay shows how a prisoner and a college student sustained that inquiry in writing, moving from *metanoia* or regret into *kairos*—the seizing of their day and the experience of agency. The ultimate value of that experience transcends the here and now of the workshop to become the building block of a better public sphere.

In his book about the end of Chicago's high-rise public housing, *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America*, David Fleming reveals an all-too-familiar disjuncture between Rhetoric's high ideals for democracy and its gritty translation into the real. It comes through the story of transforming one of these communities, Cabrini Green, into condos with shared public areas and a storytelling project for economically and racially diverse residents. Though the urban planners from the city did not characterize it this way, Fleming argues convincingly that a polis had been envisioned—a community that "literally sets aside time and space for the rendering and negotiation of conflicts"(13). Incredibly, the same public life that we theorize in our scholarship and commend to students in community literacy projects was at hand: not the shouting of pundits or the dead ends of polemics but the honorable efforts of ordinary people making claims, telling stories, presenting evidence, and presumably, compromising in service of something larger and nobler. Then Rhetoric became rhetoric again.

When the plan was made public, condo-buying "investors" were characterized in the press as the brave ones doing the right thing by integrating with the dangerous ones. Naturally, some from Cabrini resisted this characterization—their elbows in need of this middle-class rubbing—and came up with a counter plan: to buy their building from the city. This triggered a competition in public discourse between the rhetoric of *nobles oblige*, on the one hand, and *solidarity* amongst poor African Americans on the other, with impatient strains overheard in the background—a barely contained excitement to just blow up "the projects" already and all of the fears and loathing they