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Collins, Paul. Community Writing: Researching Social Issues Through Composition.

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Collins, Paul. *Community Writing: Researching Social Issues Through Composition*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001.
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Asking students to argue passionately for an issue that does not touch their lives quickly becomes stale. In frustration over the irrelevance that traditional composition textbooks seemed to hold for the first-year students I teach, I ordered *Community Writing: Researching Social Issues Through Composition*. Like most good books, *Community Writing* was born of a bad experience. After being thrown into a Brooklyn composition classroom with no training, Paul Collins sought advice from colleagues. Out of one of these conversations surfaced “What Makes You Angry?” a paper topic and a question that created space for students to speak about and into their own communities.

The resulting textbook—which, ironically, does not resemble a textbook—asks students to choose a community, identify a problem within that community, and consider possible solutions to that problem. Collins defines “community” broadly, suggesting that it can be “a neighborhood, a school, a profession, even an entire ethnicity or religion—any group bound by a common interest or condition” (1). *Community Writing* offers instructors and students explicit instructions for each step of the research process: assignments, papers, group revision sessions, interview suggestions, fieldwork tips, sample responses, writing advice, and guidelines for finding and analyzing sources. Helpful either as a textbook or as a grab bag of assignments and advice, *Community Writing* offers materials for any writer interested in community involvement.

Community Writing challenges the argument that academic work is not practical. Collins’s attention to community-centered writing is reminiscent of the four women Katherine Kelleher Sohn describes in *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices Since College*. Despite the Appalachian families’ fears that academia would strip the women of their common sense, all four women now use skills they learned in college writing classes to promote change in their communities. In the same way, Collins’s text attempts to merge these two worlds; he contends that the academic can be practical, and the everyday can be academic.

The idea of investigating a community seems ethnographic, but Collins’s assignments are un-ethnographic in one important way: the writers are participants in the communities they are studying. Even in recent trends of participant-observer ethnographies, the ethnographer participates in the community only in part and often merely for the duration of the study. *Community Writing* asks writers to explore communities in which they are

already participants. Because the community is already somewhat familiar to the writer, the potential problems of Margaret Himley's service-learning "stranger¹" are not as present here as in a traditional ethnography. And although full participation brings into question the research findings, it also adds a new dimension to Ellen Cushman's reciprocity model of research². The *Community Writing* student does not enter the community to bestow her salvific powers upon them, nor does she hope to offer the community services in exchange for her research. Instead, using Collins's model, both the researcher and the participants are naturally benefited by their co-membership in the community.

Unlike many textbooks, Collins meets writers on their level, offering advice and instructions throughout *Community Writing*. For example, in the first section, Collins asks "Why Write Papers?" "Why Write *Research* Papers?" and "For Whom Are You Writing?" Collins also incorporates technology into his assignments, asking writers to analyze Internet sources and offering advice for creating websites.

If *Community Writing* has one flaw, it is the lack of time Collins spends discussing how to initiate action in the community. The assignments suggest community involvement as the final step of the assignment sequence, but surprisingly, Collins's last chapter leads writers through a traditional term paper, offering only a few closing pages of advice on community work. This is a serious limitation if one hopes to use the textbook as a coherent work. However, considered as an assortment of assignments and ideas, *Community Writing* offers useful resources for preparing writers for the hard task of speaking into their communities.

At first glance, *Community Writing* seems to be written primarily for university writing instructors. And for these teachers it is useful: the text offers a relevant set of assignments to engage students both in argument and in community work. *Community Writing* could also be used in a service-learning course, although the assignments ask writers to investigate their communities. However, I want to suggest that this book should be read by those engaged in community literacy, for they are generally concerned with marginalized populations of one sort or another. Collins's book presents one way to expand our knowledge of and participation in the multicultural communities in which we live, study, and work. While populations like adult students, nonnative English speakers, and workplace writers might not feel capable to write about universal issues like abortion and federal legislation, their own communities will seem familiar and relevant to them. And if there is one thing I have learned teaching writing, it is to assign writing that writers have a stake in, writing that matters to them.

Community writing matters, because it is one way we can engage in the life and energy that surrounds us when we step outside of the classroom and offers what we all seek as writers: a space of our own in which to speak words we fashioned for those who will listen. I urge both university professors and community literacy workers to read *Community Writing* and consider it

as alternative to traditional textbooks and perhaps one more place where a conversation about community literacy work both inside and outside of the university can begin.

NOTES

1. Himley, Margaret. "Facing (Up To) 'The Stranger' in Community Service Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 55.3 (2004): 416-38.
2. Cushman, Ellen. "Opinion: The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research." *College English* 61.3 (1999): 328-36.

