Community Literacy Journal

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 6

Spring 2007

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Recommended Citation
Fero, Michele, et al. "A Reflection on Teaching and Learning in a Community Literacies Graduate Course." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 81–93, doi:10.25148/clj.1.2.009520.

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This article outlines one potential model for a graduate–level course in community literacy studies. Ellen Cushman and Jeffrey Grabill taught this course for the first time at Michigan State University in the spring of 2007. In this article our colleagues with varying disciplinary backgrounds reflect on the course, its readings, and their theoretical and practical understanding surrounding many of the central questions of this new discipline: what is a community? What is literacy? What is community literacy? And what does it mean to practice "community literacy"—to write, to speak, and so on? After a wide discussion of course experience from several student colleagues in the course, Cushman and Grabill reflect on their course objectives and point toward future incarnations of the course.

Case Study: A Community Literacy Graduate Pedagogy

The *Community Literacy Journal* will publish case studies from academic, administrative, and community perspectives on initiatives, projects, research, collaborations, outreach, and other aspects of community literacy work. In this, our first case study, faculty and graduate students from Michigan State University discuss and reflect on a recent course taught by professors Ellen Cushman and Jeffrey Grabill in Community Literacies.

Background

In the last twenty years, university professors and students have experienced an historical moment in which the estrangement between universities and communities has been recognized as a problem worthy of attention. Recognizing these problems, university presidents and administrators from around the country came together in 1986 to form the Campus Compact, a coalition of universities seeking to unite resources toward the shared mission of making knowledge with and for larger social purposes: "Campus Compact advances the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility" ("Mission"). Campus Compact facilitates professors' efforts to work with communities to identify problems that community members find important and to place university knowledge in the service of addressing those problems with community members. The best instantiations of university outreach initiatives embody a spirit, at least, that is well captured by the example of Campus Compact.

Community literacy projects within rhetoric and writing studies are situated within this institutional moment and seek to address the larger schisms between universities and communities. Rhetoric and composition scholars are well positioned to combine the scholar's traditionally separate and separable roles of research, teaching, and outreach. Indeed, university rhetoric professors have a long and established history of civic participation (Miller; Halloran and Clark; Wright and Halloran). The publication of Wayne Peck's, Linda Flower's, and Lorraine Higgins's 1995 essay, "Community Literacy," marked the beginning of a decade-long trajectory of research and curricular reform in rhetoric and composition. This important essay describes how a "community/university collaborative between the Community House and The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon…defined community literacy as action and reflection—as acts that could yoke community action with intercultural education, strategic thinking and problem solving, and with observation-based research and theory building" (200). This work addresses the important need for intellectuals and their universities to work together with communities to address local literacy goals and strive to enhance the public good. The work of the Community House / CMU collaborative provides the field of composition and rhetoric with the terms "community literacy" and a model that enables the field to engage in larger discussions of the mission of the university and opens a new field of inquiry.

In fall 2006, this very journal published "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry," by Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower. This important essay will be a central feature of future iterations of our community literacy course; unfortunately for us, it was under review and not yet published when our course was being taught. The article presents a synthesis of fifteen years of activist research and teaching in the Community Literacy Center and beyond into a theoretical framework that "features local publics, the deliberative, intercultural discourses they circulate, and the literate practices that sustain them" (10). Importantly, the authors are trying to theorize how civic literacies unfold over time and across social networks as they engage in unique rhetorical problems.

Theory of the Course

We see the Peck, Flower, and Higgins essay as a watershed moment in the field of rhetoric and writing; since their publication, the field has articulated community literacy in service learning and radical pedagogy initiatives (Deans; Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Flower et al; Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi; Herzberg; Flower; Peck, Flower, and Higgins; Bacon; Coogan; Cushman; Cushman and Emmons; Julier, Julier, and Cooper; Shultz and Gere) and an increase in qualitative research in communities and workplaces (Grabill, forthcoming; Lindquist; Guerra; Moss). With these current research trends in mind, we sought to design a graduate course in community literacy that would offer colleagues a means for articulating their sense of "community literacy."

The new graduate program in rhetoric and writing at Michigan State University created a space—a concentration within the program—for the study of community literacies. But what does this mean? In many ways, this keystone course in a Ph.D. concentration was an attempt to ask what it means to study this thing we call "community literacy" at this point in time, in this particular discipline, and at this particular place (MSU).

Our theory of the course, then, was to begin with these larger disciplinary questions:

- When did "community literacy" emerge as a concern in composition studies and why?
- Why did it emerge in the way that it did—asking certain questions and not others, posing certain methodologies as appropriate and not others?

We posed these questions at the beginning of course, and in various ways, they were taken up at other points in the course. The purpose of these questions was to play a doubting game in order to interrogate the disciplinary and intellectual ground upon which this course and concentration stood. Answers led us in many directions, including to additional questions regarding the sustainability of community-based work and whether or not a focus on *community* literacies was intellectually or methodologically meaningful.

However, the usefulness of these questions rested in the inquiries they made possible for the rest of the course, as we explored issues such as:

- What is a community?
- What is literacy?
- What, therefore, is community literacy?
- What does it mean to practice community literacy—to write, to teach, to learn, and so on?

We sought to develop with our colleagues both a sense of the theories, methodologies, and pedagogies already associated with community literacy initiatives in rhetoric and writing as well as a projection outward to other disciplines that might help them define their place within this area of work. We hoped this course would help everyone define a field of work in which to locate our future research, teaching, and service efforts. Below we include a series of reflections on the field as described by our colleagues in this course who will be researching further in these areas. We end this essay with an overall reflection on community literacy possibilities and limitations and include our syllabus.

The Problem of Definition: Michele Fero

I came into this course with an interest in definitions of literacy, literacy practices in non-academic settings, and a particular interest in the convergence of potentially different literacy practices, such as the convergence of home and school-based practices. I had some exposure to literacy studies prior to the course, but looked forward to filling in what I believed were some of the gaps. The course certainly helped me develop a more nuanced sense of literacy, though not entirely as I expected. Literacy is a socially and institutionally constructed concept. Institutions play a powerful role in deciding what counts as literacy and schools are obviously important, but schools do not function in isolation. Rather, they are part of a larger social system and can work to reinforce, recreate, or even resist other institutions which shape definitions of literacy—such as the government, workplaces, homes, and various community settings, among others.

After taking this course, I now see the term literacy as almost meaningless unless it is placed into a very specific context.

As the course progressed, the "problem" of definition became central. As a class, we debated what we thought we meant by "community literacy" and considered the range of implications. What is literacy? What is community? How do we establish boundaries and definitions? Definitions can be limiting but seem a disciplinary necessity. I had not considered this trajectory at the beginning of the semester, but I think it turned out to be one of the most important points of discussion. For instance, community literacy can be labeled a discipline, a methodology, or a subfield of literacy studies. Each meaning brings with it numerous possibilities, all of which deserve consideration. For me, community literacy as a discipline raised several questions. Disciplinarity, at a minimum, includes a somewhat definable area of expertise/knowledge, one or more research paradigms, *or* at least a set of research practices that many scholars in the field would support along with theoretical framework(s).

The list could grow, but these seem to be typical disciplinary concerns. This list also strikes me as incredibly self-serving. When I think about disciplines as institutional entities, I frequently see trouble. Being a discipline has certain benefits, such as academic legitimacy, which can lead to jobs, more money for projects, and arguably the ability to do more good. If there are no resources, material or otherwise, it is hard to accomplish much of anything. Yet the word *community* in community literacy should immediately raise concerns about the fact that disciplines can become insular, full of navel-gazing and self-congratulatory articles. The emphasis on community and the rightful suspicion of researchers and other university types should not be overlooked. Can a discipline avoid being consumed and/or corrupted by its very disciplinarity?

As we discussed it throughout the semester, there are—muddy as they are—certain things that make community literacy something particular. For instance, there seems to be an activist element. As I understand it, this means that community literacy favors research that can affect change. The type of change desired is not only for the researcher to decide, though.

Community researchers work with communities to achieve good for the communities. Another important aspect is a critical stance toward all research, always considering power relationships between researcher and participants, and between researchers and communities. I would also add that community literacy as a university discipline would have to work hard to maintain reciprocal relationships with communities surrounding the university.

The attention to ethics, the community-focused approach to conducting research, and the desire to "do good" are all very meaningful to me. Many of the course readings led me to consider the point of both higher education and the work of its researchers and scholars. Ultimately, this course was a wonderful addition to my graduate studies. I have been able to apply many of core concepts and concerns to my own work in composition—the attention to disciplinary issues, an understanding of the relationships between communities and institutions, questioning the role of any research, a greater understanding of literacy practices across settings, and the importance of building strong university/community relationships.

Learning: Jill McKay Chrobak

This course was an effective and thorough survey of the concepts, theories, and debates on and about community literacy. The course introduced me to a number of scholars I have always wanted to become familiar with, such as Paulo Freire, and others I hadn't been interested in, but should, such as Pierre Bourdieu. Ultimately, the Community Literacy course provided me with a better understanding of how to define, research, and value communities and the vast multitude of literacies that exist within and throughout them.

What I benefited most from in the course were discussions on the following topics:

- Bourdieu's discussion of *habitus* as producing individual and collective practices (more history) in accordance with schemes generated by history (54). This helped me to recognize the profound social and idiosyncratic constructions that are bound up in our everyday lives.
- That there is worth and value examining the daily workings of communities, of studying the mundane to make meaning of cultural and social phenomena—Cushman's and Grabill's work particularly address this point.
- That institutions can be rewritten through rhetorical action and institutional critique. The discussion surrounding Grabill's *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change* helped me to visualize how I can be an agent of change within the institutions I choose to serve and be served by.
- That we cannot assume the existence of a community. We can never assume that a community-based program is empowering; similarly, we cannot assume that communities and institutions must be built. If they are, the systems that result must be able to see the pervasiveness and relevance of what are called everyday and work literacies (Grabill 117). Not only can these ideas be applied to communities, they can also be applied to classrooms. Instructors cannot assume the existence of a community within that classroom; they cannot assume what they teach is empowering just because they say so. Furthermore, I think what these excerpts and our subsequent class showed is that we must be transparent in our goals and in our means of achieving those goals in our research and scholarship. Also, we must recognize and value the everyday, to make meaning of and about our communities and think carefully about the strategies and moves involved with those literacies.

My definition of community is what Iris Young would call a "social group." She says a social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or ways of life, an expression of social relations, not entities that exist apart from individuals. My definition of literacy is oral, written, and visual moves and strategies used to make meaning. So for me, community literacies is the merging of those two definitions. As a field, community literacy is the study of how communities make meaning through varied oral, written, and visual strategies. I don't believe that community literacies exclude anything; one can use community literacy as a pedagogy, a research methodology, or as a outreach method (which is what I think it was originally designed for). Community literacy has given birth to a completely new subfield, community informatics, much like how composition studies formed cultural studies.

While I don't believe community literacy as a field was intended for outreach—though I think it should focus on such efforts—it certainly has evolved into that methodology. Michigan State University, for example, uses community literacy methods and methodologies to operate a wide range of outreach programs aimed at the surrounding communities of the institutions, primarily to aid the infrastructure of the community itself. I believe embracing community literacy in this way as a field, method, methodology, and pedagogy can prove beneficial for both theory and practice: theory for the academics who crave legitimacy in the field and praxis for the communities that it seeks to engage with and for.

Ultimately, I do not think community literacies can be defined. Too many factors, concepts, and theories are inherently wrapped up in the work of communities and in the recognition and study of literacy. Many of the scholars we have read in this course have defined how community literacy has vastly advanced and legitimized their research and work. Through community literacy they have been able to prove that studying and researching communities and the literacies within and throughout them have value. Community literacy therefore should be acknowledged in the greater field of composition and rhetoric as a legitimate method, pedagogy, or outreach effort that can be used to construct and proliferate meaning.

What is Community? Jim Ridolfo

Prior to this course, if I were asked to define "community," I would quickly have had a confused look on my face. I might, after thinking about the question for a longer length of time, have begun to define community in terms of the many positive attributes or strengths a group of people might express. I would have fallen back on a more idealistic notion of what constituted community. If someone had asked me to define the difference between the singular "community" versus the plural "communities," I believe I would not have been able to do so. At best, I might have re-identified "community" in terms of different interests, expanding slightly on my understanding to include distinctions between communities of different politics, culture, religion, geography, leaders, and other attributes. But neither of these modes of thinking through community held up after the course or the events of that semester. Like many courses where moments of deep learning happen for me, I was able to study different local events and use the course readings as a location to reflect and revisit my understandings of how community functions (both as an idea and as a tangible structure), in and around these events.

In the middle of the spring semester, a neo-Nazi rally was announced in Michigan's capital, Lansing. The rally posed a serious threat to the city on a number of levels. The impact of a small neo-Nazi organization coming to the capital city was serious: in 2005 the same organization had rallied twice in Toledo, Ohio. On the occasion of the first rally in October 2005, the mishandling of the small Nazi presence by the city of Toledo may have resulted in sizeable unrest, with over a hundred counter-protesters arrested, many injuries, and subsequent national publicity for a small and relatively insignificant hate group (Maag). The group returned to the city in December of 2005 and there were two dozen arrests (ABC). Yet again, the small hate group received a disturbingly disproportionate amount of national and international media attention.

The recent history of the Toledo events is, in short, a sizeable part of the context leading up to a near-identical controversy in Lansing. In December 2005, the same hate group that had marched twice in Toledo announced a rally in Lansing for April of 2006 (Darrow). From this public controversy, a number of different plans emerged to deal with the impending rally. A city plan sponsored and promoted by the mayor's office focused primarily on holding a diversity rally on the east side of the city and urging people to stay away from direct physical confrontation with the neo-Nazis. In philosophic opposition to the mayor's plan, a "radical" activist plan promoted direct confrontation between counter-protesters and neo-Nazis, involving different elements of physical force (Darrow). Then, a sizeable portion of individuals wanted to ignore the presence of the neo-Nazis, believing that any attention would be a strategic win for the group (Lutz).

I bring up the example of Lansing's responses to the Neo-Nazis because for each of these plans, there was a strong sense of "community response." But what constitutes "the community"? And how does the rhetoric of "community response" work when a community is clearly divided over how to respond? The mayor's plan in part attempted to shift the media focus away from the neo-Nazis. The activists' plans for direct action felt that allowing the group to march through the Lansing community unopposed would be a direct victory for the neo-Nazis. The media photographs and publishes, unfortunately, moments of visible conflict. f both sides are laying claim to "community" as a term, then what does the term mean? How should its marker of conflict be navigated?

This situation coupled with course discussions helped me realize that before this course, I thought through the idea of "community" in overly positive and generalized terms. In using these generalizations, I often thought about "the community" abstractly, without any concrete referent to the situation at hand. I learned understanding the context for "the community" is complex. Do six, a dozen, or a hundred people in a city of 200,000 make a community? What must they say for one to *know* that they do represent "the community?" I still don't have an answer to this question, but from the seminar conversations, I learned ways to identify the problem: community can have positive connotations, but it is also a flash point for representing the conflict and strife of individuals as they fight *for* the term "the community."

Rethinking Service Learning Pedagogy: Deborah Vriend Van Duinen

I initially signed up for this course because of my interests in English education. As a former high school English teacher, I had background knowledge and experience in working with students on their reading and writing skills and was curious to see why and how community could be involved in such endeavors. At the time, I didn't see any connections between my current work as a graduate student in the teacher education program and what I would learn in this course. I was merely taking an elective course for fun.

Or so I thought.

During the first few weeks of the course, as the only teacher education student in the course, I continued to maintain my "outsider" perspective because many of the class discussions and readings situated community literacies in the university realm

and, more specifically, in college composition classrooms. After wrestling with the many terms, methodologies, and locations within and of community literacy experiences, however, I began to see many connections to both teacher education and K-12 teaching. In fact, I ended up writing my final paper on the necessary intersections between teacher education and community literacy.

On a literal level, teacher educators frequently acknowledge the importance of communities in students' lives and the literacy practices that occur in them. They also discuss the necessity for teachers to learn about and utilize the resources in such communities by working with community members and by making space in the curriculum for students' lived experiences. *Community* and *literacy* are buzzwords in my field. Sadly, however, cursory notions of these words are used and the theories behind them are seldom discussed. Taking this course has helped me to question my field's use of these terms. Is a community only a single, static, geographically located neighborhood around a school or are schools and students participants in multiple communities that are dynamic, overlapping, and at times contradictory? Who gets to define literacy? Who decides which literacies are acceptable in school settings?

On another level, service learning opportunities frequently occur in K-12 school settings. Getting primary and secondary students to c*ollaborate with the community in* a context of an academic experience that includes reflection and promotes a sense of civic responsibility is indeed a beneficial experience. However, it's not simple. What are the goals of such collaboration? Who gets to decide them? Who really benefits from the experience?

Taking this class prompted me to make significant changes in the design of a teacher education course I am currently teaching. In this course, students are required to complete eight weeks of tutoring in an urban middle school. The concepts behind community literacy have changed the way I encourage students to approach their tutoring experiences, their ways of trying to get to know their students' communities, and their understandings of literacy. Such changes, in my opinion, have significantly improved my course.

In thinking back on our Community Literacy class, the following things come to mind:

Possibility of community partnerships: I'm not sure about the feasibility of this, particularly in light of how complicated it is to find, establish, and maintain a relationship with a community organization or group, but I wonder if a class like ours could have participated in or at least physically observed a university-community collaboration focusing on literacy. Doing so could have provided us with a common experience from which we then could have compared and contrasted other community literacy examples and models.

Order of the readings: We began the first class by exploring the question "Why community literacy in our field in this historical moment?" We also highlighted the many different terms that are used to describe the general theories, research, and pedagogies of community literacy: applied research, outreach, service learning, extension, capacity building, development. We then spent four weeks looking at various theories and methodologies behind community literacy. As an outsider to our field, it would have been helpful for me to spend more time looking at the history of community literacy as both an institutional structure and a term as well as the different terms surrounding it. What, for example, is the difference between community literacy and service learning?

Rethinking the Writerly Self in Community: Jason Wirtz

> "I prefer to get up very early in the morning and work. I don't want to speak to anybody or see anybody. Perfect silence"—Katherine Anne Porter
>
> "To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting"—E.E. Cummings

The field of creative writing guards against what could be characterized as "intrusion from the outside world" by cultivating a sense of the solitary author hunkered over a desk scratching out text across a page. There is no better way to stifle invention, this school of thought maintains, than by direct involvement in the world. This deep-seated notion of the artist as separate from the community in order to invent runs counter to the concept of a course on community literacies. This course and its act of conjoining the terms *community* and *literacy* challenged me to think of ways that writers evolve out of, and invent within, their communities.

Gloria Anzaldua writes, "When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people" (1589). This recognition of creative writing as representative of, and giving voice to, a culture is to position invention through language as being deeply situated within a community's subjectivity. Anzaldua's assertion that through the telling of her story, and through the telling of all stories of oppression, "the intracultural split will heal" (1601). is an assertion that writing about and within community is a primary source of writing purpose and invention.

Similar to the rhetorical stance that Anzaldua operates from, Virginia Woolf refers to the liberating qualities associated with writing from a place of oppression. In order to write from this perspective Woolf first had to kill the "Angel in the House"—the mentality adopted by most women of her time (on the behest of men) that they were not to express themselves in certain ways, that their place was solely within the domestic sphere. Woolf writes, "The first—killing the Angel in the House—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved" (1255). Woolf calls on other women, specifically women writers of the future, to take up this task and play their part in the continuing evolution of women writers and writing. For Woolf, then, a notion of community and writing as a form of activism on behalf of women was central to creative writing.

Finally, we might begin to see the founder of critical pedagogy himself, Paulo Freire, as keenly interested in narrative used to describe the world in a word. An early reference point in our course was Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. One way to view Freire through a narrative lens is to understand that his pedagogy could not exist without narrative; his arguments against the banking model and his insistence on dialogue and "naming the world" predicate creativity and narrative.

I see community literacy as a necessary ideological perspective in dispelling the myth about invention as taking place in a lonely room somewhere, invention as an individual *tour de force*. Even if artists lock themselves in a hotel room to write for days on end and come out with something brilliant in the end, this brilliance is only based upon how it reflects or comments on the community in which it is placed. This is true whether one is writing for a first-year composition course or a large publishing house.

Back to Ellen and Jeff

We posed genuine questions for our colleagues and ourselves, and we were pleased with how the students, both those represented here and others, wrestled with these questions. As Ellen noted in her own reflection, the class raised more issues that are definitional and questions about research in this area. Like Michele, Ellen isn't sure if we are talking about a discipline, a methodology, an institutional location that involves teaching, or a scholarly or administrative mission—community literacy seems to occupy all these locations and more. We were also pleased that our colleagues seemed to struggle with the definition or location of community. Michele's piece locates this line of thinking with respect to institutional issues, while Jim's reflection provides a concrete example of how hard it can be to decide, both pragmatically and ethically, what a community is and how to value it. Deb's reflection allows us to consider the possibility that communities of individuals such as preservice teachers are located within universities and that they also need communities beyond the university to be able to learn and work—but that the ethics of this relationship need constant care.

We did not want to send our graduate student colleagues forth to volunteer or design a study or engage in work that was not already part of an existing relationship.

Because our colleagues genuinely wrestled with the questions we posed and seemed to have made significant progress in their own thinking, we are generally happy with the course and its design. Would we make changes? Sure. One issue we continue to ponder is the lack of a community engagement project. We thought carefully about this, but one of us (Jeff) was insistent—perhaps too insistent—that any work outside the university be linked to existing work and relationships. We did not want to send our graduate student colleagues forth to volunteer or design a study or engage in work that was not already part of an existing relationship. This made the course perhaps too conceptual in its conduct. We read few pieces that dealt on an operational level with how to understand and work in a community, and what we read, such as Kretzmann and McKnight, was not well received; these pieces were understood as too reductive. Therefore, we left one key tension untouched—the tension between our often elegant theories of what communities are, what literacy should be, and how we ought to design our activities and the less-than-ideal realities of literacy projects. Regardless, we offer our course—the rationale, the reflection, and the online syllabus—for our colleagues to take and reuse at <http://www.msu.edu/~cushmane/commlit_0104.htm>.

Let us know how it goes.

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