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“Inviting the Body”: Walking Methodologies as a Process of Unlearning

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Abstract

This article delves into an exploration of the transformative journey of integrating walking methodologies within the context of a Technical Writing in the Community service-learning course, which is offered at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in south Texas. These walking methods, founded on the principle of engaging the physical body in the learning experience, serve as a dynamic conduit for building bridges between the academic sphere and the broader non-academic communities that surround it. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered the educational landscape, there has been a growing recognition of the need for innovative approaches to education that prioritize equity and inclusivity. This article places particular emphasis on the concept of "unlearning" as a central tenet of this experiential pedagogical practice. The act of unlearning challenges entrenched and conventional structures within education, offering a powerful means of fostering meaningful change. In an era marked by heightened awareness of issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as the ongoing call for decolonization within educational institutions, the integration of walking methodologies takes on added significance. This article explores how these methods can play a pivotal role in reshaping the educational landscape, helping to break down barriers and create more inclusive spaces for learning. Acknowledging that no pedagogical approach is without its challenges and limitations, the article concludes by underlining the importance of persistently inviting the body into the process of learning and unlearning through the use of walking methodologies. It calls for a continued exploration of these innovative techniques as part of a broader effort to cultivate more responsive and equitable educational experiences. By embracing the transformative potential of walking methodologies, educators and institutions can move closer to the goal of fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Keywords: walking methodology, service-learning, unlearning, technical writing pedagogy

Introduction

I started the spring 2023 academic semester by asking the students in my Technical Writing in the Community course to *unlearn* their stationary outlook of the writing process. I wanted them to move beyond the bounded expectations of writing as a seated practice achieved strictly in front of a computer screen or settled at a desk with pen and paper. Unlearning invited students to consider their body as the center for writing, and offer their writing skills, products, and time as a form of service. Students were urged to think of the nuanced ways that words and composition could be shared, could make change, and could be a reciprocal tool for learning. One of the practices incited to support unlearning in our Technical Writing classroom was to take up walking as an essential part of this process. I encouraged students to walk, wander, and write outside the box of our enclosed classroom and travel beyond the margins of their Word documents and power-point templates. We used walking methodologies as a way of unlearning traditional writing practice and engaging in community literacy through experiential learning, though not without complication.

Legacy of Social Justice Grounded in Place

As Nedra Renalds, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jenny Rice, and others have affirmed, place matters, especially in relation to intersections of learning, writing, and identity. As we write and teach and create and learn, we are sowing a future that is grounded on the legacies and shortcomings of those who worked the land, composed the literature, and educated the generations before us, calling this same place *home*. We stroll the halls and trample the soil others toiled to harvest. The institution where I work, where my students learn, and the city that surrounds us, harbor a legacy of service, social justice, and the intrepidity to take risks, sometimes for the betterment of others and sometimes not. I teach at Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU), a small Catholic liberal arts school in San Antonio, Texas. OLLU was founded by a group of strong women in 1895. Mother Florence Walter, the superior general of the Sisters of Divine Providence, looked out over the land where our university now sits and asserted: "This is the place. Someday, upon this land will stand a beautiful Gothic chapel with twin spires pointing up to the blue Texas sky" ("OLLU History"). Her vision has become reality, though there is still work to be done in acknowledging the destructive role of settler colonialism and exploitation of indigenous peoples and land in creating the city of San Antonio and our university. Historically and presently, there are complexities and conflicts grounded in questions of settlement and service.

The Sisters of Divine Providence were initially established in San Antonio to educate rural communities beyond the city's reach as well as serve the westside of San Antonio, a part of the urban landscape troubled with social injustice, systemic oppression, and limited access to municipal services. The sisters' first educational ventures required them to travel, sometimes on foot, to serve those who otherwise would not have access to education. Many of these communities were poverty stricken, and women and people of color dealt with additional social and educational barriers and violences. These early narratives of the institution are oversimplified in our university

archives, online history, and in conversations across our campus and community. The founding sisters are often depicted as *saviors* to these *lost* communities. Challenging and scrutinizing these uniquely documented origins is arduous for students and faculty, particularly in the presence of living faith-oriented individuals who inhabit our campus spaces and learning environments, and with institutional values and vision profoundly rooted in faith-based principles. A potential avenue for further inquiry and analysis is the exploration of counterstories in subsequent endeavors and iterations of this course. However, based on the existing documentation, the sisters' educational initiatives expanded, and the college was established.

In 1986, OLLU became the birthplace of the Hispanic Serving Institution designation or HSI ("OLLU: The Birthplace of HSI"). Dr. Antonio Rigual, OLLU's provost, assembled a group of leaders from eighteen universities to openly discuss the founding of an association of colleges and universities that served substantial populations of Hispanic students. From that meeting, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) was established and was housed on the OLLU campus through its early years. Working from this foundation, OLLU maintains its HSI status, and continually assesses and explores how to best serve our students and community. There are divergences and disputes on how to implement this HSI obligation in a pragmatic manner. Faculty and administration frequently hear that we are "sitting on the shoulders of giants," which is an uneasy position to occupy in ambiguity. We are assigned with exceedingly high criteria for service to students, community, and university, resulting in our research and other interests being allocated scant time and resources.

The heritage of our place at Our Lady of the Lake University is one of assisting our immediate community as well as a mindfulness and action-oriented education focusing on the specific population of students we serve; however, one-hundred-twenty-seven years after the founding of our institution, systemic oppressions and injustices continue. There remains a passion towards community literacy and social justice, but these are not always executed efficiently or effectively. Students in my Technical Writing in the Community course engaged with the legacy of our common place and its complex history, as well as its imperfections and bias. One approach students were prompted to recognize both merits and drawbacks was by unlearning conventional writing practice through walking methods, situating their own body in this place and knowledge production, thereby contemplating on positionality and process.

Unlearning

Measuring student learning is a difficult task, and measuring unlearning is perhaps even more arduous. Unlearning is defined as the process of replacement or disuse of knowledge, action, or procedure and substitution of new knowledge when appropriate (Hafner 2015; Hedberg 1981; Starbuck 2017). As outlined by Moshe Banai (2022) and Hislop et al. (2014), most studies of unlearning have been within the framework of organizational structures and practices, but the theory has been applied to cultural assimilation, educational leadership, and learning exercises. The theory of unlearning

asks for a shift in methods and practices for individual or structural change, despite cultural and institutional limitations.

The praxis of unlearning within a formalized educational system is paradoxical; however, unlearning can be practiced as a way of pushing against standardized education structures embraced by the majority that marginalize those not equipped with a privileged background. As part of a blog series on social justice and civic engagement, Dr. Jin Young Choi, explains the significance of unlearning as it relates to privilege and oppression. She defines what it means to unlearn as an act of "discarding or nullifying what we have learned when it is wrong, false, or outdated; to forget your usual way of doing something so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way" (Choi). Post-Covid education with lingering health and equity concerns, as well as decolonial and DEI driven education initiatives, insist that institutions and instructors unlearn what is false or outdated, and seek a new and sometimes better way. The students in my Technical Writing class were asked to forget their usual way of writing and include walking as an integral part of the process. Within the confines of a semester, students incorporated experiential education practices of centering the body and movement into the writing process. Several students reflected and voiced how they gained confidence through this approach and tried incorporating walking methods within other classes as well as their personal writing and creative projects. The question remains if unlearning will stick, if it will transcend my request in a single semester to make change. More studies, reflections, and student feedback are needed, but the initial student experience in the spring 2023 semester revealed a shift in writing practice and signs of unlearning through this experiential effort were successful.

Somatic Pedagogy/Walking Methodologies

Although academics often acclaim achievements of the mind, the cognitive labor, the indicators of intellect and innovation, the body is the site of all learning, writing, and research. The work of the mind is not so easily separated from the body. Largely, people recognize how their body influences their mental discernments and physical pursuits, but few reflect on the body's role in learning. While some may have fervent body awareness in social or health related frameworks, as part of adopting somatic pedagogy and for a deeper level of knowledge, the body must be overtly integrated with the particular subject students are expected to learn. Somatic pedagogies, such as walking methods, should be considered as a viable means to knowledge making and a way to bridge academic communities with non-academic communities. Service-learning is an excellent site to build this bridge since the two communities are already in conversation.

At the Adult Education Research Conference in 2008, Tara Horst argued that "the key to fostering somatic learning is to overtly include the body as part of the learning. The body should be actively invited into the learning space" (Horst). Walking as an essential part of the writing process and means to understanding the community invites the body into the learning space. The body is acknowledged and embraced as an essential tool in the process. Instead of clinging to the tendency to

classify learning as either mental or physical, we should create room for modes of learning that are embodied, unlearning the dominance that is cultivated by constantly praising and promoting only the cognitive learning paradigms. Adrienne maree brown argues in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* that somatics is a change method to help us engage in bodied change; it is a means of reclaiming our bodies for social analysis and systemic transformation. Walking methodologies is one way to do this work.

Sarah Truman and Stephanie Springgay conceptualize walking methodologies in *Walking Methodologies in a More-Than-Human World* as a corporeal approach that scholars and students employ to investigate sensory, material, and transient aspects. Although walking as a methodology has a historical background in social critique and urban analysis, in contemporary practices it provides an embodied research method and pedagogical instrument that fosters student involvement with place, a means to unlearn or defamiliarize the spatial realities that students may not deliberately discern or scrutinize otherwise. This methodology enables students to comprehend the role of body and place in writing, identity construction, community development, and language, by eliciting a tangible, affective awareness of place(s) that cannot be fully grasped or valued in the abstract. My Technical Writing in the Community service-learning course served as a venue where the somatic pedagogy of walking methodologies was applied. Students were invited to walk with their community partner and throughout our shared community to better understand audience.

In practice, the positionality of my students, myself, and our community was crucial. As an able-bodied white female educator and researcher, I must be aware of my own prejudice and blind spots; I have to take into account how my students may perceive walks similarly or differently from my own walks, and I have to create space in my classroom for these dialogues. We examine social positionalities of walking while being Black, brown, female, undocumented, or differently abled. We investigate what walking looks and feels like on our campus and community, as well as other locations across the city. Students are encouraged to share their stories. We discuss the specific spaces they will be required to walk through as part of our class; students are free to ask questions, express their concerns, or consult with me individually. In subsequent iterations of this course, I intend to broaden these conversations on walking and positionality to explore national and global commonalities and differences. San Antonio and OLLU are distinctive and complex in their minority majority communities and stratified histories; students may gain from exploring perspectives and narratives that intersect, complement, and challenge their viewpoints.

Walking Methods Meets Service-Learning

Much like social relationality while walking, service-learning is fraught with questions of power, positionality, and privilege. Though first acclaimed as an excellent pedagogy for civic engagement, a number of researchers and theorists have signaled that the potential in service-learning for transformative change may instead unintentionally reinforce or even strengthen power imbalances (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Cross,

2005; Himley, 2004; Hullender et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2001). One strategy to address and confront these systems of power is a shift from traditional service-learning to critical service-learning. As originally coined by Tania Mitchell, critical service-learning should aim to dismantle systems of oppression. Santiago-Ortiz outlines the goals of traditional service-learning as "student-focused and outcomes-based," she addresses how this "vision has been challenged for reinforcing unequal power dynamics, engaging with community issues superficially, and providing temporary solutions that do not address oppressive conditions" (44). Similarly, Harkins et al. define critical service-learning as "a model that adopts a social justice framework, as opposed to a more 'apolitical helper' model of service-learning and demands an analysis of power structures and social change" (22). Though service-learning remains flawed, a critical approach works to assess, acknowledge, and expose inequities. As Himley argues, service-learning should "agitate us," for it is a "complex process of proximity and distance," but we should "not give up on community service learning (or debates about the 'right' way to do it)" (433).

Each semester at OLLU, there are courses that are designated and designed as service-learning sections. Our Center for Service-Learning and Volunteerism collaborates with faculty, students, and community partners to attempt to implement critical service-learning. OLLU has enduring relationships with the non-profit organizations it partners with to try to prevent power dynamics, perceived savior complexes, and to facilitate students through the process and provide them with a voice. Naturally, there are shortcomings and flaws, and some semesters are more successful than others. I will persist in reevaluating and examining what worked and what did not, what to eliminate and what to retain, and I will involve students and our community in these dialogues. Currently, the organizations we serve are part of the same community as the university, and many of our students originated from this shared neighborhood. We strive for respect and reciprocity, motivating students to recognize what they contribute and what they receive.

Prior versions of Technical Writing in the Community necessitated students to produce technical documents for non-profit organizations that lacked the resources or personnel to create, revise, and disseminate these materials. Students devised, composed, and refined deliverables such as slick sheets, organization handbooks, reports, manuals, web content, and brochures for community organizations to utilize. Communication between students and the community transpired predominantly through digital means. In the initial version of Technical Writing in the Community, service-learning was only enacted through document production for non-profit organizations, creating a disconnection, a gap between students and the purported community they were supposed to serve. Students fulfilled the mandatory tasks but did not distinctly comprehend document production as service. Their work was mainly conducted on campus, in the confines of the classroom, on a computer screen. Their bodies were not explicitly welcomed into the learning space.

Transitioning to Somatic

In spring 2023, I adopted a more somatic approach that incorporated walking. I incorporated a two-hour general service component that instructed students to walk the facilities of the non-profit organization and serve the needs of the community by opting for one of several embodied service alternatives. Some students opted to assist in creating a legacy garden, others contributed to a town hall meeting, and a few undertook more personalized tasks as specified by our community partner. Subsequently, students were prompted to reflect on these embodied experiences and the majority articulated how they felt more connected by walking, not only to the organization they were serving, but also to their classmates, and the technical written assignments they executed from campus. By mandating a minimum of two on-site general service hours and an initial site visit where students would walk-with to physically explore the facilities of their non-profit organization, students and community partners would walk and learn together, foregrounding the body as part of this process. This shift entailed walking the premises of the non-profit organization and the adjacent community.

The day I announced this walking requirement as part of the service-learning, students were not enthusiastic. They rolled their eyes, they averted their gaze, they groaned, and two students approached me right after that specific class session to express their apprehensions. Walking was not how they envisioned technical writing skills, nor was it part of their usual knowledge making process. Nevertheless, throughout the progression of the semester and through their walking practices, their attitudes changed and all but one student persisted. They worked at unlearning their prior conception of writing as a sedentary act and broadened their view of service to encompass composition.

The class was divided into three teams and each team traveled and walked together. Students designated a communication liaison for each group who scheduled their site visits; all three teams arrived on their prospective days. Our community partner for the semester was a non-profit blood and tissue bank that has been serving the greater San Antonio region for over forty-five years. Most students were unfamiliar with the organization even though it is not far from our institution and hosts blood drives on campus every fall and spring. During their site visit, students walked through the facilities of the organization they would serve in the months to follow. They met with an administrative leader, a research scientist, a graphic designer, an onsite volunteer, and others working in various departments. As students walked the halls, they were struck by the community created art installations that lined the walls and the recycled cans that were hung decoratively from the ceilings creating a sense of shifting skyscapes. As they walked into various offices and labs, they talked to individuals who expressed a sense of familial closeness within the organization and outlying community. Students witnessed blood draws, and one student nearly fainted upon seeing the storage of gallons of community blood to be disseminated throughout our region to those in need. Teams walking the grounds *with* the community partner built a stronger connection than previous iterations of this course.

In addition to walking with the community partner, students were asked to take their ideas for a walk as they created each deliverable. As part of the writing process, I urged students to walk and incorporate movement, especially when they felt stuck, when they felt the words and ideas weren't flowing, they should simply move, wander, walk, acknowledging their body is an essential tool for writing. During these walks, students were encouraged to think about their time with the community partner, their audience, as well as the larger community they were serving with their writing and beyond it. This experiential effort was an act of unlearning, and at first students were skeptical. I assured them these walks were a way to connect the knowledge and expertise they had been acquiring in the classroom and from their textbook, from the technical writing skills to the understanding of audience, to the community that their audience and they were simultaneously serving through this process. Community, writing, body, and service were intimately connected.

At the end of the course, students organized a showcase of learning and reflection where the community partner was welcomed to attend and provide feedback on their final products before delivery. Students narrated their experiences and anxieties and spoke proudly about the technical documents they produced, but they dwelled on their onsite service experience and how they felt establishing rapport with the community partner through walking and tactile engagement. I observed subtle differences in the ways students articulated their experiences compared to previous semesters. I could discern they had a more robust understanding of audience, and their final documents manifested this profound understanding by being more elaborate, more vivid in their depictions. Walking methods fostered a process of unlearning that incorporated the body into the educational and community space, connecting the two even if precariously. Reflecting on the semester, I should have asked students to supply documentation or visual evidence, such as photographs, within their reflections to more explicitly demonstrate how walking was part of their process and how they specifically perceived and felt it in action. This is an aspect of the pedagogy I will concentrate on enhancing this coming spring, but I am confident that walking methods in conjunction with service-learning offered students a distinctive educational experience that stimulated change.

Conclusion

Subsequent versions of Technical Writing in the Community as well as incorporating walking methods into other classes will uncover a more refined understanding of this experiential education practice, but from my spring 2023 experience I can affirm that unlearning through walking methods was a worthwhile risk. It was not, however, a smooth transition. Throughout the semester there were communication errors, disruptions in schedule due to freezing weather conditions, and irritations related to transportation difficulties. As an instructor I had to be adaptable and adjust to challenges I had not previously anticipated in more classroom-oriented course structures. Students and community partners also encountered new difficulties in this process. There were definitely constraints. I anticipate each new semester will gener-

ate its own issues and triumphs. I acknowledge that more attention, research, and application must be devoted to discussions about able-bodiness, and the manifold ways we walk, move, and wander our shared places and educational spaces, and the concealed or controversial histories upon which they are constructed. The body, however, should continue to be invited into the learning and/or unlearning process, and walking methodologies welcome such conversations.

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Jamie Crosswhite is an Assistant Professor of English at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Her research encompasses several critical areas: place-based rhetoric(s), where she explores how our surroundings shape communication and influence the way we express ourselves in writing; critical regionalism, where she delves into the unique characteristics of specific regions, investigating how local culture, history, and geography impact communication practices and identity formation; intersectional identities and place, where she examines how intersections of identity—such as race, gender, and socio-economic status—shape experiences and narratives within the spaces we inhabit; and feminist studies, where she critically analyzes gender dynamics, representation, and agency.