Keep Writing Weird: A Call for Eco-Administration and Engaged Writing Programs

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Influenced by ecological theories of writing, the author proposes a new model for writing curriculum design and community-based projects. The article provides a project of the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement at the University of Colorado Boulder as an example of programmatic engagement with a community issue using an ecological methodology.

One of the most important questions community writing and rhetoric scholars can ask is how to better produce, teach, and theorize writing to help our communities catalyze change at the behavioral and policy levels. One theoretical strand in rhetoric and writing studies that may get us toward an answer is "ecological writing studies," which analyzes the complex, dynamic, networked systems within which writing and rhetoric function and the circulation and remix of texts and ideas within those systems (Dobrin; Edbauer; Ridolfo and DeVoss; Seas; Gries).[1] I will suggest here in broad strokes a possible direction for community writing scholars, practitioners, and administrators to explore further. In the second half of the article, I offer an example of a writing program that is using ecological writing theories to drive its curricular design and to facilitate communitywide writing about local food.

Although community writing—which comprises genres such as service-learning, community literacy, community publishing, community-based research, advocacy writing, and ethnography—necessarily studies the public nature of writing and what it does in the world, little scholarship in community writing addresses through ecological methodologies the hyper-networked, collaborative, circulatory, and remixed nature of community-engaged writing that comes out of writing programs as it works toward measurable change within a community. A question that I'd like to begin to unpack here concerns how community writing practitioners can use theories of distributed, networked writing and ecological systems to help create engaged writing curricula and programs.

In his study of ecologies of writing, Sidney Dobrin challenges his readers to reconsider what writing is, reprimanding the field of rhetoric and composition for its "regrettable failure to imagine what comes next" (3). He rightly claims that "there is an (ethical) imperative … that demands that work be pursued that theorizes writing beyond the disciplinary limit-situation" (3). Although he does not specifically connect what he calls "postcomposition" to community writing, I want to make that connection explicitly, though for different ends. I'm going to push back against

Dobrin's provocative declaration that "[t]o move postcomposition requires that administration be abandoned as a useful part of the field" (4). While I appreciate his arguments against some of the bureaucratic strands of WPA scholarship, I want to do here exactly what he argues against—to attempt to ground his theories about complex ecologies in practical application that relates to programmatic and curricular design. In going against his behest to abandon scholarship on administration, however, I actually hope to make an argument more aligned than not with his call to move beyond the logistical, institutional focus of much WPA scholarship, and to think more about how writing curricula function as nodes within larger community writing ecologies.

How can activist rhetoricians and community writing practitioners use the related theories of hyper-networked writing (Dobrin), rhetorical ecologies (Edbauer), contagion of ideas (Seas), rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo and DeVoss), and circulation (Gries) to help us design engaged, ecological writing curricula and programs? If we take seriously these fascinating theories that reconceive the very nature of writing, must we not reconceive, as well, the very nature of how writing programs and curricula are designed, their purposes, and their outputs? When we assess our students' community-engaged writing or create community-based writing projects, we often fail to account for the very complicated ecologies in which our students' texts function, circulate, and can be transformed beyond the original authorial intent. Although since the social turn in composition studies, we as a field have embraced the importance that our *students* write *in context*, a concept that has helped community writing scholars and practitioners to justify the benefit of engaged writing courses, we often lose track of the students' writing once it is produced. In other words, in a service-learning course, for example, a final project may be a written product produced for a partner. Once a grade is assigned, however, we do not continue to study the writing's contextual nature. Rarely do we see that writing again. Even more rarely do we and future students study its trajectory from classroom through community. But what happens to it? How does it interact and intersect with, diverge from, morph into other writing and ideas as it or its message circulates through our communities? If we accept Dobrin's view of "writing not as the product (or process) of a producing subject but as a never-ending (re)circulation in which larger producing/desiring machines generate and perpetuate writing throughout network, system, and environment" (77), then our curricula must fundamentally change.

Drawing from postcomposition theory's concept of the material places, texts, people, and things that constitute the human and non-human actors or agents in an ecology, I call to community writing teachers to move beyond creation of assignments or courses that take the student as the central subject or single agent directing their single project or text outward to a recipient. Instead, I suggest that we work toward a better-theorized ecological approach to the kinds of distributed, networked writing that occur in our communities and to the conditions we can help foster through our students' projects for the greatest impact in our communities. I'm

drawing here from Kristen Seas' study of epidemic contagion and virality to "explain the spread of ideas and behaviors" (53), and from Ridolfo and DeVoss's work on writing for "rhetorical velocity," which they define as "a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party" (n.p.). These theorists argue that we can, indeed, deliberately write for, and teach our students to write for, contagion in a "rhetorical epidemic" (Seas 56). As we take these theories into account, I encourage writing practitioners to create—or to suggest to those who can create—courses, vertical curricula, and writing programs to both study and use these ecological methodologies to drive our efforts.

In these efforts, I argue, we have to "go local." I'd like to invoke Jenny Edbauer's influential analysis of what she terms "the rhetorical ecology" of the "Keep Austin Weird" phenomenon in Austin, TX. Like Edbauer, I lived in Austin's deliberate weirdness during graduate school. When I moved to Boulder, CO for my current job, I noticed, within days of arriving, "Keep Boulder Weird" bumper stickers, signs, and t-shirts all over the city. The idea that cities should stay weird, which has now spread from its Austin origins to several cities from Portland to Asheville, represents a grassroots movement on the part of the citizenry to stand against or to refuse corporate capitalist control of cities—to support the local in the face of the global.

In the very kind of circulatory leap that ecological approaches to writing might study, I'm going to recompose or remix the notion of weirdness for writing program design. As our own grassroots movement in an increasingly corporate culture in higher education, *weirding writing studies* means developing an ecological methodology in our design and administration of writing courses, curricula, and programs, and it includes an imperative to incorporate the study and practice of local community writing into every writing program. When we don't, we risk ending up with dislocated programs and courses, which can lead to the equivalent of the suburban strip mall effect, where you can look to any program in any part of the country and find the same kinds of courses taught in the same kinds of ways.

How do we keep writing weird? We can't do it without a local, organic conception of what each program could be. That comes from deep listening and collaborative imagining (Feigenbaum) with our communities of what is possible and then mapping curricula to community-identified needs. We do this, in part, "because we live here," as Eli Goldblatt so beautifully articulates in his book by that name; we do this, as Steve Parks explains in his description of the institute that he founded at Temple University, in "an effort to participate in the creation of a new city that encompasse[s] the literacy and cultural values of its diverse neighborhoods and cultures" (33); and, as Dobrin, Edbauer, and other ecological writing and rhetoric scholars teach us, we keep writing weird because it allows us to teach writing that aligns with current theories of what writing is and does in complex, hyper-networked, dynamic systems. To keep writing weird means taking an ecological approach to program design and administration—what I'm calling eco-administration—as a nod to ecocomposition and ecological writing studies. I call to rhetoric and writing

practitioners to open discussion in our field about ways in which faculty involved in curricular design can help to create engaged writing programs; design innovative curricula around community needs, curricula in which students study how writing and ideas circulate and are remixed; offer professional development opportunities for faculty and graduate students in community-engaged pedagogies; and create substantive community partnerships that align with theoretical insights in our field about the ecological nature of writing.

As an example for how writing programs can support the work of local communities through an ecological writing paradigm, I'd like to offer an ongoing, multifaceted project coming out of the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement (WISE) at the University of Colorado Boulder. I don't seek to prescribe our model but offer it as *a* model for what a community-engaged writing program can look like. I hope that it will encourage you to envision how you might help *weird* your writing program so that it is dynamic, adaptive, and place-specific. This means that courses and projects will necessarily change as your community's needs and concerns and conversations change.

For many years, the Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) at the University of Colorado Boulder has integrated community-engaged pedagogies throughout its lower- and upper-division writing curriculum through the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement (WISE). About 30% of our writing faculty now teach WISE courses each year to about 1,200 students, who spend about 15,000 hours on community-based writing and research projects. We've done a huge amount of faculty development through retreats and workshops, as well as continual outreach to non-academic community members[2] to co-develop curriculum with them and to map our courses to their needs and goals.[3] We want to help our students to understand how people work for change within our community and how rhetoric and writing impact and intersect with that work. This approach to community-based learning mitigates what Derek Owens calls "our placeless curricula" (72) and moves toward what Eric Zencey calls "a curriculum rooted in locale" (qtd. In Owens 73).

Since WISE's founding in 2008, this community outreach and partnership building has occurred on an individual course-by-course basis as an instructor expresses interest in working with a partner or as a potential partner brings a project idea to an individual instructor. This is a common way in which community engagement, often as service learning, occurs in writing courses, not just at the University of Colorado but also at schools across the country. Based on recent research in ecological writing studies, I am coordinating a different model of engagement in the PWR, one based on an ecological methodology. This model suggests a paradigm shift in community writing studies from the singular model, as in single course/single instructor, to a multifaceted one, one that we might call an ecological community writing model.

To think ecologically about course design, we can begin with three basic questions. 1) What is important to my city or town or region as an ecology—and to those of us who live here? 2) How might the answers impact our curriculum? 3)

How do we help students engage as part of this ecology? An ecological methodology takes into consideration a place's landscape, climate, laws, people, history, and institutions, all of which function as actors, to use Bruno Latour's term, embedded in our cultural and rhetorical ecologies. Therefore, when we consider the first question, we are thinking of not only the people, but of all the non-human actors that continuously "write" the place and how it responds to and interacts with social, environmental, and economic issues. This means that what the place "is" is endlessly written and rewritten. Certain key issues emerge and subside. As issues emerge, our writing programs can create courses around those issues and invite our students to see themselves as writing in this endlessly evolving ecology of "writing." They become agents in the scripting of place, and their writing will impact other human and non-human agents' scriptings, and vice versa. As Dobrin writes, "All affects all" (20). The writing is a connective tissue. Perhaps we can even strategize for their writing to achieve rhetorical velocity or virality.

In Boulder, Colorado, where I live and teach, one of the answers to the first question, and the one I'll delve into a bit more here as an example, is the local food movement. You can't go many places in Boulder without seeing or hearing reference to it – it is a profoundly important issue for the city and the county, both the physical place and the people. I'd like to use the local food movement in Boulder County, then, as a jumping off point for answering the second and third questions.

A few years ago, about two dozen local leaders, including high-ranking officials from several city and county government offices; executive directors of several non-profits; CEOs of for-profits; representatives from Boulder Valley School District; and farmers agreed that local food should be a priority. They formed a working board, which I will simply call "the board," whose mission is to educate the public about local food and to promote its production and sale. The board originally assumed a fixed and shared definition for local food based solely on miles—anything grown or produced within the "foodshed" is "local food." During the same period of time when the board was forming, I was teaching food-focused writing courses in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at The University of Colorado Boulder. Over several semesters of community-based research projects, my students conducted hundreds of interviews and surveys with farmers, restauranteurs, and consumers, which uncovered that there are major definitional discrepancies over what constitutes "local food" in Boulder County—miles, ethics, or both?—leading to consumer confusion and to county policy that is at odds with consumer desire. I presented my students' interview and survey data to the board in 2015, and they asked me to join the board and help them to create a food-literacy campaign for the county.

As we on the board have discussed how to be most useful as a group, we've realized how extraordinarily complicated it is to support local food. There are century-old water rights laws that prevent farmers from being able to farm certain lands; there are dated policies that restrict the number and kinds of structures farmers can have and the number of events farmers can host, such as farm dinners and wedding receptions, on their land. Then there are the realities of the short

Colorado growing season and the intensive labor involved in organic production, which have contributed to the bankruptcy or closure of nineteen of the twenty-four new, small-scale organic farms opened since 2011 in the county. There are the conventional farmers, whose families have farmed the land for several generations, and who, despite vocally negative public opinion, passionately want to continue GMO commodity crop production, in part because they have seen their organic neighbors go under. There are also many people who either cannot afford local organic produce or who remain unpersuaded as to its value. These are only a handful of the issues that the board discusses as it tries to determine how to best intervene in public discourse and policy deliberations around local food.

As a community writing teacher, my inclination when I'm engaged in these types of conversations is to ask whether I can and should create a community-based course around these issues, with which students can engage through public writing projects. But clearly, based on the short list above, the issues are far too complex and rhizomatic to be adequately approached in a single course. An ecological approach across multiple courses would be preferable.

I reached out to other writing faculty to invite them to join me in creating a multifaceted food-literacy campaign to educate the public about the local food movement. Based particularly on Seas' study of contagion, I believe that the board will be most successful in "tipping" the issue of local food if we can set a large-scale scene in Boulder County ripe for rhetorical contagion. We want to encourage the idea of local food's importance to our region to "leap," so that the idea of local food is not only popular "but eventually normative. Thus this particular leap is the tipping point in the progression of the contagion, when the innovation is suddenly visible and widespread seemingly overnight, just like a biological epidemic" (Seas 57).

In a move, perhaps, toward what Derek Owens called a SAC campaign, Sustainability Across the Curriculum, rather than WAC (xiv), I have coordinated a cohort with faculty from Environmental Studies and Communication to design either research projects, courses, or outreach projects around local food, specifically food justice, in coordination with the PWR and our community partner, the board. CU's Office of Outreach and Engagement has generously awarded us a $24,000 grant to help fund these community projects. A 5-10 member faculty cohort in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric will join this effort in Spring 2017. The board has expressed the need for our help with several projects, including the following:

1. The board needs to better understand the complexities and challenges to farm/farmer/farmworker viability. Why do such a high percentage of organic farms go under? The board's understanding would help them amend or write policy to support local farmers. They would like students to conduct oral histories and write farmer profiles, to be featured on their website. A graduate student in Environmental Studies will design a qualitative study, and we secured funding for her work toward her M.A., which will be based on this study.

2. The board needs help in redesigning their website to offer more information and resources to encourage citizen engagement and literate action. The website is currently static and hosts an unpopulated "Resources" link. They would like students to help create and curate resources, including a K-12 toolbox for Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) teachers and students. We are partnering with a Ph.D. student in Communication to carry this out.

3. The board needs CU students' help in launching and carrying out a social media campaign to target younger citizens, who may have influence over their parents' purchasing and growing choices.

4. The board needs help in launching a public high school arts competition called "Dig In!" about students' perceptions of local food. They also ask for help to create a subsequent circulating student art exhibit to be displayed in public libraries, an art museum, and other places around the county. They would like writing students to help coordinate all elements of the competition and exhibit.

5. The board needs help launching a nutrition campaign and food growth and preservation workshops to target lower-income populations, working with the City of Boulder and community leaders in several low-income neighborhoods to plan and implement workshops, educational demonstration gardens, and perhaps a food forest in a lower-income area of Boulder to increase access to and production of free healthy produce. They would like students to be involved in proposal writing and workshop planning, execution, and follow-up.

The PWR faculty cohort will work with our students across our suite of professional writing and topical writing courses toward addressing these challenges and others that will emerge through the process. The cohort will commit to a minimum of a two-year partnership so that students will not only produce new writing, but they will remix and study the writing of previous students and community members, its impact on the communities for which it was written, its velocity, and its rhetorical contagion. As Laurie Gries encourages, "we can make rhetorical matter the main character in our case studies and follow that matter as it enters into new relations, undergoes rhetorical becoming, and affects a diverse range of consequences" (81).

In the process of facilitating this networked, multifaceted approach to understanding local food's meaning in Boulder County, no one involved, including the board members, thinks "local food" has a fixed definition anymore. Boulder's historical battles around land use, laws and policies, people, intersecting institutions and organizations, the climate, water, and myriad other factors all influence the ways in which local food and the movement to promote its production, sale, and popularity manifest in Boulder. In fact, as new materialists and ecocompositionists

remind us, each of these actors has agency to co-write Boulder's continuously dynamic, evolving definition of what constitutes "local food." This offers a *kairotic* opportunity for collaborative and distributed public writing.

The CU students will co-write the community's definition for local food through their data collection and presentations to various audiences around the county. But their writing is not privileged; it is part of a dynamic constellation of writing. The high school students will also co-write through their art projects; the farmers will co-write through their survey responses and oral histories; and, as an ecological approach to writing would acknowledge, the land co-writes, and the climate co-writes, and our water rights laws co-write because these non-human agents cannot be ignored in any responsible discussion of how local food is going to work in Boulder County. Boulder itself has an ethos, built on a history of environmental activism to protect city and county land known as Open Space—those historical battles also co-write the community's definition and vision for local food. Gries reminds us that "we need to acknowledge that rhetorical agency is distributed across human and nonhuman agents, environment, space, *and* time" (74). Future students and involved community members will continue to write and revise local food's scripting in Boulder County. To ignore this complexity in our structuring of community-based projects would be detrimental not only for our students' learning about the nature of writing but also for the many, many people implicated in the network of partnerships impacted by the range of projects from all of the involved courses. Seeing any one of the elements in isolation or as static is to ignore the dynamic ecology.

Through the suite of courses we are developing, the Program for Writing and Rhetoric faculty cohort brings to the board, to other community members, and to our students an understanding of the distributed, dynamic nature of public writing that we will help enact through our course design, and of how writing and rhetorical concepts circulate and morph in a complex ecology. This is a different model for community writing and for curricular design; it is an ecological model. Our goal is to work across our curriculum with the board to help frame their local food campaign and to saturate the community (Dobrin) across diverse ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds with ongoing messaging and projects, *which they have agency to co-create*, and which circulate across multiple sites in order to encourage contagion of an idea.

This system of projects, courses, and relationships is an example of what I'm calling for in the ecologically-informed engaged writing program—the co-created, grassroots, local, organic, *weird* writing program. So that each semester, across the country, we faculty develop innovative writing curricula in partnership with our colleagues and our communities that meet the community where it is, and we jump in. Or, rather, we acknowledge through our curriculum that we're always already immersed in it.

Notes

1. Jenny Edbauer's study of the "Keep Austin Weird" slogan and Laurie Gries' study of the Obama Hope image offer examples of ecological studies of words and images.

2. I distinguish non-academic community members from the "we" and "our" of the sentence simply because we academics are also, of course, community members.

3. For detailed description of the development of the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement at University of Colorado Boulder, see House, Veronica. "Community Engagement in Writing Program Design and Administration." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 39.1 (2015): 54-71.

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