Challenging Audiences to Listen: The Performance of Self-Disclosure in Community Writing Projects

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Abstract

Young people have the potential to transform public perspectives about pressing social issues—if their audiences listen deeply to what they have to say. This article examines the ways that high school student participants in a community-university writing partnership employ self-disclosure, or emotion sharing, to encourage audiences to listen empathically to performances about complex social issues. Our analysis of two student performance pieces reveals rhetorical strategies that might promote empathic listening. We argue that empathic listening is a necessary precondition for the kind of collective community listening that can lead to social change.

Introduction

Youth-led writing projects and performances have the potential to catalyze social change. Recently, the U.S. has seen such potential realized through the youth-led rallies and protests that followed the devastating Parkland, Florida school shooting. The eloquent and stirring words of students from Stoneman Douglas High School not only garnered the attention of lawmakers and media outlets; they also gave adults an opportunity to listen to students contribute to a discussion from which their voices had been largely excluded. Among the many compelling characteristics of the Parkland student activists, one was the degree to which curricular and extracurricular activities, such as journalism, theater, and extemporaneous debate equipped them with the skills and experience needed to advocate on a national stage (Gurney; Lithwick; Schulman). As Dahlia Lithwick put it in the title of her *Slate* article on the subject, the student leaders "were trained for this moment." Seen in this way, the students' success in capturing national debate offers a powerful reminder of the classroom's potential to be a space where students cultivate the tools they need to participate powerfully in public discourse.

Such preparation is a central component of Writing for Change, a community writing program that we founded in 2013 with the goal of empowering high school students to catalyze social change through creative, multimodal projects. In our partnership, students in a ninth-grade English class collaborate with college students in a 200-level English course. For the college students, the course is an English major elective that also attracts students from a variety of majors. The high school participants, meanwhile, are all members of one teacher's ninth-grade English class and participate as a part of their requirements for that course. Once a week, the college students travel together to the high school (less than one mile from the university) during a

time that corresponds with one of the high schoolers' 75-minute English classes. Over ten weeks, small teams consisting of four to five high school students and one or two college students produce performance pieces that range in topic and genre but share a common goal: to illuminate multiple perspectives on, and catalyze dialogue about, issues ranging from bullying and stereotyping to immigration and gender inequality. In years past, students have composed a wide array of projects, including skits that integrate monologues and images, documentary videos, spoken word poetry, and symbolic dance performances. The students have significant control over their creative process and decide on the subject, genre, and approach that would best suit their purposes. They then perform their projects in a final public event at the university, which attracts a large audience of community members, including high school faculty, administrators, parents, and peers as well as college professors, students, and staff.

As the founder and former instructor of the program (Heather), and the current instructor of the program (Justin), we have both emphasized listening empathically to a range of different perspectives on contentious issues that are important to the students and also to the local community. We focus significant energy on teaching both college and high school students to listen empathically to others: throughout the program, we practice listening strategies such as looking for the "story behind the story" and "seek[ing] rival hypotheses" (Flower 240). The high school students actively research other attitudes and perspectives on their topics, and, under the guidance of the college buddies, revise their own stances as they develop their projects. Many groups work from members' decisions to volunteer personal experiences with difficult issues and, across the board, research and disclosure serve as entry points for students to listen more fully to concerns present in both the school and local communities.

As we have reported elsewhere (Lindenman and Lohr), this process can encourage the high school participants to better empathize with and be more willing to advocate for others. For example, Fernando, a high school student interviewed after participating in the program, observed that, by helping his group members craft spoken word pieces about the inequalities women face, he could better empathize with his group members' experiences with gender inequality. "Of course I don't have an experience like that," he said: "Me understanding their problems will show them that I actually care, that I want to . . . I want to know their problems." Another high school buddy, Kadi, noted how participation in the program led to intervention in a school problem. She reported that one of her peers, after participating in the program, was motivated to stand up for an LGBTQ student who had been bullied after math class.

As these examples suggest, empathic listening at the individual level may open the opportunity for individuals to recognize the challenges others face as representative of the concerns of larger communities. Indeed, we argue in this essay that empathic listening is a crucial precursor to community listening, which we define as the hard work of trying to hear the collective refrains and struggles that often present themselves in individual voices. Listening empathically to individuals may serve as a portal to community listening, or to seeing others' concerns as part of a collective experience and standing in solidarity with communities that both include and extend beyond one's own. Fernando's empathic listening to his group members' concerns

primed him to see those concerns as part of a larger collective experience. Community listening, then, opens the possibility of allying with people whose life experiences are different from one's own.

This sense of community listening as the ability to recognize individual concerns as representative of larger collective concerns guides the Writing for Change program in two complementary ways, one pertaining to process and the other to product. We hope that the process of composing texts will invite student participants to listen empathically to each other and, through this listening, develop awareness of and engagement with larger collective struggles. At the same time, we hope that the texts the students produce will lead audience members to listen deeply to the communities represented within the student performances. To this end, we aim to coach students to compose texts of their own that invite empathic listening and pivot from arousing empathy for individuals to encouraging audience members to recognize individual challenges as part of larger collective struggles. We read, watch, and study texts that perform strategies for animating this synecdoche, such as Shane Koyczan's animated poem, "To This Day," and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." In addition, the college students apply the rivaling strategy throughout the process, coaching the high school students to conceptualize and engage different perspectives on tricky issues and to construct texts that reveal the story behind the story and present multiple perspectives. A central goal of these compositions is to invite the audience to listen closely to what the high school students have to say as a part of a broader whole, opening up the possibility that their performances might transform audience attitudes and preconceptions. In one college student's final reflection on the partnership, she claimed that her high school team's final video enacts a "discovery process for the [students'] audience that mirrored their own" by "sharing their personal stories." This mirroring was our goal and hope, but it was not always realized. In this essay, we examine when and how the performances composed as a part of Writing for Change elicit empathic listening and, through that, open up the possibility of community listening.

To conduct this analysis, we situate our essay within the complex, multilayered relationship between performance and listening. We argue that the strategy of self-disclosure (or emotion sharing) helps foster empathic listening, and thus encourages the audience to rethink their preconceptions and understandings as members of a broader community. In other words, emotional disclosure can dispose the audience to listen empathically, which might lead to deeper understanding of larger communities and their experiences. To make this argument, we examine the ways that two performances from Writing for Change (2015)—a documentary-style video and a skit—encourage or deter the type of listening that might influence audience members to think differently and more expansively about the issues being addressed and the collective struggles they represent. To guide our analysis, we use the social psychological concept of emotional self-disclosure, which involves sharing one's feelings or personal experiences (Hackenbracht and Gasper; Klinger-Vartabedian and O'Flaherty; Sprecher et al.).[1] We trace students' performances of self-disclosure in both the documentary and the skit and consider how these moves might prime audience members

for community listening by inviting them to listen empathically. While both texts employ emotion sharing in a way that might cultivate empathic listening and open the door to community listening, they do so in different ways based on their approaches to self-disclosure and the extent to which their performers are willing to use emotion sharing to challenge conventions. These differences in approach and willingness to use emotion sharing lead us to consider how high school students, as they learn to practice empathic listening themselves, strategically negotiate the potential risks and benefits of performing self-disclosure for an audience that belongs to various social and cultural groups. We close by considering tactics that participants in community writing programs might use to strategically evoke empathy as a means of promoting community listening among audience members.

Performance, Empathic Listening, and Self-Disclosure in Academic Spaces

A central objective of Writing for Change is to use social advocacy in the classroom to increase student engagement and address persistent issues at the high school related to student retention and promotion. We hope the process might heighten students' awareness of their own and their peers' agency and thus foster communal pride. At the same time, however, we want others to recognize the students' agency and voices. That is, we hope that audience members will listen to students as members of the community whose perspectives are worthy of close consideration. Since adults often assume that students lack experience and, thus, expertise, it can be difficult for students to get adults to listen meaningfully to their contributions. This is especially significant for the Writing for Change performers, who come from an institution burdened by labels such as "underperforming" and "struggling," which further invites prejudices regarding their knowledge and what they might contribute. In staging a public event in a university auditorium, then, we hoped to "legitimize" the student voices as important within the community and open up the possibility that their performances might provide "a catalyst to personal and social transformation" (McKenzie 30).

At the same time, however, trying to catalyze social change in an audience that includes a range of ages, social groups, and cultural experiences can be complicated. While the students' performances are "dynamic form[s] of literate expression" (Fishman et al. 226), they are also "act[s] of constructing identity" where students negotiate their self-presentation based on their understanding of the audience and performative situation (Marquez 1). Indeed, we know from performance theorists that performers construct their presentations of self around their perceptions of context and audience receptivity (Carlson; Goffman; Marquez; Schechner). Thus, even as we hope that the performances might be transformative, the actual student performers may find themselves in a complex game of impression management (Goffman), feeling pressure to maintain the positive impressions held by friends, parents, and teachers. We know that "words shift meaning given their embodied context and their physical location in the world" (Fishman et al. 228), and one important cause of this

shift in meaning might be the way that the physical environment of the performance encourages students to construct their texts—and in turn, encourages audiences to listen (or not listen) to those texts—in certain ways. Given the situation and the assumptions made about students' capacity to meaningfully contribute to public and political discourse, audience members might be nudged towards a kind of passive listening in which they interpret the performances more as opportunities to admire the presenters' capacities than as challenges to individual preconceptions or conventional narratives. While the students themselves might be held in the audience members' esteem, their messages might remain, in effect, unheard, perpetuating the cycle of student voices being dismissed in discussions of community concerns.

One possible strategy for moving the audience to transcend passive listening is to encourage students to craft their performances in a way that fosters empathic listening and readies the audience for community listening. For our purposes, and following the literature, we define empathic listening as the concerted effort on the behalf of an individual or audience member to imagine and internalize a speaker's words and message and, in particular, to attempt to identify with the speaker by feeling the emotions that the speaker might feel or perform. Scholarship on empathic listening in psychology and communications agrees that empathic listening is a reciprocal act, usually between an individual speaker and listener, in which the listener attempts to feel and understand the emotional experiences of the speaker (Aragno; Batson; Bodie; J. Floyd; K. Floyd; Myers; Walker; Weger).[2] In her review of literature on empathic listening, Kandi L. Walker defines it as "an individual actively listening in an attempt to understand another's point of view and the problems which arise in his/her world perspective" (133). More recent studies and reviews emphasize similar elements. Batson summarizes eight uses of the term "empathy" in social psychology; they all address real or imagined emotional connection and include "knowing another person's internal state" (4) and "imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place" (7). While researchers agree that there is a cognitive component to empathic listening (K. Floyd; Weger), the emotional connection between speakers and listeners is central. In Kory Floyd's words, empathy (and thus empathic listening) "focuses on one's effort to adopt the perspective and infer the experiences—the emotional experiences, usually—of another" (5). Some existing literature on empathic listening (or its close relative, Active Empathic Listening) suggests the framework is applicable only to one-on-one relationships, whether in personal or professional settings (K. Floyd; Walker). Other research extends the concept to classroom settings and instructional environments (Huglen and McCoppin; Weger). In our case, because the performances are not participatory, empathic listening may look most like "responsive" listening, where audience members meet students' performances with "apparent understanding, caring, support, and respect" as well as "acceptance" (Miller and Perlman 160).

Many of the qualities used to define empathic listening can be used to define community listening as well. Much as empathic listening involves "adopt[ing] the perspective" and "infer[ring]…the emotional experiences" of individuals, community listening involves individuals and groups of people working to adopt the perspectives and understand the experiences of communities of which they themselves are not a

part. These shared characteristics, we argue, might allow empathic listening to serve as a stepping stone toward community listening. When an individual listens from a position of empathy, she might be better positioned to ally with the communities that the speaker represents.

One strategy that might be especially effective in promoting empathic listening—and, through it, open the door to community listening—is emotion sharing, or emotional self-disclosure. Research draws a link between emotional self-disclosure and empathic listening. Specifically, Joy Hackenbracht and Karen Gasper argue that "listening to emotional disclosure promotes a sense of social connection," whereas "listening to descriptive disclosure does not increase feelings of closeness between the speaker and the listener" (915, 916). When speakers choose to share facts and information rather than emotions or emotional information, the audience does not have the same motivation or potential connection to the speaker. Kim Peters and Yoshihisa Kashima likewise discuss positive consequences of emotion sharing. They define emotion sharing as a phenomenon when the audience experiences the same emotional response to the issue at hand as the speaker, and the audience realizes this connection (780). They argue that emotion sharing can have three consequences: it can "create a coalition between the narrator and his or her audience," shape the way the narrator and audience both understand the issue at hand, and synchronize actions that the audience and narrator might take regarding the issue (780). These connections would likely not occur in the absence of emotion sharing, or in the case of more descriptive, informational disclosure. Peters and Kashima's scholarship suggests that moments of emotional disclosure in student performances might be a powerful tool that can be used to foster empathic listening and open the door to empathy and solidarity with larger communities extending beyond the one-on-one of the performance.

Even so, any project associated with school or academia seems an unlikely place for authors to choose to emotionally disclose or for collective concerns to take precedence: in academic contexts, the subjective "I" often gets subjugated to perceived norms of rationality and objectivity. Yet taking the risk of emotional self-disclosure in academic spaces, and particularly in academic writing, can fundamentally and positively reorient the relationship between the writer and audience, fostering empathic listening and involving the audience in the same listening process that the writing recounts. Within rhetoric and composition, we see this at play in three seminal essays that address the topic of listening: Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own," Ellen Cushman's "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," and Krista Ratcliffe's "Rhetorical Listening." Each of these texts presents theories related to listening that are influential in and even pivotal to composition and rhetoric—and each includes as a central component some personal or emotional self-disclosure. Royster's article toggles between personal testimony about her experiences as an African American woman and scholar and her inquiries into those experiences. She grounds her article's advocacy and argument in part in her own vulnerability and willingness to self-disclose. Cushman likewise reveals, through footnotes and in the body of her text itself, that her "white trash history" and experiences with

poverty make her more similar to than different from the community members with whom she works, underscoring a central component of her argument (8, 18). She identifies the "long process of self-disclosure and listening" as the first step in identifying with people with different backgrounds and experiences (18). In "Rhetorical Listening," Ratcliffe questions how her own day-to-day life as a white woman influences her interactions with others. Each of these scholars chooses to emotionally disclose in their essays, suggesting that when contending with the intensity of cross-cultural exchange, acknowledging subjectivity and emotional experiences, while risky, may be indispensable. Certainly, the emotional self-disclosure of these academic pieces compels readers to listen closely to them: their voices challenge purported academic objectivity and thus are ones readers feel moved to pause to really hear. Because of their deviations from the standard academic script, all three jolt audiences out of passive listening and nudge them towards fully attentive, deep engagement. The effectiveness of this approach underscores how powerful self-disclosure can be in shifting the relationship between individuals and, as we will show later, between individuals and communities.

These texts inspired our approach to Writing for Change by calling our attention to the power of self-disclosure as a rhetorical tool to prompt empathic and community listening. As we (Justin and Heather) work to discern our own roles in this program, we struggle to reconcile our identities as university members, teachers, and outsiders to the high school students' community. While Heather was previously a high school teacher who had built trust and connections with her own students, her authority as the "college professor" meant she was always once removed from this high school community and had to build ethos by association with the students' teacher instead. Justin likewise felt anxieties about being the "white male authority figure" who grew up in a largely affluent community and the distance that might create between him and the high school students. As we have worked to lead Writing for Change, both of us have felt the weight of our own private college educations and affluent high school communities. While we do not try to pass as insiders in the high school participants' worlds, we also realize that our privilege means we have not had to struggle to make our voices heard in the ways that they do.

Throughout the process, we try to model self-disclosure by discussing such concerns with the college students and endeavoring to create an environment in which they can voice their own struggles pertaining to status and position. We also ask the college and high school students early on to reflect on personal experiences with urgent social issues and to consider using those experiences as the starting point for their advocacy projects—something many of them elect to do. We never mandate disclosure, but we encourage students to see it as having an important place both in the classroom and in public advocacy.

To explore the role of self-disclosure in empathic and community listening, we analyze two student-produced compositions, a video skit and a documentary, from the 2015 Writing for Change final performance. Collected through an IRB-approved study,[3] these texts were chosen in part because they were recorded in advance (and thus we have record of them) and in part because of their representativeness. The

video skit is among the most popular genre that participants in Writing for Change produce; it accounts for 23% of the compositions in our data set (2013-15). The documentary genre is less popular, comprising only 7% of performance pieces in those years, but it has grown in popularity since, accounting for 15% of the performances in 2016-17. We studied these texts in conjunction with a variety of other documents from the 2015 Writing for Change process: interviews with participants, reflective letters the high school students wrote to their college buddies, and culminating synthesis essays written by the college buddies. Taken together, the final projects and supporting texts provide invaluable insight into students' learning about empathic listening and their attempts to invite members of the community to listen as allies of those with differing identities and life experiences.

"A Look into Stereotyping"

"A Look into Stereotyping" is a six-minute documentary in which contributors establish the role of stereotyping in their lives, speculate on the causes of stereotyping, and advocate for reducing negative stereotypes by listening to others and suspending judgment. In the opening sequence, each of the participants holds a handwritten sign that presents a negative stereotype associated with them. For example, Ebony appears with a sign reading, "I'm **BLACK**, so I must be illiterate." The documentary then presents interviews with three high school students and one high school teacher; each responds to questions related to the causes of stereotyping and the actions that could be taken to reduce negative stereotypes. In the closing sequence, the same participants flip over their signs to reveal the truth, challenging the stereotype they presented earlier. Ebony's comes to read, "But my profound vocabulary proves that statement to be fallacious." The video ends with a moral: "Think before you stereotype!"

In terms of the formal elements of video composition and design, the documentary is well-produced. Cuts between speakers are clean, and their comments are edited and arranged so as to create a clear argument. Stasis theory, which the groups use to generate ideas earlier in the process, also informs the documentary's structure; the piece first establishes the existence and prevalence of stereotyping before moving into its causes and the actions that can be taken to reduce it. On the one hand, the creators of the documentary effectively leverage the genre's affordances to create a polyphonic representation of stereotyping. Students of different races and genders appear throughout the documentary, either in the silent opening and closing sequences or as speakers in the segments in between, and their individual disclosures about having been stereotyped underscore the universality of stereotyping. On the other hand, the four primary speakers' contributions vary greatly with regard to self-disclosure. While some interviewees treat stereotyping as an intimate, emotional matter, which invites empathic listening, other speakers treat stereotyping as an objective, abstract concern, distancing the audience.

The most persuasive speaker in the documentary is Robert, a black teenage male, who directly admits his involvement in stereotyping. Some speakers in the documentary respond to the question "Have you ever stereotyped someone before?" in imper-

sonal and/or strongly hedged ways. Robert, on the contrary, flatly admits, "I stereotype *all the time*." "Because," he adds, "I'm being honest—because you have to think of people off of who you think they might be . . . because of their skin color, or . . . what other people like them act like." He says this while remaining casually slouched, emphasizing his complete ownership of his claim. Robert's disclosures force the audience to confront a difficult reality: we all stereotype. While the other speakers are vague and evasive in ways that audience members might expect during discussion of a hot-button issue, Robert's directness counters the audience's expectations and as a result might catalyze the kind of coalition building between "the narrator and his or her audience" that Peters and Kashima describe. That is, Robert's willingness to take the risk of self-disclosure might make it easier for audience members to listen empathically to him. Such a willingness to hear Robert and empathize with his admission, rather than condemning him for it, would open the possibility of audience members joining Robert in the concession. Effectively, Robert's disclosure might thus open the door to more sincere, engaged community listening.

That said, the performative situation may make it difficult for everyone to practice self-disclosure as willingly as Robert. Laurel Klinger-Vartabedian and Kathleen M. O'Flaherty draw important connections between self-disclosure and status, particularly in educational contexts. While self-disclosure can move people of lower status and people of higher status closer together, usually this is only the case when people of higher status such as teachers or professors do the self-disclosing. The authors point out that "students may not see the classroom as conducive to self-disclosure" (161). It comes as no surprise that self-disclosure may not be desirable or safe; a student may be wary of sharing their emotions for fear of the audience's reaction or out of a desire to protect their status. The high school students who participate in Writing for Change, including those who produced and performed in this skit, likely feel the "inevitable and ubiquitous tension" of whether to disclose emotions (Farber 526). In this situation, no matter how flexible students are told their performances can be, the truth remains that the high schoolers need to balance "the demands of open and honest disclosure" with "the equally potent countervailing forces of shame, tact, and appropriateness" (Farber 526).

"Hate is Easy, Love is Hard: Be an Ally, Stand Up Against LGBT Bullying"

"Hate is Easy, Love is Hard: Be an Ally, Stand Up Against LGBT Bullying" is a fictional video-skit that is more of a self-consciously fabricated performance than a documentary. As such, the students perform as actors rather than as themselves, and this conceit allows them to share personal experiences embedded in the script with potentially less risk involved. The plot of "Hate is Easy" centers on two fictional students, Shay and Nicole, who have been bullied by another student, Becky. In the video, Shay confesses to his friend Nicole that his home life has become tense after his decision to come out to his parents. He is then accosted in the hallway by Becky, who bumps into Nicole and says, "Eww, gay germs." This provokes a fight, which is posted to YouTube with the title "2 RaTcHEts gO at it!!" It is teacher character Ms. Smith who interrupts

the fight and issues detention to all parties involved. What follows takes place in detention, featuring discussions between Ms. Smith and the students: she first speaks to Shay and Nicole (the victims), then to Becky (the perpetrator). In her conversation with the former, Ms. Smith states that school policies do not permit bullying or fighting and claims, "I'll take care of this." In Ms. Smith's conversation with the bully, Becky divulges that she has been struggling because her brother has been "brainwashed into liking boys" and her family has been fighting as a result. Ms. Smith responds by telling Becky that bullying is prohibited and that she can identify resources that might help Becky. The video ends with an extradiegetic moment: the actors, now speaking as themselves, tell the audience, "Being gay isn't a choice. But hate is." They close by reciting, in unison, "Hate is easy. Love is hard."

At first glance, the video does not seem like the most compelling invitation to listen: it offers far more examples of bad listening practices than it does of empathic and attentive listening. In fact, the teacher, Ms. Smith, shines as an exemplar of bad listening. During her talk with Becky, which serves as the skit's climax, Ms. Smith disregards Becky's personal and painful disclosure about her home life, relying instead on stock dictums that are in no way sensitive to the contours of Becky's internal conflict. "I think we should look into you getting some peer counseling," she responds: "It's a way for you to talk to people in your age group who are able to understand what you're going through." Physically, Ms. Smith hovers over Becky in a semi-threatening posture, and she speaks only in indicatives and directives. As a result, she seems neither interested in hearing Becky in an open, nonjudgmental manner nor willing to offer time or energy to the task of meaningfully engaging. Instead, Ms. Smith outsources the work of engaging and transforming Becky's attitudes to peer and family counselors. As the faculty members guiding a process meant to engage participants in empathic and ultimately community listening practices, we see much in this representation of the teacher figure that would trouble us. In many ways, Ms. Smith comes to personify many of the conventions of the bullied student narrative, which often disregard the bully's emotional and personal circumstances and simply insist on compliance with sanctioned behaviors.

At the same time, however, the skit's empathy for Becky and attention to her circumstances push back against bully narrative conventions. Contrary to most texts about bullying, which lend the power of emotional self-disclosure to the victim, the creators behind the documentary instead lend it to both the victim and the bully, encouraging the audience to listen more empathically to both parties. In other words, Becky's self-disclosures encourage the audience to see humanity where they otherwise might not. In her conversation with Ms. Smith, it becomes clear to the audience that Becky's homophobia owes not to blind hate but rather to confusion and pain at home. "Why should I understand Shay and Nicole when my family doesn't even understand my own brother?" she asks: "He's the whole reason my family's torn apart." Becky's disclosure reveals the roots of her anger and confusion and challenges the kinds of institutionally mandated tolerance Ms. Smith embodies throughout the text. It also challenges the audience to listen differently than Ms. Smith. While Ms. Smith embodies conventional deafness to the circumstances of the bully, Becky offers an import-

ant counternarrative: her disclosures complicate the picture, resisting convention and thus encouraging the audience to listen empathically and perhaps more fully to the person who is accused of wrongdoing.

In our view, the move to humanize Becky, the bully, by way of emotional self-disclosure is quite remarkable. The group takes advantage of the freedom fiction affords to explore the circumstances that shaped the bully's prejudice, and, by foregrounding the story behind the story (Flower), they present her in a complex, evocative, open-minded way. This sustained exploration might encourage empathy for Becky, and this empathy, though for a fictional character, might color and shape how the audience understands other bullies they encounter. By listening to Becky's vulnerabilities, audience members might be encouraged to listen for the humanity in other bullies, countering the tendency to reduce bullies or perpetrators of violence to deviant outsiders. Restoring attention to the bully's humanity, then, might prime the audience to recast other aggressors as worthy of meaningful engagement, even while condemning their actions.

This group's rhetorical choices are still more remarkable given the creators' personal connections to the topic. One of the high school buddies in the group openly identifies as LGBTQ, and the college buddy leader also identifies as LGBTQ. In her final essay for the program, the college buddy writes that her own emotional self-disclosure inspired the group to pursue the issue of LGBTQ bullying: "[W]hen I opened up as being bullied for being openly LGBT my students were compassionate and found this as motivation." That a group motivated by one of their own members' victimization could seek the story behind the story, and encourage their audience to do the same, suggests that they have developed strong empathic and community listening practices of their own.

Even more, the text serves as a model for empathic listening and community listening, at once promoting audience understanding for the bully while still firmly calling for the audience to "be an ally" and stand in solidarity against LGBTQ bullying. It offers empathic listening as a tool for healing and as a precursor to community listening: the opportunity to self-disclose and the challenge to engage the situation from a more empathic stance are important first steps that might lead Becky away from her prejudices, towards empathy for Shay and her brother, and eventually towards solidarity against LGBTQ bullying. Firm solidarity against bullying, the text reminds us, does not preclude listening empathically to the bully, especially when such listening might open up changes in how the bully thinks about and relates to the community—and how the community thinks about and relates to the bully. Thus, from the skit, we might construct an understanding of community listening as a mutual process: while it might describe a unidirectional shift in how one group or individual listens to a community, it can also involve all parties working jointly toward more meaningful engagement with each other.

Learning to Listen and Invite Listening: Genre, Ownership, Self-Disclosure

In the examples above, community listening has the potential to mobilize audience members toward re-envisioning their understandings of stereotyping based on race and

bullying based on sexual orientation. The performances offer spaces for those listening to them to develop a sense of collective responsibility to address these social issues. The means by which the high school students hoped to foster community listening was by inviting the audience to empathize with their stories. We argue that the empathic listening the students practiced to develop their projects—and the empathic listening that their performances demonstrate, especially in the case of the video skit—is a precondition for productive community listening. Indeed, the experience of inventing and performing these projects may have primed the students to be responsible and committed community listeners, people who work hard to understand their own and others' struggles as part of a collective experience. Many of the young people who performed as a part of Writing for Change were surprised to realize just how capable they and their classmates are. The college buddies involved in the project speculate that the audience attending the performance may have been moved toward future collective action, just like the high school performers. For instance, in her culminating synthesis essay, college buddy Allison writes, "By watching the [documentary] video, which ended with suggestions about how to stop stereotyping, attendees were both able and motivated to develop their own consciousness—to leave our performance and to *do* something." Her words suggest that she sees empathic listening not only as an end in itself, but also as part of a process that results in community listening and action.

The genres we profile in this essay support empathic listening in different ways and, as a result, may differently encourage the audience to connect, or discourage the audience from connecting, their individual empathic responses to larger communities and collective experiences. Charles Bazerman reminds us that genres are "ways of life, ways of being," "frames for social action," and "locations within which meaning is constructed" (19). In a classroom context, Bazerman argues, it is crucial for educators to help students access the right genres; if we do, "students may become capable of remarkable performances as they speak to environments they grasp and they want to speak to" (25). This is the case in community-engaged writing programs such as ours as much as it is the case in strictly classroom-based writing environments. As we reflect on Writing for Change, we believe it is important to consider the affordances of the genres that the high school students composed and the extent to which they might encourage and/or model empathic listening and community listening. Below, we share three ways that others involved in community writing projects like ours might maximize the power of genre and self-disclosure as tools that could foster empathic listening and use it to ready audiences for community listening.

First, we propose that participants in community writing programs like Writing for Change have liberty to choose and/or construct genres that suit them and that they feel most comfortable performing. While some community writing programs that work with high school students focus specifically on poetry, videos, or spoken word, for instance, Writing for Change is unique in that the students have freedom to invent and remix genres that best resonate with their selves and their goals. Indeed, some of the best performances in the history of Writing for Change resulted from students who were too shy to speak publicly yet who created stunning posters—or who wanted to represent their message without words and choreographed a

dance that told a story. In the cases we profiled above, the documentary was particularly dialogic, presenting multiple perspectives on an issue without arguing that one is more valuable than another. In that way, the documentary can be easily employed to prompt empathic listening: it presents multiple perspectives alongside one another without any voice dominating or overpowering the others. The fiction of the skit, on the other hand, enables the creators to fine-tune emotional disclosure in a way that might not be as readily possible in a documentary. Moreover, the genre enables the actors to share emotions without having to give personal testimony or disclose directly to the viewers, thus diminishing students' risk by dissociating the message from a particular speaker. At the same time, however, the narrative nature of the skit genre may pressure the actors to offer resolution at the end when empathic listening and, through it, community listening might be better prompted by lingering in the uncomfortable space of the bully's internal struggle.

Second, we recognize the tremendous potential of allowing performers to take ownership of their genres, tinkering at their edges or subverting their typical contours to best serve their performative goals and selves. In the examples we analyze, it is some of the students' clever reimagining of the genres that best pique community listening. Documentaries, for instance, are not inherently dialogic, as evidenced by the polemical work of filmmakers such as Michael Moore. However, the performers' use of handwritten signs to silently reveal stereotypes evokes the feel of a protest or rally, a space that promotes a space for community listening. Likewise, the skit's violation of conventional bully narratives and extradiegetic moment at the end, when the actors offer a final message to "be an ally," directly prompt community listening by offering an avenue for empathy-in-action. Students' liberty to tinker with their understandings of genre conventions allows them to maximize the affordances of the genres they do compose. They may also help students craft spaces for self-disclosure that feel more appropriate and comfortable for them.

Finally, we propose that community writing programs like Writing for Change teach tools that might promote community listening. These include tactics that might encourage audiences to understand individual stories and perspectives as representative of collective concerns and experiences, such as Flower's "rivaling" and finding the "story behind the story." Another tactic that holds promise is the counterstory methodology proposed by Aja Martinez. In that approach, rhetors craft "composite characters" who embody ideologies and are then employed to make visible and critique "stock stories of racial privilege" (38) and present counterstories that foreground marginalized perspectives (39). The methodology's emphasis on weaving together empirical data, scholarship, and lived experiences (37) make it especially well-suited for programs like Writing for Change. Participants can further develop these tactics by studying texts that employ individual voices to tell collective stories. David Joliffe's Prison Story Project provides one model of this tactic in action. The Prison Story Project's "On the Row" performance intermingles personal stories of death row inmates, putting them in concert. The actors who stand in for the inmates deliberately lead audience members to reassess how they listen to and understand the varied and horrifying experiences of people who are on death row. By studying performances

such as "On the Row," students can gain insight into how they might perform in ways that promote community listening.

At the same time, as we consider how to encourage students to perform in ways that encourage empathic listening, we must remember that even when done clandestinely, emotional self-disclosure constitutes a significant personal risk. Even in a fictitious skit such as "Hate is Easy, Love is Hard," the students' beliefs and perspectives are still on the line and vulnerable to the audience's interpretation. Furthermore, we cannot ignore that emotional disclosure is not always a positive experience, for the person sharing or for the person listening. The extent to which students choose to self-disclose may be a function in part of their cost-benefit analysis of their personal gains/risks from disclosing, and in part a function of their belief that the performance of self-disclosure will enhance the impact and value of their text. Scholarship on self-disclosure makes clear the "potentially deleterious effects of patient disclosure" in a clinical setting (Farber 527). For instance, while disclosure could foster more empathic listening and bring relief to a patient, "shame, guilt, fear, and apprehension are frequent affective accompaniments of disclosure" and honest or full disclosure may be "overwhelming" for the speaker or listener (Farber 590). Indeed, self-disclosure can be risky if "it violates others' expectations" and makes the listening audience uncomfortable (Miller and Perlman 160). Given that the impact of the performance "is based upon a relationship between a performer and an audience," it would be counterproductive to jeopardize that relationship through too much emotion sharing (Carlson 35). At the same time, without some amount of emotion sharing, it is unlikely that a performer might prompt empathic and community listening.

The ability to stretch conventions without violating expectations—in other words, the ability to walk the fine line that might maximize empathic listening as a tool for fostering community listening—requires careful negotiation of self-disclosure. What more can we do to help students create texts that carve out spaces for empathic listening and encourage audiences to participate in community listening? How do we help students reconcile the benefits and drawbacks of emotion sharing in their performances for different and heterogeneous communities? Such questions defy easy answers. If we hope that students engaging in Writing for Change and partnerships like it create texts that do in fact accomplish meaningful change, we must do so while also respecting students' comfort and level of willingness to emotionally disclose and make themselves vulnerable. One of our challenges going forward, as faculty members leading such partnerships, might be to help students navigate the intricate rhetorical situations where they speak and listen—and collaboratively identify strategies that balance risk with the larger goals of encouraging community listening and changed consciousness.

Notes

1. Emotional disclosure differs from descriptive self-disclosure, which is when someone shares facts or information about oneself (Hackenbracht and Gasper).

2. While research in psychology points back to Carl Rogers as the seminal source on empathic listening (K. Floyd; Myers), research in communications points to the

value of Kenneth Burke's work on identification to our understanding of empathic listening (J. Floyd; Huglen and McCoppin).

3. Our research study, "Assessing the Consequences of Writing for Change" (#749476), was granted IRB approval on May 18, 2015. For the purposes of anonymity, each participant has been given a pseudonym of his or her own choice. If no preference was expressed, the researchers assigned a pseudonym.

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