

## THE EXTRA-CURRICULAR OF COMPOSITION: A DIALOGUE ON COMMUNITY-PUBLISHING

*Steve Parks and Nick Pollard*

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Our dialogue explores the development of community/university publishing partnerships in the United States through the dual lens of the U.S.-based “Students’ Right To Their Own Language” and the U.K.-based Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, a national alliance of working-class writing groups. At the conclusion of the article, pragmatic tools are provided on how to undertake community publishing projects.

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In the “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition,” Anne Ruggles Gere argues that composition has created a narrow professional history of itself that often excludes the writing historically done by self-initiated community writing groups. Gere argues that rather than see such community writing groups as a way-station to a more formal sense of writing (or professional identity), the field needs to acknowledge “extracurricular [writing] as a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects.” She also argues “such an inclusive perspective can lead us [writing professionals] to tap and listen to messages through the [disciplinary] walls, to consider how we can learn from and contribute to composition’s extra-curriculum in our classrooms.”

One location where there is an active attempt to both learn from and support local writing initiatives is in the emergent movement for Writing Programs/Centers to support community publications. The goal of many of these publications is to join academic tools with local writing practices, shifting local and regional conversations about literacy and community rights. Within such projects, the “wall” between classroom and community writing ideally becomes a membrane through which various forms of knowledge and writing travel. As a consequence, the very nature of these publications draws forth many of the central issues currently being debated in community literacy studies as a whole—issues of language, power, appropriation, and ethics.

To attempt to capture some of the complexity of current moment as well as to represent some of the emergent practices, a dialogue was sponsored between Steve Parks, representing the university-based New City Community Press, and Nick Pollard, representing the community-based Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers. Together they are editing a 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing*—the foundational treatise on the nature and goals of community publishing within the United Kingdom—to be published by Syracuse University in 2009.

Nick Pollard has been involved in community publishing in the UK for nearly 28 years through the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). The FWCP was a working class grassroots

organization of groups who produced books, broadsheets, magazines and performances about their communities. Over 30 years it built up a diverse membership that included survivors of mental distress, groups concerned with representing cultural minorities and disabilities, all of whom shared a perspective of the need to represent their marginalised perspectives in ways that they had chosen and could control. While some groups were more interested in developing published outputs, others functioned more as writing workshops focusing on the development of expression. After losing its funding in 2007 a 'New Fed' comprised of FWWCP activists and members continues this work through the internet. Pollard was editor of the FWWCP magazine *Federation* from the early 1990's, was a member of the FWWCP's executive for many years and for nearly a decade convened a writing workshop in Sheffield. Now a university lecturer in occupational therapy at Sheffield Hallam University, he has drawn on FWWCP experiences in producing book chapters, edited books and articles linking occupational therapy theory with political processes of social transformation and community work, and on writing and community publishing in mental health and learning disability contexts.

Steve Parks is Executive Director and a founding member of New City Community Press, a non-profit organization dedicated to publishing the work that emerges out of university/community partnerships ([www.newcitypress.org](http://www.newcitypress.org)). Many of its earliest publications emerged from work with Philadelphia Public Schools where students used writing to combat negative images of their schools and communities. During the past ten years, New City sponsored writing/oral history projects, often linked to service-learning projects, focused on marginalized communities in Philadelphia. This work has resulted in *Especjos y Ventanas: Oral Histories of Mexican Farmworkers and their Families*, *Working: An Anthology of Writing and Photography*, *Freedom: A Community Dialogue*, *Chinatown Lives*, and *No Restraints: An Anthology of Disability Culture in Philadelphia*. Parks is an Associate Professor in the Writing Program at Syracuse University, a location from which he also facilitates local writing groups. Parks understands New City Community Press as the drawing together of composition/rhetoric's commitment to a "students' right to their own language" and the tradition of the FWWCP.

The following transcript represents portions of their ongoing dialogue on the goals of community publishing.

## **The Transatlantic Origins of Community Publishing: SRTOL and the FWWCP**

**Parks:** Where to begin? I don't know if you are familiar with the 1974 "Students' Right To Their Own Language" (SRTOL) resolution by the Conference on College Composition and Communication—the organization of composition teachers in the United States. ([http://www.ncte.org/library/files/About\\_NCTE/Overview/NewSRTOL.pdf](http://www.ncte.org/library/files/About_NCTE/Overview/NewSRTOL.pdf)). The resolution grew out of the radical politics of the 1960's and argued

that students should have the right to write/speak in their own 'dialect' within writing classrooms. When picked up by the conservative right, the resolution became a way to argue composition teachers had "no standards." In its truest sense, however, the resolution was arguing for a respect of community literacy practices—it was an attempt to get composition teachers to understand the literacy practices of their students' home communities and to allow these practices to be part of the educational process. There was a sense during that period that education was intentionally excluding working-class, African-American, and Latino experiences, among others, from the writing classroom. The SRTOL was an attempt to end these practices.

So to me, what is interesting in the case of the SRTOL is that this movement didn't become connected to communities outside the university and never really became connected to publishing. Instead, community publishing in the U.S. academy seems more of a result of a push for a neo-liberal "engaged" university—a rhetoric which almost positions the university as the replacement for state-funded neighborhood support-programs. It was this push that probably opened up community publishing as a focus in many universities—such as Toby Jacobi's work at the Center for Community Literacy at Colorado State University, Linda Flower at Carnegie Mellon University, and Tiffany Rousculp's work at Salt Lake Community College—even while many who do this work see it much more as an attempt to support communities using writing to gain increased social and political rights. In that way, I have always felt community publishing is in the spirit of the "students' right." In fact, it was this political sense of writing as a project in community recognition that first drew me to the FWWCP. When I heard about the FWWCP, it struck me that this organization was also making an argument about language rights—that the working-class had the right to their own language/understanding of their history.

**Pollard:** The FWWCP formed in 1976. There were a number of different groups, some of which, like Centerprise, arose from the 1970's alternative press counter culture, but others were linked to adult education and the Workers Educational Association. There was no real link to the university - many of the people involved had a university education but many hadn't. Part of the movement stemmed from a secondary school in Stepney where a local teacher, Chris Searle had been sacked for publishing poetry by the children. They went

on strike and he was reinstated. In school education there had been a lot of debate about the ‘writing off’ of children who did not get into the higher streams. This became part of FWWCP discussions since many members felt that their education had been about teaching them middle class values in an attempt to get the working class to repudiate or repress their own working class culture. Even when working class culture was discussed, it was sanitized and made safe so as not to disrupt middle class sensibility – more sympathy for their plight than a history of their struggle for justice. It was nothing to do with students’ rights; it was something that developed in writers’ workshops and adult education classes, adult literacy classes and local history groups, in performance nights organized in pubs. Even though we began to organize the Annual General Meetings (which included a programme of workshops) at universities, the meeting was seen by many people there as kind of having a right to be at the university while still identifying as working class people. (For a history of the FWWCP, see Woodin.)

**Parks:** I can see why you would say it wasn’t about “students’ rights” directly, but it does seem connected to the larger issue of the connection between a community’s sense of its own history/voice and the way that gets represented in classrooms and educational settings. Just from what you say above, there seems an implicit sense that a community has a right to define their own history and to have that history part of a students’ education—whether that education comes in school or from reading FWWCP book purchased at market stall.

### **Traveling Theory: Community Publishing in (and outside) the University**

**Parks:** Can we take a moment and play out how the FWWCP plays out in the colleges and universities in the United States. I’m intrigued by what you said about Searle. It strikes me that the goal of university/community publications like New City Community Press is not unlike Searle’s work with school children. The goal is to use the credibility of the university to distribute the marginalized community voices and experiences within classrooms, altering what counted as “legitimate and important authors” to study. We can use our position in the university to argue (through conversation and related curriculum) that these books were valuable to a student’s education. That is, our university sponsored publications became important because that “institutional relationship” authorized community voices and leveraged

them into a curriculum that, in the U.S., is dominated by standards-based education. In that way, publishing served two purposes—support local writers establishing an organic sense of the community’s history as well as alter what counted as legitimate history/voices in public school classrooms.

**Pollard:** Within the FWWCP, I think publishing became important because there was already a broader community publication network producing alternative community newspapers. People realized that the only way to distribute working class writing, to get it discussed, to involve more people, was to publish and to perform. By publishing material ourselves we learned how to make our own culture at every stage. We were literally our own literacy sponsors, perhaps in a fuller sense than Brandt’s term (1988) anticipates, because most community publishers or workshops didn’t have the money to pay someone else to do it, and we had to sell everything ourselves too. The writing and the publishing therefore came from the community, and perhaps in some places more than others, was part of the community and the way communities depicted themselves.

**Parks:** One of the fascinating aspects of the FWWCP to me is how it developed its own distribution network, one that outlasted many of the alternative paper networks of the 1970’s in the U.K. By the time the university/community publishing work emerged here, say in the late 1980’s (although university faculty/public school teachers had probably always done some type of low-level “Xerox printing” of project for a specific classroom), the independent newspaper world of the 1960’s had vanished. Many of us, I think I can say this, many of us found there were no existing networks which would carry these local publications across a set of different literacy communities – public schools, community centers, university classrooms, or beyond a local neighborhood. I think that is one reason why in addition to creating community events to highlight a New City Community Press publication, embedding the publications within a public school or university classroom is so important—it distributes these works across class boundaries and age boundaries. Lately, we’ve been working with Syracuse University Press to distribute them nationally.

Still if the university can help support a sponsorship network, there are also problems with that set-up. When the university publishes a book “for” the community, the self-sponsorship

of a community-publication becomes imbricated in the expectations of a university—whether the expectation is that a student will learn something about their discipline through such work or whether there are different standards of what counts as “finished” —glossy professionally edited publication versus self-edited broadsheet. This is why I think the FWWCP model is so powerful—self-initiated writers, publishing on their terms, to chosen audiences. I’m not quite sure that purity can be replicated within a university/community partnership.

Moreover, I think writing projects sponsored/aligned with universities face additional problems. For a lot of the neighbors and communities I’ve worked with, writing (and the writing process) is directly linked to an education in which they were considered poor students, bad writers, and essentially illiterate. When I begin a writing group, I have to assure those involved that this is not “school” nor are they “students.” It’s a bit esoteric, but I try to invoke Gramsci’s idea that they are organic intellectuals – people who understand their social and political location and have a responsibility to speak out in support of their community’s local rights. And at first, this involves writing against what has been their previous educational experience.

**Pollard:** The connection between being a writer and someone’s educational experience was also a key issue within the FWWCP. The groups that made up the FWWCP came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were adult education classes that continued to run through a summer break and discovered they had no need for a tutor, others were simply set up as writers’ workshops for people who wanted to share their writing. The community publishers, such as QueenSpark and Centerprise, were formed around local alternative newspapers and the radical bookshop movement. Some of the people involved in these grassroots developments were teachers, who were trying to get school children interested in writing. A number of early FWWCP books, particularly those published by Centerprise, occurred because of this link - Centerprise set up a workshop for young black writers, and other people went on the join workshops after they left school. Roger Mills, for example, wrote *The Interview* and *A Comprehensive Education* that were autobiographical accounts of his experiences of adolescence. In the *Republic of Letters*, Ken Worpole describes how as a teacher he worked with children who were struggling academically on

the production of a photo-comic which was subsequently published by Centerprise, while another 12-year-old boy, Vivian Usherwood, wrote about his troubled experiences with a vibrancy which first captivated his classmates and eventually achieved a popularity which went throughout his school. Successive editions of his work sold over 10,000 copies, starting with a school duplicated pamphlet and ending as a slim volume.

This recognition of the different uses of English and the introduction into the classroom of new texts from the diverse cultural experiences here in the UK went towards indirectly answering some of the issues in the Students' Right to their Own Language surrounding recognizing and using materials related to a students' home community in the classroom. It marked a point in a long debate about the way traditional English teaching (and schooling generally) had disadvantaged and marginalised pupils arising with the publication of David Holbrook's *English for the Rejected* in 1964. There was a general debate about the need to teach an English literature that was inclusive of post-colonial literatures in which some of the writers associated at one time with the FWWCP took part. This diversity began to be reflected to some extent in the publications produced by some of the groups.

Still many of the discussions about diversity needed to take place principally within Black writing groups rather than the broader FWWCP. There almost needed to be "safe house" before stepping into the larger, what Pratt calls "the contact zone." From some perspectives, it is probably difficult to appreciate why this needs to be a separate conversation if you already have organized around "class," since you might easily take the issue of race as subsumed under it. That's where the tension arises. Real patience is needed to have that discussion within the larger FWWCP, particularly if the discussion is not going to make a virtue of hostility. All sorts of attempts were made to create this dialogue. There was a short vogue for white people to write in patois. Again, this may seem embarrassing, but it is an attempt to engage with differences and possibilities that many people recognized as exciting. In school kids are encouraged to write rap poems irrespective of their culture. Still, this discussion never really took off. On the whole people continued to work at their own, often regionally based writing.

**Parks:** Actually, to take us on a slight detour, I think the difficulty of the dialogue between class and race is constantly being negotiated in composition/rhetoric. My own book on the *Students' Right To Their Own Language* was strongly criticized for putting more emphasis on New University Conference, a class-based organization, in the resolutions development than on the Black Caucus. The tension is also there in the special interest groups, often based in terms of identity, trying to work together to create a common agenda—an agenda that the Progressive SIG/Caucus Coalition is trying to negotiate. And, certainly within our own community publishing work, we've encountered projects where even the community is unclear whether the focus is principally class or race. I think we'd like to say "theoretically" it's a hybrid relationship between the two. When it comes down to a writing group or community publication group deciding what goes in the "book," though it becomes very concrete and very personal. I was once involved in a project where a cover to a publication that featured community members led to a protest because the images of the different heritages in the community were not evenly represented. I often think that community publishing makes us have to actualize our theories—which as we both know can be a pretty contentious process if, as you say, the discussion is not going to make a virtue out of hostility. For me, the work of New City Community Press is a place where I've learned how to negotiate these issues, even though like most community publishing, the value of such work to the academy—say for tenure—is pretty slim.

Actually, your mentioning Holbrook makes me think of the relationship between community and academic publishing—its goals and possible benefits. One of the tensions around this work, at least in the U.S. academy, is whether community publications count as scholarship. For graduate students and faculty, the question becomes whether taking on community publishing work will count towards reappointment or tenure. There seems to be a real pushback from institutions about focusing on more traditional scholarship—articles published in peer-reviewed academic journal. Layered on top of this concern is the ethics of turning community-based work into academic scholarship—shifting the voice and audience from the local to the disciplinary. Some folks I know have drawn the line very clearly and refuse to publish anything scholarly on their community work, others write collaboratively with their partners, still others argue that community publishing itself is a form of "scholarship." (I have to admit, I fall into the

latter camp.) How does the FWWCP approach the issue—if at all—of the academic or scholarly nature of the writing produced by local writing groups?

**Pollard:** Since few of those involved were university professors, these publications were not linked to educational research. They were published to engage local young people in developing a working class culture, to reflect the needs of a community to access reading and writing that spoke to local experiences. I guess they arose through what Eli Goldblatt has since called ‘knowledge activism’ (2007). Some were taken up by the Inner London Education Authority and distributed through the National Association of Teachers of English because they appealed to a demand for reading material that kids would recognize as being by, and about, kids like them. For a brief time in the 1980s with the emergence of a UK national curriculum that had to reflect the different uses of English, there was a minor vogue in community writing. Some FWWCP work was anthologized, while an exercise on ‘the economic use of English’ concerned the costing of a community publication.

The FWWCP was being written about in academic discourse from the early eighties by people such as Rebecca O’Rourke, people working in the University of Sussex Adult and Continuing Education department, some of whom entered the university through their involvement in QueenSpark books, but this was never more than a small element of the movement. It interests me to see this university-led process in the US, but from a FWWCP perspective this feels like many of the other approaches we have seen both in the UK from the mainstream arts establishment and from some of our colleagues in Europe—top down, not bottom up, and there are difficulties of engagement, sustainability, real skills transfer, and fundamental issues of representation without the grass roots involvement.

At the same time working class writing and community publishing is not isolated from academic discourse or mainstream forms of culture. At workshops people are often writing material that is in popular genres, science fiction, detective novels, historical and popular romance. Some people attempt to model themselves on literary styles, and others think that proper writing has to ape a literary style to be ‘good’. Probably this is something that occurs in every writing workshop or writing class and is part of the process

of negotiating writing as a discipline. It would be impossible to create a self consciously ‘workerist’ style and approach which was independent of all the influences around, and when you read people like Len Doherty (*A Miner’s Sons*), for example, you can see that pure social realism has limitations if it has to conform to a party line - where the communist party member extols the theory of revolution.

The FWWCP had people who were members of left wing parties amongst its members but none of them dominated. There was a strong communist party and Labour party presence, but people were more interested in writing and publishing than ‘political debate’, and the politics emerged through the experiences that were being voiced. When I first became involved I thought that I was a Marxist, and my position hardened with the situation under Thatcher through the 1980s, but I found the literary theories associated with Marxism didn’t really accommodate the kind of writing that was happening in the FWWCP, and in fact this was part of the reason I became dissatisfied with Marxism - there was no space, apparently, for cultural action until ‘after the revolution’ - itself quite a dissonant concept in the UK. Most of the people in the FWWCP were not really that politically oriented, to be honest, and would switch off if you tried to introduce literary theory. However, you could write poems and stories with political content, or which were set against significant events like the Falklands war or the miners strike, and people would appreciate them. Political writing is, however, often pretty tedious to listen to unless the jokes are good.

Over time, people from the FWWCP have gone into academic life. The accessibility of state education enabled more people with working class backgrounds to obtain degrees while the difficult economic times denied them work. Many writers’ workshops contained a mix of people, workers, unemployed, people with and without higher education, or who were basic learners. Basic education programs, such as those in which Pecket Well College and Gatehouse Publications were involved were the source of many innovations (Woodin 2008). The venues, which provided relatively inexpensive accommodation for the weekend Annual General Meetings (eventually renamed the “Festival of Writing”), were universities. While the FWWCP was itself developing its own pedagogical approaches within the groups and in the running of regional and national workshops and training events the effect it had was that of a university. People not

only read each other but recommended material for others to read, passed books around and encouraged learning in an autodidactic mode that has echoes of the earlier working class debating societies, miners' and mechanics' institutes of the industrial age. In this way, the FWWCP was a "vernacular" university to its members.

**Parks:** I think the phrase "vernacular university" really touches upon a central weakness or issue within the community-literacy/publication emphasis in the U.S. I think in its ideal form the research practices and theoretical paradigms used in community publishing can model a more a vernacular university structure, where different forms of knowledge intersect and collaborate to find new solutions to local/national literacy issues. I think in practice, though, what often happens is the university itself is unwilling to change who it considers an "intellectual." There might be a brilliant community organizer, someone with dead-on knowledge of how to improve literacy instruction in a local community, but that person will never be hired as an instructor or faculty member at a university since he or she lacks the proper credentials. In this way, I think, the movement to recognize community literacy and to publish local intellectuals almost acts for an alibi for the real failure to restructure universities to admit into their power structure different types of intellectuals and intellectual credentials. I sometimes feel that as a Composition/Rhetoric professor bridging the university/divide through such work actually only highlights the reality of the divide.

**Pollard:** My particular interest as an occupational therapist is in the way that community publication activities can lead to a participatory articulation of life experiences. Of course, the real benefit of doing this arises from the experience of ownership and control over the way these experiences are represented. If the group that does the writing does the disseminating, while this may limit some aspects like the extent of distribution; on the other hand, there is a strong personal affirmation in communicating directly with an audience through selling them a book, reading or performing to them, and inviting them to join in the process, since community publications encourage a dialogue.

The problem of introducing this through a professional discipline such as occupational therapy is that there is the potential for the professional processes, the demands of

employers or of professional bodies, even standards of practice, to be insensitive to the needs of the individuals and groups with whom you might be working. In many instances other professionals might want to work the writing part as an expressive therapy, which might exclude publication, rather than an occupational therapy, which is about central occupational values of 'doing, being, becoming and belonging' (Wilcock 1998, Hammell 2004) in your community. Elenore Long (2008) discusses the dangers of appropriation arising from the power differences between professionals or academics and the communities they are working with. Very quickly work can become my project, rather than our project, and in doing so depart from principles that keep such work community-directed and focused.

A community publication says essentially 'We belong here' - It's a point you and Eli Goldblatt have made (Parks/Goldblatt 2000). It's probably better for therapists to think of themselves as a catalyst or a facilitator who enables others to own their publishing project and find the means to do it for themselves. For a project to be accessible and sustainable may mean that it is cheap, cheerful and simple. A glossy professional project looks good and is a source of pride, but becomes an albatross when considering further publication. The next project may not get the same level of funding, local expertise may not match the skills bought in to produce the first. These issues can demotivate people.

Consequently, there was a feeling that it was better to do your own stuff your own way and this took a political commitment to worker writing. There was even a suspicion of employing full time workers and obtaining grants to make books because the result would be books written for, not with, the community.

**Parks:** Okay, bit hard for me to hear since I'm pretty sure I'd be situated as one of those full time workers. I guess the sense is that folks like me shift focus away from what made the work enjoyable to the community. It's certainly an issue that we all face who try to do this work from the location of the university. No easy answer here. I think for those in the university we need to be "constantly vigilant" in our partnership work.

## Community Writing in the “Classroom”: The Ethics of Including Local Voices

**Parks:** I think from my perspective as a teacher, my goals might be slightly different than the FWWCP. For instance, at an immediate level, there was the project that we did together over the past year. When we did the *The Transfed*, it was our attempt to bring the working class students at Syracuse University into contact with members of the FWWCP, first through an on-line discussion and, ultimately, through trips back and forth to the USA/UK. What I imagined the value to be for my students was to see a tradition of valuing working class experience as a means to critique public education, but also to see a sustained effort by working class groups to produce and distribute their own history. I think it both showed the value of writing and a context in which writing was seen as both hard work and the building of a writing community that, without minimizing the work, was really fun and enjoyable.

**Pollard:** The thing that pulled people in the FWWCP together was the enjoyment of writing, and that through the enjoyment of writing people found that they had a lot in common, but could also share their experiences and learn a lot about other people. For a Masters dissertation I ran 4 focus groups with FWWCP members. One of the overwhelming responses was that one value of the FWWCP was that you met people you would not bump into normally, in other words that a group of organizations like the FWWCP enabled people to break out of their separated parallel existences and talk to each other. I see that with the work you are doing in the US in the Syracuse Writing program, getting students and local working class writers together. This is really important in affirming working class and community experiences, because the tendency of academic discourse and of the middle class dominated cultural forms is to sanitise and historicise experiences of poverty, disaffection, hardship and inequality as if it is happening in a space ‘over there’ somewhere, not on your doorstep. When I use material from say Oresick and Coles (1990) with my occupational therapy students to promote discussion of the relationship between working life and disability, I get responses like ‘this used to happen, didn’t it?’ One of the reasons is a perception that industrial work is something from a past era, here in a steel city, and another is that people are insulated from the experiences of those in other social classes. The mature students and some of the

locally born students with working experiences of their own or working class relatives often recognize them as current, however.

I use this material to challenge students to think about how they are going to work with people, how they are going to acknowledge their experiences, and to reflect more about where they are coming from. Some questions I ask them are “what makes you think that you can be a therapist?” and “what are you going to give up to be one?” I hope to produce some tensions and anxieties with this that will move people on from their perhaps assured positions (it is not fair to assume that all students have these, but none of us keep them in mind all the time) to think about how they can actually work with other people. Occupational therapy has to recognize and embrace social change in a much more up front way and working class writing and community publishing can help this discipline to do this. Practitioners have to value vernacular knowledge derived from experience that is not going to be described any better elsewhere.

There is pressure to respond to diversity but the way in which we recruit and educate people to the profession and possibly into teaching doesn't always work in favor of this. Occupational therapists are generally white, middle class and female, in the UK and US this is 95% of the profession. Their education is in clinical subjects and is now at degree level, though my training was through a three-year diploma. Whereas earlier curriculums included a lot of craft activities and group process, these skills have been squeezed out in the demand for a more academic program. However the majority of the people occupational therapists will be dealing with will be working people, at least in the UK. Brenda Beagan (2007) found that therapy students from working class backgrounds found themselves under pressure to meet the middle class values of the academic environment and most of their peers. The assumption that middle class values are right, and therefore working class experiences can be looked down on, needs to be challenged. We discuss anti-oppressive practices (in a couple of hours), and cultural competence, but somehow the value of vernacular knowledge gets overlooked.

**Parks:** I'm glad you brought up using the writing to help students get a better sense of working-class reality. I know for some of the students in my classes, there is a fear of the local

community, which is often portrayed as dangerous or crime ridden. I think hearing the experiences of long-term residents helps to demonstrate a more complex sense of the local community—a region that is undergoing economic and demographic change, but also a region which is full of community organizations working to insure this change insures progress for all members of the region. Of course, this is not always a happy experience. For some of the community writers, they were surprised by the reaction of the students, many of whom came from elite or privileged backgrounds. There seemed to be a sense of disbelief that anyone faced issues such as having their phone turned off.

### **Community Writing in the “Community”: The Production and Reception of Local Writers**

**Parks:** Of course, it’s not only students who give unexpected reactions to community writing. Even when we’ve published writing that was circulated within the actual community, there have been dust-ups. Folks have protested how a particular writer talked about a moment in the community; others are upset that the “dirty laundry” of a community has been published. If I can imagine the value for our respective disciplinary fields and even our students, sometime the value for the particular writer is not so clear.

**Pollard:** There are indeed many tensions in being a working class writer. Often people are writing from their immediate experience, but that includes the narratives of other people in the community who might object to being documented, or the way that they are portrayed, or the idea that they are being presented for other people’s entertainment or prurience. To write about your community experience can mean taking a distance from it and being distanced from it at the same time. Morley and Worpole (1982) say that when a working class writer gets a typewriter, they also get a suitcase.

**Parks:** Morley’s joke about working-class writers needing a suitcase seems very true. One of the ways those involved in New City Community Press have tried to manage this situation is to create a governing board made up of community and university based writers/intellectuals. This tends to keep everyone “honest.” Plus the board works with the community publishing project team to insure work is done to create an accepting audience for the writer and her work. For instance, the Press works from the assumption that writers have final edit on anything that is published; the community involved

in the project has final say on what goes in the book; design decisions are jointly made between the community and university. The Press also had to work through what counts as plagiarism – copyright infringement. As folks work in styles they see around them – TV, mysteries, romance novels, sport pages—certain terms or phrases appear which are mighty close to the original source. So that takes some conversation. Also, there have been moments when a board member or community editor thought someone should use an alias or someone wanted to use an alias. In the former, there was an undocumented worker who would be “outing” himself by publishing his story; in the latter, there was a union worker who didn’t want to risk her employment situation by writing about her boss. It all gets very tricky. I know this is talked about extensively in the *Republic of Letters*, but I’m wondering how you or the FWWCP approached such issues.

**Pollard:** This is a crucial issue to any worker writer. *The Republic of Letters* records Roger Mills’ finding that some family members strongly objected to his depiction of his life. People are concerned that they might be misrepresented and part of this probably comes from a strong tradition of regarding the working classes and others who might be disempowered from answering back as objects for humor, or as people to be ‘looked down on’.

A worker writer in the FWWCP’s activist tradition might attempt to show that ordinary people can write something that other people want to read, and about asserting the place of different and diverse experiences in culture. On the other hand anonymity has to be respected and even suggested. In a health or social care setting with vulnerable groups, confidentiality is often an issue. Sometimes people write and want to publish things which they may later regret and need the protection of confidentiality. A man wrote a book about how his impoverished childhood led to a career of drug use, containing explicit details and mentioning members of the local police as colluders in the drugs trade. It was published through a local library without much editorial consideration other than the story being sensational. He had his arm broken in a pub doorway by an angry member of his community two days later. Having formed an unrealistic idea about the material benefits of publication, when his book was first published in a local magazine review and fame and fortune did not follow he became unwell. Another individual in a service user group with whom I worked was pleased to get

the first piece of sustained writing he had achieved in a local publication. A relative, his career, was very upset to see the family name in print, and demanded an apology. My answer was that while I was sorry for the distress it caused, he was an adult, had chosen to send it himself, and that he saw it as an achievement.

A group of people with learning difficulties, Voices Talk, Hands Write (Pollard et al 2005, 2008, Pollard 2007) produced a publication with several pieces that might be read as controversial with the FWWCP. They were facilitated in setting themselves up as an autonomous group, who could then make decisions about what to publish and where to publish, including whether or not their group could be written about in professional journals. The group allows this on the basis that letting others know about their activities makes it possible for other people with learning difficulties to access similar benefits to those they experience. The use of consent forms allowing their writing and photographs was a basic administrative measure, but the ethos of the group has been one of continuous engagement in the process of writing about the groups activities. Even this paragraph will have to be discussed with them. Working in this way has enabled them to access opportunities such as being interviewed by local media, getting into the local paper, and obtaining further funding to continue the group in recognition of the positive profile academic exposure has given them. It's a tactic Elenore Long (2008) discusses to work the benefits of academic publication synergistically with a community group. As a grass roots movement working with members gradually finding their feet in the process of using the academic community as a resource for development this is something we have found through a discovery process. In community publishing you don't have the luxury of experimentation with pilot projects, you have to learn as you go along.

Editing in most FWWCP publications would be done by a committee process. My workshop generally decided on the items to be included in a publication as a group; the selection had to be representative of everyone who put forward work, but every piece had to have been read out and critiqued in the workshop first and that was the version which was usually submitted. For other groups this might be unwieldy. Other community publishers might have an editor to deal with a particular book, or might agree as a collective that

a particular writer's book might be published supported by an editorial committee. Because of the strong feelings about teachers in the education system wielding a red pen and striking through their work which were generally held in the FWWCP (e.g. Smart, 1995, cited in Woodin) any editorial changes would be negotiated with a person, beyond minor typos. Some FWWCP books retained idiosyncracies of spelling, a notable example being *Dobroyed* by Leslie Wilson (1981), describing his experiences of the borstal system (corrective institutions for juveniles). This was retained because the way he spelt often reflected his experience - thus solicitor is spelt cellisiter, because consultations take place in a cell.

I think these difficult and sensitive issues are the real strength of community publishing and worker writing, though they can be the source of many problems. Handled well, this process can be the means by which the group feel that they are really owning their own medium and get fired up to sell something good about the community to the community. However, one of the faults is often that the process of editing is seen as more important than the market to which the book is being sold. It's not an issue of producing a book that sells thousands of copies, but of producing a book that sells as many—or almost as many—as you expect it to sell. There is nothing more dispiriting than dragging out a yellowing pile of old publications to give away—it suggests the latest one might not be so good either.

**Parks:** In some ways, we are back to where we began – talking about how the publications are used—in the community, the schools, local universities. I think this sense of audience/intention, a motivation that rests outside of the individual writer, is a really difficult issue to tackle. To go back to an earlier moment in our conversation, I think that the university wants to understand the audience as students, the local writer/ community, and, if there are funders, a non-profit audience as well. Sometimes these forces all align, but more often than not one party leaves dissatisfied. In my “storage unit” right now, I have a publication which met the goals of the university very well and was used extensively in the lower division curriculum; the community and the projects participants, however, left the project feeling somewhat betrayed and rarely use the book. On the other hand, we just finished a project, the *Working* book featuring writing by Syracuse union members, which seems to be finding an

audience in both worlds. Part of the success of the latter project, I think, is we used many of the tactics you just discussed. What it really highlights is that, at least in the U.S., community publishing in the university seems to be a-learn-as-you-go enterprise. This is why the history of the FWWCPC, I think, can be such a valuable resource and, as you know, is my motivation for republishing *The Republic of Letters*.

**Pollard:** Often FWWCPC groups learnt all this as they went along as well. Many group publications show a wide diversity of writing reflecting everything from literacy exercises to polished work, others focus on a particular theme. People anticipate that others will buy their work without troubling to think why people might want to read it. My workshop often produced magazines and broadsheets as much in the spirit of experimentation as showcasing the writing we thought was good. We found that cassette tapes and broadsheets were the most cost effective form of distribution. Broadsheets could be produced quickly and enabled new members to be involved shortly after joining the group. They helped to build up group membership but producing a new one every three months saturated the readership in just over a year.

Publishers such as QueenSpark, Bristol Broadsides or Commonword focused on themed publications with a local market in mind. For QueenSpark this was very much around local history, with books about areas of Brighton, local shops and trades. Selling these on a market stall they were engaging the local community in a way that suggested to people that they might have something to contribute to the developing library of local history by telling their own stories. Eventually QueenSpark linked with the University of Brighton at Sussex and ran a course in community publishing through which students negotiated the production of local books as a learning outcome.

Amongst the first community publications I bought were the *Centerprise Working Lives* series. The second volume of this contained a series of photo-documentaries about people in Hackney, and I recognized the owner of the chip shop near where I lived at the time. This graphically brought home to me the potential of community publishing and the importance of using every means to own your own story. Centerprise books used a lot of photography, illustrating their books with the local people who wrote them, or a

pictorial sense of their personality and presence through their own photographs of their environment. *Working* (Hart, 2008) and Esther Cohen's *Unseen America* (2005) shows that this approach remains a potent tool. It's a working class or community application of photojournalism and underpins the authenticity. Again it says we belong here, because no-one else would think to take this picture or be able to say what it means.

## **The Future: The Continued Role for Printed Books in a Digital World**

**Parks:** So let me end with a somewhat “old guy” question. At almost every moment in our conversation, we equated community publishing with books. Technology has changed the nature of publishing books. For instance, you can now print perfect bound books, with full color covers, etc. on demand, greatly reducing the cost of the books and opening up who can “look” like an real author. And, to some extent, this has relieved the pressure for some community writers to have to imagine a larger audience to purchase their books—they can appeal to a micro-community even within their community. But has technology also changed what counts as a publication. Do we want to include blogs, websites, etc. as a form of community publishing? Is this the next generation of community publishing?

**Pollard:** One of the problems is that books seem to be a format that does not engage younger generations so well. The FWWCP used to have a wide age range in its community and people used to bring their children to events, but in later years my generation appear to be amongst the younger members. Through working with schools and finding areas of the curriculum you seem to be engaging younger people. Some of the publishers, such as QueenSpark and Eastside, have continued to engage with local schools, facilitated by their status as local publishers—but the other groups have not been able to do this or have not wanted that kind of commitment. Some of the barriers may be around the funding of criminal record checks for volunteers and issues of appropriate access. Perhaps the FWWCP's pedagogical stance has also created the distance, since though there are teachers in the membership we haven't really succeeded in connecting with schools or the forms of writing which younger people currently use. This means that we have not succeeded in interesting subsequent generations of young

people in finding out about the history that we have access to, or in connecting this to the futures that these children will make.

On the other hand, we are looking at the needs of an ageing population. In Europe, a quarter of the population will be over 65 by 2023. People are engaged in active learning, there are many projects which lend themselves to community publishing activities, and oral history and local history groups have been a strong tradition over the years in the FWWCP. The other week I went to see a former colleague in Doncaster working in a dementia care setting where she had involved local school children aged 9-10 years in working with day patients around museum artefacts such as washtubs and old biscuit tins to elicit their memories for an intergenerational writing project. It's the kind of thing that some FWWCP groups have done themselves, and could be developed again where people have the informal contacts to connect groups up with nursing homes or day care facilities, or other local groups. These activities depend on 'knowledge activism' based in local awareness of resources and people to make the conversations happen that will allow them to develop.

**Parks:** I see your point about using local materials to produce conversation and the need to engage in forms of writing used by the current generation—Facebook, etc. The newest incarnation of the “FWWCP” the FED, is using the web as a principle form of communication and, perhaps, sharing written work. I do want to end, though, by saying that without romanticizing the book, the printed word (whether on a broadsheet or in a book) allows for greater local circulation in working-class communities where computer/internet resources are not as great. In the U.S., there is a big push to make libraries local computer centers, but I still think that the ability of a broadsheet/book to be taken home and read in your house, at work, or on the train (and then maybe left for the next reader) speaks to the fact community publishing will have to not so much leave behind one form of publishing, but work through how to bring these various “platforms” into dialogue in the continued effort to bring resources to local neighborhoods struggling to use literacy/writing to define their own community history and to give political power to the streets on which they live.

## HOW TO CREATE A COMMUNITY WRITING/PUBLICATION GROUP: A PEDAGOGICAL AND PRACTICAL TIP SHEET

### Creating a Writing Group

**A publishing group:** The way a writing or publishing group is set up is important if the group is to sustain itself, both as a group and as a community publisher.

Groups need to meet at convenient places and times for the target participants. Groups that meet in the evenings may find people are reluctant to come out at night, for example, groups meeting in the daytime may clash with work. Try to use neutral spaces rather than someone's home to meet. Sometimes a friendly bar or café will tolerate or even encourage a group, if it is difficult to find a room to meet.

Basic principles are to ensure that people arrive on time, and identify what they are going to read at the beginning of the meeting. Start the meeting on time. Encourage people to exchange roles such as chairing the meeting and organizing refreshments as this helps to share responsibility. Take care of new members and ensure they are introduced.

If you are having your writing class participate in the writing group as part of a project it is important to spend time in your class highlighting these guidelines and even, if possible, enacting them in sample discussions of work. Students also typically will enter the group assuming a greater expertise in writing. For that reason, some time should be spent in class problematizing the concept of the “intellectual” – for which Gramsci is excellent—as well as highlighting the different rhetorical situations of community versus academic writing.

**Reading work in groups:** Some negotiation may be necessary. Longer prose pieces need to be broken up in ten minute chunks if the other members are to be able to comment usefully. They may stretch over several meetings. Scripts may need time set aside so that people can read the parts; poems are usually best dealt with one at a time. Where possible encourage authors to provide copies; this enables people to exchange work and give each other more extensive feedback. Keep a record of what has been read by whom, and if people miss their chance to read one week, ensure they are prioritized the next time. Offer voluntary writing tasks if people have difficulty knowing what to write about.

**Criticism and feedback:** Set a ground rule for constructive, not destructive criticism. Allow all the comments in the group to be heard before the author responds to any of them. All comments are valid, but it may be useful for the chairperson to draw people out if they say merely that they ‘liked’ a piece and say no more. If work is to be published in a group publication it should first have been aired this way to be considered representative of the group's work. Offer voluntary deadlines for changes.

**Working for publication:** After a group has been meeting for a while and exchanging writing and criticism it might be time to consider making a publication that presents its work to the community. If it is a first publication,

keep it simple and the costs low - otherwise publication can drag on, not involve new members, old members leave, and no-one is much interested in the result when it finally comes out.

Rather than make judgments about the quality of one person's writing over another, find a way to include everyone. Allocate tasks such as finding a printer, negotiating distribution in local shops etc, to different people. Editing may need a couple of people to co-ordinate, but no changes should be made in someone's work without that person's permission and cooperation. Some authors may have to accept that material is unpublishable unless they make changes.

Successful publication depends on good marketing. Think first about how and where you will sell your work and in what quantity. If no funding is available work out a price for the publication and subdivide the total amongst the group membership. Everyone can be asked to contribute a sum and take away as many copies as this buys at cost. This way the group always breaks even on its sales, everyone is involved in distributing the publication - you can of course ask people to pay in their profits too.

## Creating a Community Publication

Although many publications will be broadsheets (photocopies of text designed in word documents) if you want the publication used in classrooms, a more formal publication might be required. This is not as difficult as it seems. Below is the information necessary to produce a "book."

**Permission to Print:** You will need to have each author/photographer featured in the book sign a permission letter. See sample letter below. In addition, you will need to secure permission from any school featured in the book to publish images of their students – parent permission should also be secured.

**ISBN/Barcodes:** School Districts, local bookstores, and national chains often require any publication to have an ISBN account. To tackle this issue, go [bowkerlink.com](http://bowkerlink.com). Once you have an ISBN, you will need to purchase a barcode. While there are many sites to purchase barcodes, two popular ones are General Graphics (<http://www.ggbarcode.com>) and Barcode Graphics (<http://www.nutrifactgraphics.com/>)

**Print on Demand:** Unless you are printing over 500 copies for a guaranteed "sale," avoid large printing companies. On-demand printers can usually print a 55 page book with full color cover and photos inside for less than \$8.00 per book. New City Press has used Professional Duplicating ([produpe.com](http://produpe.com)), but using a local company reduces shipping costs. Broadsheets should be produced at local copy centers.

**Layout:** Large and small printers usually demand documents are sent as "InDesign" documents. A surprisingly large number of university students know how to use this software, so hiring a professional designer is often unnecessary.

**Time Frame:** If you are using a print-on-demand process, you should allot about 10 days from the time you submit your document until it is in your

hands. If you are using a large printing firm, you should allot about 8 weeks. Xeroxed publications, as might be expected, are immediately available.

**Cost:** To print up to 500 copies of a 100 page book (full color cover and black ink inside) will cost about \$8.00 per book if you go with a 9” by 6” size. Some print on demand shops charge less for small sizes since this allows them to use paper more effectively.

**Funding:** While it will differ locally, for publication with a public school audience, many companies will donate funds to be listed on an acknowledgement page. Local schools will also agree to purchase the books at cost, assuming it contains student writing. The development of a curriculum directly focused on the book also helps to insure adoption/use in the public schools.

**SAMPLE PERMISSION LETTER**

This letter will serve as an agreement between \_\_\_\_\_, New City Community Press and (**insert interviewee/author name**) to publish excerpts of your oral history interview in the forthcoming publication with the working title \_\_\_\_\_. The Interviewee/Author also grants permission to include their interview in future editions of the book, if it is re-printed.

The Interviewee/Author understands agrees to the following:

Interviewees/Author will be given an opportunity to review the excerpt selected for publication.

Interview/Writing excerpts and accompanying photographs may be used for promotional purposes.

Interviewees/Author will not be compensated. Publication sales will be utilized by the two nonprofit organizations to off-set the cost of its production.

Each Interviewee/Author will receive three (3) copies of the publication. S/he may purchase additional copies at 50% of the retail price.

No additions or alterations to this agreement will be considered.

Please sign one copy and keep it for your own files, signing and returning the other to:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Project Coordinator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee/Author

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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