

Opportunity Lost: Disciplinarity, Community Activism, and the Grand Compromise

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For those of us identifying with Composition/Rhetoric, there is a certain story we love to tell. It is a story that links our core identity as providers of an institutional service, freshman composition, with a militant form of public politics, such as anti-privatization struggles. Admitting to some broad generalizations, the story might go as follows: “The modern age of Composition/Rhetoric grew out of a sustained and engaged involvement with the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s, movements which reframed the political purposes and goals of a university education. This progressive heritage is alive today in the composition classroom’s commitment to respecting and representing the diverse linguistic and cultural heritages of all students.”

It is, no doubt, a great story. It is important to understand the appeal of that story, however, within two dynamics shaping our field today: community partnerships and labor practices. Adding these elements allows us to understand how the imagined linking of our classrooms to militant politics misrepresents the current nature of our field. Indeed, if taken seriously, this expanded narrative will ultimately lead us to a different form of activism than we traditionally present in our scholarly journals and academic conferences. In the following pages, I would like to explore the relationship between these two elements, using as examples some of my own work, then tentatively point to the need for a new sense of activism from which to base our politics.

Community Work/Labor Practices

For at least the past fifteen years, Composition and Rhetoric has articulated its progressive political sensibility as a commitment to community partnership work. To some extent, this focus represents the next logical stage of a field that has traditionally understood its commitments as focused on the “underprepared” and

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under-represented writer. In justifying the literacy skills of such designated writers, for instance, Composition/Rhetoric has consistently reframed the students' expertise as drawn from community-based practices arguing, in effect, that such expertise did not mesh with the requirements of the traditional academy (see Heath). This argument then moved toward developing writing programs that helped to affect this transition/entrance to the academy in a humane and progressive fashion. The curricula intended to enact this transition has been as varied as the individuals who teach it, but I believe it is fair to say the core value of respect was embedded across these efforts.

It was not a far leap then, having recognized the mismatch between college and the community, to begin arguments about the need to better understand a student's home literacy environment. Unfortunately, the field initially seemed to determine the home community of students as lacking in proper reading/writing practices. This is certainly true of early sociologists and language scholars in the 1970s (see Bereiter, for instance). More nuanced versions of this "lack" emerged during the 1980s; one contribution is from Bartholomae, who – in "Inventing the University" – endorses students' ability to interpret any academic text while recognizing the blunt fact of their inability to capture its full inter-textual relations. They must be made to "speak like us," even though "they are not us." This method granted respect, but no real engagement with community literacy patterns as oppositional tools to confront mainstream writing practices, or with the political structures that create this distance from academic literacy.

To some extent, the movement toward community partnership/literacy work is intended to recognize the potential of oppositional rhetoric in community literacy patterns and to bring academic and community members together around a common cause. Originally community partnerships were an administrative attempt to combat "ivory tower" critiques and focused on supporting the work of public schools through tutoring or socially-minded non-profit organizations, such as homeless shelters (see Deans). This work, however, was disengaged from the needs of the writing classroom and, to a great extent, removed from the progressive politics of the field – politics that called for a questioning of the structural relationships of power. In this regard, Bruce Herzberg's call for a more structural engagement with power was a prescient call, often invoked but rarely practiced.

Recognizing this gap, scholars such as Linda Adler-Kassner, Ellen Cushman, Nancy Welsh, and Chris Wilkey argue for a form of community partnership dedicated to structural issues of power. Here communities are understood as possessing important political insights as well as possessing the oppositional literacy strategies that might improve their conditions on a micro and macro-level. Particularly in Welsh's and Wilkey's classrooms, students framed learning in partnership with communities, joined in grassroots movement for change, and confronted issues of gentrification and war. These types of commitments, however, remain somewhat on the fringe of the general community partnership landscape.

Instead, the more centrally-located "community-partnership" strategy might be understood through the scholarship of Linda Flower, whose work at the Pittsburgh

Community House has been rightly praised for its consistent and on-going efforts to provide voice to local residents (see Flower). As Flower herself notes, however, the goal of her “community dialogues” is not to create change, but to sponsor a dialogue rich in its complexity – not so much reaching a consensus for action, but enhanced nuance for understanding a community issue. In this way, our expertise as writing/rhetoric teachers, focused on how language can shape community interactions, is directly pulled into communal situations and presented as valuable for changing how an issue is discussed. Indeed, for Flower, our expertise in rhetoric is seen as providing particularly important skills to communities lacking in such mitigation strategies, who upon learning them are better enabled to gain political power. Here the classroom focuses on how to educate the community to negotiate power with power brokers – a focus different in kind and scope from the organizing emphasis of Wilkey or Welsh. As I have argued in other work, this community partnership strategy represents the grand compromise of composition studies: politics minus actual political action.

I now want to turn to the other element in our professional “story” – labor. For while Composition has been making its public turn toward community partnership, the field has continued to be based upon (and expanded within) a contingent and exploited labor pool. The fact of labor exploitation is not new. Scholars such as Eileen Schell, Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Donna Strickland, have pointed to this fact. Professional organizations, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, or C’s), have promulgated and tried to enact policies, such as the Wyoming resolutions. The Working Class SIG and Non-Tenured Faculty Special Interest Groups at C’s have actively agitated for increased attention to such issues. Finally, the C’s journal has taken to publishing an annual newsletter by adjunct faculty in its pages. That is, there is ample attention paid to this fact, if not ample and readily-available solutions at hand. In fact, the pyramid of Composition/Rhetoric, which has always been structured as a few tenured professors at the top and mass contingent labor on the bottom, has only become more solidified over the past fifteen years.

In fact, as the university (as corporate structure) continues to adopt private sector practices, the extent of provisional and temporary employment across the humanities continues to expand. That is, Composition/Rhetoric is no longer “unique” in this regard. While there might have been a time when its economic structure stood out from other disciplines, I would argue this is no longer the case. The generalized attack on a professional class within the larger economy has re-created a labor market based upon temporary employment, little or no benefits, and a steadily dropping wage (see Harvey). This is evident not only in Composition/Rhetoric, but also in other fields within the humanities, and in other professional sectors, such as law and medicine.

This labor situation, coupled with a “public commitment”, should have led our field to enacting a different type of professional and disciplinary model. Yet as Composition/Rhetoric has moved towards increased status over the past fifteen years, the field has kept its primary focus on replicating traditional disciplinary models – minors, majors, graduate programs, endowed chairs, academic journals,

local/national conferences, etc. Indeed, under such criteria, Composition/Rhetoric has been a tremendous success. And I would argue that community partnership work has been the vehicle that has allowed us to seemingly maintain such “progressive” commitments while inhabiting a traditional academic model within such an exploitive labor structure. It is, however, a flawed and limited sense of activism.

Let me use some of my own work to show the limits of such a model. When I first arrived at Syracuse University, I became part of an effort to record the working lives of unionized employees in the city called *unseenamerica*, sponsored by Bread and Roses, the cultural arm of SEIU 1199c. The goal of the project was to form small groups that would record through photography and writing the typical day of working class union members. The ultimate goal was to weave these words and images into a national tapestry that could be used as part of an activist campaign for labor rights. Given my previous experience in community publishing and community partnership work, I was intrigued by this effort (see *Gravyland*).

I approached the work, however, through a community partnership model. For as I have written elsewhere, the *unseenamerica* group represented not just an important union project, but a way to provide support for the working class students in my course, students who at that time were a very small section of Syracuse University’s undergraduate population. This drawing of a union-based project into the needs of a “writing program” had tremendous benefit for the students. The group’s voice and insights buttressed the community-based claims of the working class student, to some extent leveling the playing field in the classroom. And, to some extent, the union group benefitted from the increased attention paid to their writing as well as access to university resources – classroom space, funds for printing their work, etc. (see Parks, “Emergent Strategies”).

With the benefit of hindsight, however, I can also see how this shift fed into a faulty model of community partnership. For what the participation of the *unseenamerica* group also provided was a veneer of labor-based and community-based politics to the emergent Writing and Rhetoric major. Through writing with and talking with the union group, my students appeared to be engaged in *actual* labor politics. In fact, at most, the students were providing a venue for the working class writers to learn how to make more nuanced arguments which would appeal to middle-class students. This is not to discount the need to finesse or take more powerful rhetorical stances. It is, though, to note that such efforts do not actually have any direct link to grassroots systemic efforts aimed at structural change – i.e. the militant politics so often endorsed in our scholarship. Indeed, one way to read the lack of militancy associated with the project was the strong endorsement by the university – an endorsement that soon vanishes when “writing” steps outside the parameters of the grand “delusion” and engages in such grassroots efforts as evidenced below.

I now want to turn to some of my more recent work, again located within Syracuse and, again, focused on the economic rights of local working class citizens. Reflecting on the limits of the student work with *unseenamerica*, I established an

Undergraduate Community Research Fellows program with a colleague from Anthropology, John Burdick. The goal of this program was to place students in activist organizations, such as the Syracuse Peace Council. The students would be asked to use their research skills to support the goals of the organization, while the organization would give them an education in activism. Two years after the program began, we were approached by an alliance of labor organizations, SANE (Syracuse Alliance for a New Economy), and asked to focus our students' efforts on one specific neighborhood, the Westside – an area marked by diverse heritages and labeled as one of the poorest census tracts in the United States. It was also an area that had just been marked as a recipient of a 54 million dollar redevelopment effort initiated and sustained by Syracuse University.

Almost at the same moment that we were being approached by SANE, I was also contacted by a representative from a foundation, a foundation which was actively supporting the redevelopment effort, to form community writing groups – leading to a publication – which would bring more residents into the development project. The foundation's goal was an increased voice for residents. (Notably, this same foundation provided financial support to the resulting publication from Syracuse's *unseenamerica* project, *Working: An anthology of Writing and Photography*.) The two elements of this project (SANE and community participation) seemed perfectly aligned. We agreed to move forward on both fronts.

While there are many twists and turns to the story (to be detailed in a book on this project), what is important to note here is the different relationship of the students to the community members. Instead of the community being a resource to working class students, the “fellows” were asked to align themselves with the political and economic interests of the residents. As a result, the work they did was designed to capture the inherent political vision of the neighborhood. Through door-to-door surveys and community presentations, it became clear the residents were deeply ambivalent about the project. Residents highlighted how new middle class “credit worthy” families were being sold neighborhood houses for one dollar, but long term residents were receiving no help to fix up their homes. Jobs were being created, but they were with non-unionized companies, often requiring degrees/certifications that disqualified neighborhood residents.

Notably, the effort to bring residents into dialogue with the redevelopment project actually resulted in them forming their own organization, the Westside Residents Coalition, a name chosen in part to protest the re-naming of their neighborhood as the “Near Westside,” as in near-to-downtown. And while the goal of this organization was productive dialogue, the fact of its independent and labor-aligned partners (SANE) set off an immediate counter-response by members of the development project. Within several months, the students were being attacked as “pawns,” and “anti-Westside.” Funding was taken away from their projects. Calls were made into the neighborhood to both attack and critique the “pedagogical” and “rhetorical” basis of the “fellowship” program. Residents were asked to choose sides in the battle. Fortunately, the Westside Residents Coalition (and the students) survived this intense period, expanding in power and becoming an important force not just in issues of economic justice but police conduct (see Kuebrich).

I tell this second story not to take on the mantle of “militant academic”; perhaps a different set of strategies might have avoided such a fierce response. Even with that caveat, however, I think the story points to a larger argument. Whereas the first project was linked to labor unions, it was not involved in systemic efforts at change. And in this way, it was acceptable within a curriculum and within a university. The second project, also occurring within a curriculum and a university, demanded a deep alignment of interests along class lines, leading to grassroots organizing. This project, while ultimately successful, clearly questioned the accepted boundaries of “community partnership” work. Enacting the spirit of Wilkey and Welsh, the project enabled students to see and work within the oppositional insights of a community, supporting their demands for economic justice. For that reason, there were attempts to shut the program down. It was “political with real political action” and, thus, outside the grand compromise of “community partnerships.”

Yet, I would argue that such partnerships should be the new model of “activism” in our community partnership work. We need to expand such partnerships to include not only the working poor of the city, but the working poor of a university as well. For the most articulated version of this project would be to have students simultaneously working with university and community members, unions and community organizations, crossing artificial boundaries of “on/off” campus and creating a common economic sense of justice. This type of project would draw together “community partnerships” and “exploited labor,” two legs of the stool which prop up “Rhetoric and Composition” (the third leg being the managerial class). It is the activism that our historical commitments should naturally lead us to take on.

Of course, I can already hear the objections. Such a model politicizes education, turning students into activists on causes that they might not support. While I think the second aspect of this concern is valid (and demands we announce such projects prior to registration), the primary charge of politicizing education seems false. Or rather, to accept that charge is to accept teaching students a model of politics that is only rhetorical and not actual, a model that endorses neo-liberal versions of volunteerism and not progressive challenges to structural power, challenges based on collective action (see Hyatt). And while the particular political stance we adopt as teachers with our students is premised upon our own sensibilities (neo-liberal or progressive), my argument is that we need to be clear with ourselves and our students what our version of politics/activism is and what our particular community partnerships entail.

I also imagine an objection that such classes, such projects, are not the work of “composition and rhetoric.” This might be true in the current form in which we have modeled our profession – one based upon very traditional academic structures. In some ways, I would argue that this structure is premised upon a need to make ourselves “legitimate” to already existing disciplines. At its best, however, Composition and Rhetoric has attempted to stand on the side of the working poor across heritages and citizenship status. We have complicated that commitment in the attempt to become a discipline, to take our seat at the academic table. And when

surveying the labor structures have been created and the limited community partnerships that have resulted, I believe an opportunity was lost. A different structure, a different type of activism, was (and should be) possible.

Just as members of my family cast about for economic lifelines at the tail-end of the great recession, I can't help but think the current moment demands a new stance, one premised on alliances with unions, community members, and exploited academic labor – an alliance pointed towards a sense of democracy that is imbued with not only a continued struggle for equal voting rights, but equitable pay and economic prosperity as well. We have made ourselves legitimate in a system premised on exclusion and elitism. Heading forward, the question is whether we can reclaim our activist history to become active partners in the lives of ordinary people, whose special abilities are too often ignored by the economic powers that be.

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