

Interview with Steve Parks

Syracuse University and former Editor of
*Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric,
Civic Writing, and Service Learning*

Willma Harvey,
Associate Editor
Cristina Kirklighter,
Editor
& Jessica Pauszek,
Assistant Editor

After reviewing some of the manuscripts for this issue, we, as editors, thought it would be appropriate to interview Steve Parks' regarding his perspectives on graduate students and community projects. Steve has worked with graduate students for many years, including Jessica Pauszek, our Assistant Editor. He was also the past editor of this journal for a number of years, and we have benefitted through his guidance. As he says at the end of the interview, the interview format cannot capture the spirit of "collaborative discussion" that comes from this work. However, given our close relationship with Steve over the years, the questions we did develop come out of our conversations with him and thus is a product of previous listening and dialoguing. An interview with a friend, mentor, and colleague is a different type of interview—one grounded in the familiar.

Cristina Kirklighter (C.K.): Steve, in our many conversations that we've had over the years, we have discussed how important it is for us to walk the talk with engaging our students in community projects at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Yet, when we look at the Robin J. Crew's Guide to College and University Service-Learning Programs <http://evergreen.loyola.edu/rcrews/www/sl/academic.html>, the numbers show a significant imbalance between undergraduate and graduate programs. From your own observations, why do you believe more graduate programs at the M.A. and Ph.D. are not engaging students in community projects and how might this affect the graduate student experience?

Steve Parks (S.P.): That's a good question. I think there are disciplinary and structural reasons for this fact. First, I think that English, as a field focused on literature and cultural studies, is premised on the production of textual artifacts that are principally focused on intervening in the institutional structures of its own house – i.e. they are interested in intervening in the status of English within the university, not in the status of Englishes in the community surrounding the university. This is important institutional work, but it is not community-based work. Since the vast majority of Composition graduate students exist within English Departments with such a focus, there are typically not enough faculty or resources to really build out a sustained community partnership focus. In that way, the legacy of Composition and Rhetoric's re-emergence in English in the post World War II USA continues to impact the ability of the field to realize its full vision. (Clearly I am speaking in very broad brush strokes.)

I think we also need to recognize that even within the field of Composition and Rhetoric, there is not wide spread support of such work. As a field, we are still primarily focused on textual artifacts as well – the study and assessment of classroom based student writing. Again, this is important work particularly in a time of standardized assessment in a corporatized university. Protecting the full literacy rights of our students (and the labor rights of their predominantly adjunct professors) should be a part of any professional career. But to return to the latter part

of your question – the effect on graduate student experience – I think that not providing equal focus to community engagement during English or Composition/Rhetoric graduate careers fails to provide students with the organizational and rhetorical strategies which can combat the creation of the very corporate educational environment that is slowly draining resources away from English, from Composition/Rhetoric, and the Humanities, the very forces that are creating an indebted generation and a pauperized professoriate.

I think we need to see how these two worlds, the academic and the corporate, are necessarily linked in ways that diminish intellectual freedom and independent research, that diminish the possibilities of our classrooms and the future of our students. Community partnerships can call the question on the relationship between the university and the surrounding neighborhood, between the creation of knowledge and the creation of profit. This direct experience of negotiating these competing demands, creating alternative non-corporate spaces, to my thinking, should be a part of any graduate student's career. Otherwise, it seems to me, we are really teaching our students to accept a world of diminished expectations.

C.K.: To follow up on this question, how do you believe graduate programs in R&C are comparatively faring in this area? Have you seen a change over the years in curriculums and dissertations that allow for such work?

S.P.: In terms of curriculum, I feel that we are in a transition moment. For a lot of years, it seems to me, community partnership was brought in under traditional graduate course titles – think “Advanced Issues in Composition.” I always liked this approach since it forced the question of how such work related to the field. My goal was never to create a silo type sub-field, but to understand how such an emphasis might alter and learn from existing conversations. I think there is some evidence that community partnership work has begun to be taught under its own heading or related heading, such as community literacy. While this is an important institutional victory, I’m not sure it

is best for the field. I think a dynamic where there is constant pressure placed upon us to explain “why we do what we do” is important. We are intellectually and institutionally strongest when we think in terms of collaboration, not separation.

Similarly, I think that embedding community-based work in dissertation work is the result of such intellectual collaboration, a collaboration that has both built off of and expanded some of the methodological and ethical practices that emerged out of Feminism, such as the need to carefully locate your self as a scholar. In addition, the field’s emphasis on the use of student writing, the ethics of citation, has been expanded by the inclusion of community voices in doctoral work. Where I think this is ultimately leading is to an expansion of who should be around the table during dissertation defenses. Should someone be able to represent their work as accurate about the community with no actual community member present? Should the work be allowed to be published without any community insight? I think right now our field would want to say the community should have some authority at such moments, but we don’t have a good strategy how to enact that belief. It pushes too much against how we professionalized ourselves on conservative views of the professoriate. So long term, I guess, I’m hoping community partnership work can put pressure on that traditional vision of the professoriate and move dissertations, move departments, to a more expansive vision of intellectual and the structures needed to fully enact their visions.

And one final related point: My sense is that the best community partnerships are nurtured over time, expand beyond a class, and are imbued in the entire department. A systemic commitment by all is involved. It’s only in that context that the questions raised above can be addressed. In an austere entrepreneurial university, where partnerships rest too often on grants, such a broad commitment isn’t really possible. In an austere university, where the entrepreneurial spirit can determine resources, such partnerships are incredibly hard to produce. So to return to an earlier point, if we really want community partnerships to be an essential aspect of our graduate programs, we need to train

graduate students who can actively work against a political economy designed to stop such collective sensibilities and collective commitments.

C.K.: From the research by Campus Compact, MSIs are known to have an overall higher percentage of emphasis of community outreach and service-learning than non-MSIs. During your time with *Reflections*, a few special issues were published on HBCU's, African American Community Literacy, and Latin@s and community activism. A few of the editors came from MSIs. Would you speak to the importance of race-based studies of community outreach while you were editor of *Reflections* and how your graduate students and partners benefit from such research and participation in these projects?

S.P.: The impetus for those issues grew out of a quote from a Gayatri Spivak article I read in graduate school, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" There is a moment in the essay where she frames her investigation in terms of the phrase "White men saving brown women from brown men." I've always felt that community partnership work had the quality of "White scholars saving brown communities from brown residents." That is, there was a subtle sense of racism in our sense of importance, of who we did and did not have to listen to – what Spivak calls sanctioned ignorance. When I became Editor of *Reflections*, I wanted to highlight that MSI's had a long history of partnership work that preceded "our field's" involvement, that there were other spaces to learn what this work could mean, how it should look. And more generally, I was concerned that as framed, our field had limited the type of scholars who could be read, learned from, based upon their affiliation with Research 1 institutions. It was out of that context that I published the special issues, but more generally tried to greatly expand across all of our issues the range of scholars who shared their work in *Reflections*. And in a related move, this is also why I tried to include non-academy based community intellectuals. Clearly, more could have been accomplished, but these were my goals.

In all of these moves, my sense was that there was a need to expand the field for those entering into such work, such as graduate students or considered experts in the work, such as professors, to recognize that there were other practices perhaps based upon a different set of values which could be studied. In doing so, I was echoing arguments made by the Black Caucus in the 1960's, when C's would have white scholars talking about black communities, never inviting scholars who were members of those communities, whose research was based upon deep and sustained research, of engagement, with the residents of their communities. I wanted *Reflections* to hear that argument and respond to it. Otherwise, my sense was, the journal would be teaching graduate students (and scholars in general) a damaging and limiting sense of the history and practices of community partnership. Again, clearly more could have been accomplished.

Jessica Pauszek (J.P): What suggestions would you have for graduate students interested in community work to begin this work?

S.P.: I think my most consistent advice is “you have to be the scholar you want to be from the moment you enter graduate school.” My sense is there is pressure to always push your values, your commitments, off until you learn “the field.” While there is some truth to the argument, you need to be responsible to the work of scholars before you, I also believe that you always need to act upon your own moral compass, the ethical system that drives you forward. You should never put your values to the side. This is the only way you will know if the field can be a space to do important work for you. It is also the only way you can learn the navigational skills that allow you to build your own research, your own community projects, as your career progresses.

I've been fortunate to work with students like you, Jessica, as well as Ben Kuebrich, Romeo Garcia, Yanira Rodriguez, and Vani Kannan. They are really models to me for how to enact your commitments – and I should add they don't all share the same commitments – and to build careers which speak to their values. I've seen the toll it can take, so I'm not romanticizing such

work. I'm just saying, why would you want to take on work that asks you to be someone else for a couple of years before you can "possibly" find your own voice. So always acting out of your own ethical values is fundamental.

Within that framework, for the most part, I don't think graduate students should create their own community projects. They simply aren't in a community long enough to do the sustained work necessary. Instead, they should study what faculty and programs do in the community work that speaks to them, apply there, and work within that existing project. In some ways, this gives you a better sense of the complexity of such work: starting your own might. It also gives you a network of support to work through mistakes (which will happen) and to understand the successes (which will happen as well.) Then, my sense is, students should use one aspect of that project for their dissertation work, using that experience to understand how to represent their role in a collaborative community project. This will help them as they move forward to article and book projects. Lastly, I think that anyone interested in this work should develop experience writing grants and arguing for institutional resources. As I wrote above, it's an entrepreneurial environment and folks need to learn how to bend resources towards progressive community projects. You should never have to depend on grant money for a project to continue, but you also shouldn't cede the territory to projects that have little or no value to the communities surrounding your university.

J.P.: What does it mean to take on community projects for graduate students? What risks or challenges are involved? And what might success look like in these projects?

S.P.: I'm not entirely sure that the stakes of taking on community projects are any more fraught than any other type of dissertation work. Every project carries risks. I think the question is whether you believe the risks are worth taking. With community projects, I think the risks involve actual public anger when projects go awry, potential publicity of this fact, and, at points, concern by your university. As a graduate student, my sense is these moments

seem a bit like a crisis. I think the more you do the work, you will see projects always go awry; it's public, and you have to calm your university down. These are just the skills you need to learn if you are going to take on such work. But you will only learn by them by taking on such work.

The reason I tend to steer graduate students away from forming their own project is, it is important to have a strong mentor when beginning this work. Someone with the institutional network to be able to push through such moments, a set of partners who have the ethos to make different players see the path forward. It is almost always better to step into an existing project, build up a set of skills and strategies, then move onto your own work. This is the case not only for you, but also for the community, who have to trust you can produce on the promises made even when things go wrong. So I guess my advice would be embed yourself in a context where you can experience the risks and crises of such work but have a network to insure you learn how to manage such moments. I definitely would not take on such work without such a network of support in your graduate program.

J.P.: While community partnership work is often focused on local communities near the institutions we work at, I'm wondering if you could talk about how partnerships might extend to engage in more international or transnational projects.

S.P.: I probably do not have as much experience as others in this regard. I can talk about some work done in partnership with activists and educators based in the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom were active in the Arab Spring and its consequences. And this is a bit difficult to talk about in an academic sense because I have such deep personal admiration for them, for their efforts to expand democratic rights regardless of gender, religion, or heritage. The risks they face are far more real than what I've ever had to face.

I bring this up because in our work together – producing a book of personal narratives which circulated internationally, including UN representatives in Gaza – I've had to be consistently aware

that my network of support does not reach to those locations, meaning I cannot provide them any real cover. I also have to be aware that their networks of support are often under direct political oppression. Taking a public stance with a U.S. based academic, for instance, is not an innocent or unimportant decision. I have to be aware of what I am asking of them. This is also true of any partnership in the United States, but the distance, the fraught political history of the USA in the region, leaves individuals much more isolated, in my experience, than in a traditional US based partnership.

I think, though, that as universities push towards a global identity, creating this vision of students seamlessly moving across the world, such partnerships can remind of us of the difficulties of borders, that the rhetoric of global citizenship reads differently in Gaza than Syracuse, NY. And I like to think that, when done well, such partnerships stand in counter relationship to such idealistic rhetoric – that they can offer a protest against an economic and political order which creates seamless travel for some and exile in their homeland for others.

My colleague, Tony Scott, recently published an article, with Nancy Welch, where they argued for the need to show the materiality of such global rhetoric. I'm trying to live up to that insight. So I'm essentially trying to learn how to take many of the strategies used in the US context and make them useful to my activist colleagues in the Middle East/North Africa in an attempt to make real the political and economic disparities of the global economy.

J.P.: As someone who does work in community partnerships and community literacy, how do you negotiate funding? How do funding structures ideologically shape what is possible in a given community literacy context and the ways in which that work is framed? From your perspective, what types of community literacy initiatives are important to fund, and ideally, from what funding sources?

S.P.: I've gone through different stages of my attitudes towards grants. I think, initially, I used grants to build up a space within my academic department to support sustained community partnerships. Here the goal was to create the resources for projects designed to create systemic change in the public school system in Philadelphia and in local communities around my university. During that period, I think about 2.5 million dollars were raised. (Here I should add all of this work was done with my close colleague, Eli Goldblatt – who really has shaped a lot of my thinking on all these issues). So at that point, I was using grants linked to systemic work on social justice designed to increase capacity for such work in the university.

Later, I also began to do work with the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) in the UK. They are a network of self-generated community writing groups who publish and circulate their own work. (Since I first met them, they have actually gone bankrupt. My colleague, Jess Pauszek, is actually doing important work now trying to create an international archive of their work.) Through the FWWC, I began to realize that “big grants” create infrastructures that continually need financial feeding. So that if the funding were to run out, the project would essentially end. During this period, I focused more on small grants – anywhere from \$250 to \$5,000 that were designed to support a specific project within a larger community based effort. That is, the community effort would be run off the labor of those involved, and the grants would support specific projects.

Throughout, I had to balance which grants funds seemed ethical to pursue. So typically, I went for non-profit foundation grants (which often have secured their funds through some pretty shaky capitalist practices) and government grants (which depending on the party in power felt ethical or corrupt.) For smaller grants, I've gone to local organizations focused on an issue, such as labor unions. In each grant, though, the goal has been to level the decision-making authority as much as possible. That is, community and university partners have equal say about how money is allocated, spent, and assessed. And no grant is

pursued until all the partners are comfortable with the funding agency. Certain partners, for instance, might not want to apply for funding from police organizations, for instance.

So in some ways, I don't think that grants alone ideologically structure what is possible. Instead, I think the partners have to decide the ultimate goal of their work, what collaborative structure is necessary to create sustainability, then, within that environment, decide if grants are needed, then at what level. Once all these decisions are made, to a great extent, the project can control its own progress, set its own path. Grants become secondary to the ultimate goal - a useful but not essential element. My sense is that if a project grows out of a funding opportunity, a certain grant initiative, then the project is almost necessarily corrupt - it's chasing the dollars instead of creating social justice. In some ways, it is exactly that cavalier attitude toward community partnership that Paula Mathieu critiques so effectively.

J.P.: Would you talk about the ethics and ethical commitments that might come up within this work, or could you give an example of your own where you've had to negotiate personal and political interests either with the community and/or university?

S.P.: I feel like I live in a world of ethical conflicts. Since there is no pure space to act from at any moment, myself and my partners are endlessly trying to figure out what is the ethical path forward. And I have really come to admire my colleagues who call me out when it seems I'm taking an easy path forward or haven't articulated my reasoning. For instance, recently, I was given the opportunity to be part of a grant which would support Israeli-Palestinian students enrolled in Israeli funded schools, to do a project where they write about their lives, ultimately publishing a book that would circulate in Israel and Gaza. The impetus for the grant is that Israeli schools for Palestinians are massively underfunded compared to schools for Jewish students. The grant was trying to address a systemic injustice.

I was fortunate to have one of our graduate students involved in the decision. She pointed out the international boycott against working with Israel, the conflict of working with a state that (at that time) was literally bombing Palestinian lands. A faculty colleague of mine also pointed out the danger of censorship by the schools – would they really allow a student publication to speak the reality of their lives, would publishing the book put the students/families in danger in ways we might even realize. And this goes to my point earlier, the network that might support me, insure my projects are published ethically, didn't reach to Israel, to Palestine.

I understood those arguments, but ultimately, felt it was unethical not to try to address the daily experiences of those students. So I rewrote the grant, internationalized the participants, created a scenario where a set of students would come to the US to produce the book, and an editorial team in Gaza/Israel would assess the impact the book might have to the authors and the community. I'm not sure it was the best compromise, since it didn't touch upon some of the arguments made by my colleagues. And ultimately, the revised grant didn't end up being used, and I withdrew from the project.

I tell this story not so much to say "Look, I got it right," but to say, that it is exactly this type of ethical complexity that community-based work (internationally or local) encounters. That you need graduate students and colleagues who will hold you to account, challenge your thinking, and, make sure that you don't lose your ethical compass. That is, I don't have a set list of ethical commitments that should inform a project. I have a set of colleagues who constantly remind me that each decision is an ethical decision.

Willma Harvey (W.H.): In past issues of *Reflections*, we've had several articles focusing on service-learning and community partnerships involving social media. Should graduate studies strive more to initiate and participate in service learning programs and community partnerships involving social media?

S.P.: I have a pretty expansive definition of social media – beginning with the newspaper and leading to the internet, inclusive of both the phone and of YouTube. I think successful partnerships work within the media possibilities available, discover the affordances they offer, then develop a plan to utilize them to expand the audience for their project. For instance, a multimedia project might appear more cutting edge, but if the community does not have a significant percentage of individuals with home computers – with adequate software and internet service – it’s really just a vanity project. So I absolutely agree in the power of social media, I would just first decide what tools best fit the project. My friends active in the Arab Spring, for instance, famously used Facebook, but they also used fax machines, phone calls from landlines, and handwritten posters. It’s the strategy you create in the medial ecology of the project that is the issue – not any particular technology.

W.H.: What kinds/types of social media projects involving community engagement should graduate programs seek to develop?

S.P.: I feel like I’m repeating myself here a bit, but I think that the social media project has to be premised on the goal of the project, the audience to be reached, and the results desired. My sense is that any project will necessarily use a blend of traditional and emergent media technologies. So I don’t think the first question is what types of social media projects, but what are the goals of a community, does our expertise match-support their goals, what does a common collaborative framework look like – what is our plan of action. It is only within that frame, I think, that the question of social media becomes relevant. And at that point, it is not so much social media, but the media ecology you are trying to use and simultaneously influence.

C.K.: Are there any final thoughts you would like to say to graduate students and/or faculty interested in community partnerships and/or service-learning?

S.P.: I think interviews can come off as a bit self-aggrandizing. “Let me tell you how it is done.” But what I think I’ve learned from

this work is that it is the collaborative discussion, the moment of humble listening and reflecting, that produces change. Interviews can't capture that spirit. I'm not sure graduate school respects that spirit. But if you enter any project with such humility, with a sincere desire to listen and learn, then, really, everything else follows naturally.

Steve Parks is an Associate Professor in the Writing Program, Syracuse University. He is author of Class Politics: The Movement for a Students' Right to Their Own Language and Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love. He is also Founder/Editor of New City Community Press (newcitycommunitypress.com). He has served as Editor of Reflections as well as Editor (with Brian Bailie) of The Best of Independent Rhetoric and Composition Journals. He has recently been appointed Editor of the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series, published by CCCC. Currently, he is working on a book project titled Composition and Democracy. To contact, please write @StephenJParks or through stephenjparks.com.