

# FORUM: Views from the Field

## The Work of Boundary-Crossing in a Community-Engaged Literacy Course

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Writing for *College English* in 2000, Parks and Goldblatt encouraged writing administrators and teachers to make room for “writing instruction and literacy research beyond university boundaries” (p. 585). The Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus (LNBC), a second-level writing and research course in the Department of English at Ohio State University, illustrates the challenges of writing and researching beyond university boundaries. In this unique section of a required General Education (GE) writing and research course, undergraduates collect and preserve literacy narratives from members of local Black communities, which have included Black church members; poets; educators; immigrants; visual artists; dancers; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual

activists, among others. These literacy narratives are preserved in the public Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives. At a final community sharing night, students present a digitally curated exhibit of their collected interviews for an audience of community members and university affiliates. The guiding philosophy of LNBC is that as students gather, analyze, archive, and curate first-hand stories and insights from Black community members, they broaden their—and our—understanding of what literacy is and does. Moreover, instead of relying on traditional academic sources as the primary drivers of intellectual thought and research, this course foregrounds communal knowledge-making.

Since 2010, the LNBC course has demonstrated how asking students to move

"beyond university boundaries" complicates the work of the college literacy classroom. The various political, social, and logistical dynamics of a community-engaged literacy course raise questions about the work that can or should be done in a GE writing and research course. In this piece, we offer initial insights about engaging students in community-based literacy work from our ongoing study of the LNBC course. Drawing primarily on student interviews, we suggest that crossing boundaries in community-engaged courses challenges students to re-think their expectations regarding the work of writing and writing classes. The LNBC course complicates the role of work and its relationship to boundaries, as students are charged with crossing and connecting the boundaries of the traditional college classroom and the community space—a geographical and, for some, a cultural and psychological boundary. Enrolled in a predominantly white institution with a 5.7% African-American population, most of the students in the various sections of LNBC, while diverse, are not African-American. These students literally travel within and across urban, Black spaces in which they most likely are considered "other"—crossing racial, ethnic, and age boundaries. Moving from the predominantly white spaces of the traditional OSU writing classrooms to Black, urban spaces to collect literacy narratives becomes not just a process that students must negotiate to do the literacy work of the course—it is a major part of the work itself.

Students must take on this work from wherever they are in thinking about race and literacy (if they think about race at all) and wherever they are culturally, socially, and intellectually. One student represented the views of many when he stated that "so I don't think I've ever interacted with them [Black people] outside of maybe on paper. Like seeing them or reading about them kind of thing. Which is also kind of rare." For many students, this lack of experience working with Black people makes the work valuable yet

tension-filled or even fearful. How does a 20-year-old white student from rural Ohio learn to ride the bus from campus to Black neighborhoods, locate and set up interviews with local Black visual artists in a city ten times larger than her hometown? How does an international student whose first and second languages are not English prepare an interview script and then conduct that interview with elderly Black Americans in a predominantly black nursing home? Adding to the tension, how do these students who represent a university that has such a large presence in the city, yet a somewhat checkered relationship with Black Columbus, create enough trust for reticent community members to even agree to an interview and trust these outsiders with their stories?

Although the tensions make boundary crossing challenging for some, these tensions make the course especially appealing to others. One student, when discussing her involvement in the course and what she learned about Columbus' Black dance community, states, "And me being a dancer as well and hearing their stories and how they got enthused to wanting to dance and pursuing that, I was like 'Oh my gosh that's me, too.' So, we fed off each other." This international student connected her interests and passions with those of her interviewees, creating a space of shared interest and blurred boundaries. This student continues, "You don't know what you don't know. So knowing that there are so many groups out there that are so embedded in black dance, African Culture dance, I was just very enthused. I was like 'This is beautiful. This is so dope.'" It would be wonderful to end here with this student finding the work of researching and composing across difference to be the kind of challenge she was ready to take on, to be "so dope." Yet, we know that crossing these geographical, cultural, and psychological boundaries of composing for, about, with, and sometimes in unfamiliar racialized spaces can cause anxieties and leave students unable to do their best work (Deans, 2000).

In addition to navigating the tensions associated with traveling in unfamiliar racialized spaces, students also had to negotiate the challenges that came with collaboratively composing digital media for an audience of community members. In the LNBC course, students work in groups to select excerpts from the collected literacy narratives to place into a digital artifact, which usually—though not always—takes the form of an iMovie. The interviewed students report they were surprised by the work constraints of creating a digital production as the final course project, rather than a more traditional academic research paper. One student notes that unlike an academic research paper, which often emphasizes the voice of the student composing the project, her group’s digital project foregrounded the stories and experiences of others: “It’s like you are direct quoting people the entire time. You’re not really inserting your own fluff words.” Further highlighting the differences between traditional research essays and digital media compositions, another student describes an “obligation to show the story in a magnificent way,” which involved the inclusion of music that “correlated with everything [the students] put together.” Often, students struggle with choosing music to fit the group’s theme, identifying representative video clips, and depicting community members’ stories fairly; moreover, the Sharing Night encourages students to think carefully about how they represent community members’ literacy stories, in words, music, and images.

The challenges students identify with negotiating racialized spaces and composing a digital exhibit centering and celebrating community members’ voices point to questions about the nature of work in college literacy classrooms:

- How do we, as teachers, account for the student labor of boundary crossings when we support and assess their work?
- How does the shift from traditional classroom spaces to community spaces

disrupt students’ view of where the work of composing takes place?

- How does the nature of composition and literacy work change when expertise is located in underrepresented communities rather than traditional university sites?

Despite the challenges and tensions associated with the course, the enthusiasm of many students who have taken the course and instructors who have taught it suggest to us that these are questions worth interrogating. Pursuing literacy work beyond the boundaries of traditional college classrooms and curricula requires students to experience and grapple with discomfort. We find that discomfort productive, and we want to recognize and celebrate it as pedagogically generative.

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# To Work: Naming, Acting On, and Modifying in the College Literacy "Classroom"

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As our worlds become immersed in the digital, as literacies become enacted by the digital, as learning becomes appended to the digital, and as our work spans the thresholds of the digital, the college literacy classroom transforms from a defined place of inoculation to comprehensive spaces for rhetorical action. For many of us in writing or literacy studies, our work entails promoting multiple literacies in the classroom, across campus, and for a lifetime. As such, we must continue to re-examine what constitutes literate practices, especially in the work of higher education, to develop rhetorical tools and strategies for literacy as lifelong learning.

Literacy is rhetorical. Literacy is making considered choices, and classrooms should mirror and model these activities. Since literacy is never simply reading or writing, literacy is better understood in the classroom as literate practices: the results of the complex interactions among writer(s), readers, texts, and contexts (Brandt, 2011; Selber, 2004). And since these practices are both cognitive and social (Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, & Rose, 2001), we can easily create classroom spaces that encourage more collaborative activities, privilege informal and situated learning, and promote decision-making, student self-monitoring, and lifelong learning—all features of literate practices. Unfortunately, in many departments and programs across the country, course development follows a traditional knowing-what approach. This means courses

are distinguished by how much you know, with pathways to knowledge approved from the top down and enforced through a series of prerequisites and program-approved gateways. In direct opposition to this traditional approach, I would like to briefly describe classroom practices that encourage a more collaborative approach, privilege informal and situated learning, and promote ubiquitous and lifelong learning, thereby increasing learner control, learner choice, and learner independence.

In my mind, any course or program that promotes literacy or literacies must account for different students with different skill sets and different experiences when they physically walk in the door or virtually log in. We must create classrooms that build from where each student is, to engage each of them in the middle of their own conversations in order to help them more effectively join in the middle of already-ongoing disciplinary conversations. In other words, literacy and literate practices are context-specific and context-dependent, so students in the classroom should learn how to be sensitive to the ways they will engage and contribute to the larger ongoing discourses in which they wish to participate. We interact orally, graphically, and visually in specific ways for specific purposes. Thinking of literacy in this way clarifies that a primary goal of our courses and our classrooms should be to help students develop the skills, tools, and habits of mind necessary for

successful literate practice at the university and beyond.

In order for students to do all this, I offer a project template we use in our Professional Writing program (see Figure 1). Our frame-

practices. We want students to personalize their experience with the project, to develop from where they are, currently, in their thinking and skill levels. Less obviously, but perhaps more importantly, literacy should be

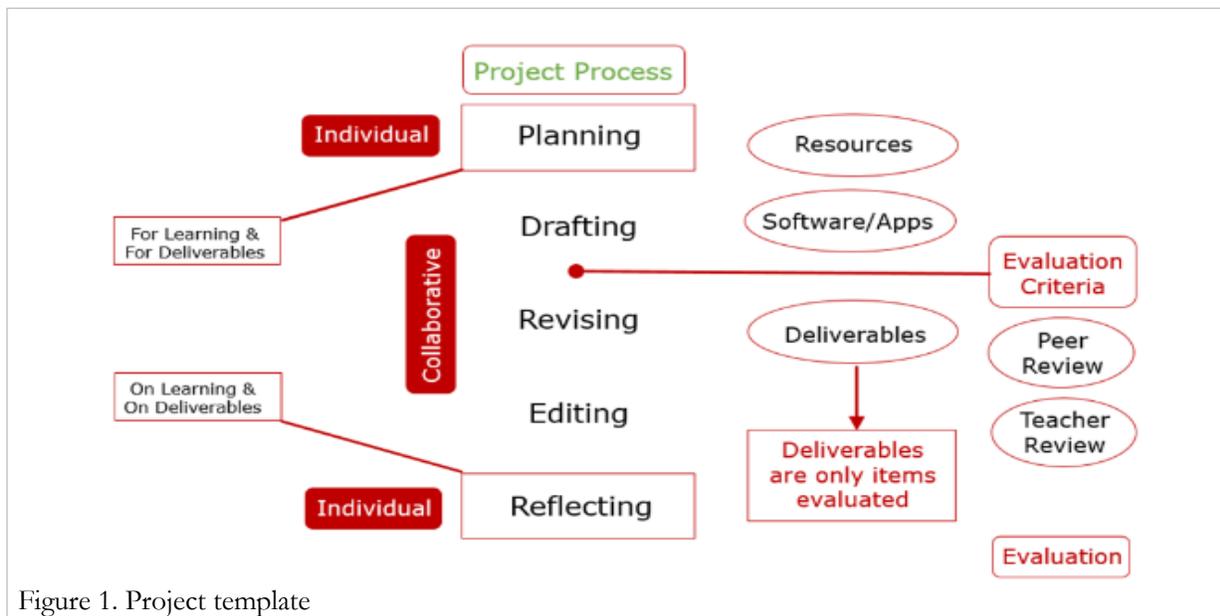


Figure 1. Project template

work begins with a minimal amount of readings and resources to get students started toward achieving the initial project aims. I use the word “initial” quite consciously because it forces us to build in the time necessary for students to work, to play, to make mistakes, to share, to collaborate: in other words, to learn. We see our projects, like students’ learning, as developmental and recursive, as evolving through the stages represented in this graphic, but we expect the progress to be recursive, not linear: learners move back and forth among the stages as they work toward submission of project deliverables.

We believe strongly that literacy is social practice, so we want students to engage with the class, to share knowledge and ask questions, to be sensitive to their own learning needs while, at the same time, contributing to the larger ongoing conversations. This open atmosphere helps students learn about and learn how to choose and use a wide range of strategies that will aid in their critical learning and reflective literate

understood in the sense that individuals never fully master it or develop to a point where literacy is automatic. They learn for a lifetime; therefore, literacy is best understood as conscious and considered. By promoting an open and collaborative environment, one that encourages and rewards sharing, experimentation, and personalization, we find our students genuinely interested in helping one another learn.

In order for a project to resonate with students’ lives and imagined futures, it should be student-driven. We expect students to take control of the projects and develop them to fit their learning goals. In all of the projects, every student contributes resources, such as readings, but they also use and review software or apps that are relevant to a particular project and share their experiences with the rest of the class. This helps them define their own learning goals for building literacies and meeting the project aims. For us, this occurs most seamlessly in the planning stage and the reflecting stage, a time when

students can articulate what they want to learn and how they will do it. This requires our projects be purposeful and have meaning for the students. Students need to engage with the work, even if it's purely for their own reasons, so they can feel like they are accomplishing things or doing something to learn for themselves. More importantly, student work should not be limited to or defined as just the deliverables, which are merely artifacts for a course rather than models for lifelong learning.

These early stages help students explore and establish a context for the project so they understand it well enough to begin to discuss how their work should be evaluated, for we develop the evaluation criteria as a class. This includes an explicit understanding that part of their reflection should address the ways that they have met the criteria relative to their own learning goals for the project. Once evaluation criteria are negotiated and agreed upon, drafts of the deliverables can be completed for the first time. On this side of the project, student work should go through multiple iterations. We might characterize these iterations as lower-order or higher-order: in writing, the difference between line edits and revisions; in reading, the difference between understanding a word and understanding a concept. In practice, this might mean working in small groups with peers, working in small groups with the teacher, or working in large groups with the teacher. Again, we must provide the time to allow individual students to make their own connections in order to feel a sense of accomplishment. The goal here is to model the recursivity of learning, to encourage trust in multiple perspectives, and to allow for the time necessary to develop quality thought.

Finally, we are adamant that only the deliverables for a project be evaluated. Real success in the literacy classroom, for us, comes when the majority of the work is participatory, a contribution to each student's own learning and to the learning of their classmates. To reiterate one more time, the key to all of this is time. We have to be patient

and provide the time for students to explore, the time to experiment, and the time to fail, before they make the move to final insights. If a teacher is primarily concerned with coverage, then real learning—and learning in the future—will suffer.

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# Remediation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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One of the first articles I read when I started teaching developmental courses was Mina Shaughnessy's (1976) "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing." At the time, I took the article as the title suggested: as an introduction to basic writing, the students I would teach and, perhaps, some of the challenges and difficulties I would face. Many years later, I read this article with a much different perspective. Knowing very well that developmental students are often placed on a scale of development, Shaughnessy suggests that a scale for developmental education teachers would be insightful and could show the progress teachers can make through their teaching career. This scale is in response to her experiences and observations and includes four stages, all of which include a "metaphor intended to suggest what lies at the center of the teacher's emotional energy during that stage" (p. 234). I'm revisiting her article now because I've seen a shift in the students I teach and realize I need to work to not just understand my current students but ensure that I am understanding my role and responsibilities as their developmental education instructor.

The first stage, *GUARDING THE TOWER*, positioned the teacher as the guard protecting the academy while negotiating with preconceptions of the students and their chance for succeeding in such an institution. During this stage, teachers may begin to see and experience some of the difficulties of their students but, in order to protect the academy and themselves, they hold the same expectations and do not adjust their

pedagogies. In the second stage, *CONVERTING THE NATIVES*, teachers realize there are students who have the potential to "catch up" (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 235), and they set out to reach these students and help fill their educational void. Once they realize that perhaps these students find the topics difficult and that not all students retain and understand information at the same pace, teachers move to the third stage, *SOUNDING THE DEPTHS*. In this stage, teachers begin to process the difficulties their students are having with writing and begin to think about them on different levels. The focus moves away from the specific errors students are making to the reasons and processes behind those errors. The fourth and final stage is *DIVING IN*. This stage emphasizes that teachers who have made it this far, who have advanced in the rough prior stages and are still in the profession of teaching basic writers, have important choices to make. These choices require the teacher to not only think about themselves but also about their students. It is in this stage, where, I believe, the "work" of the classroom changes and transforms and ultimately has the biggest impact on the learners—in this case, both the students and teacher.

When teachers "dive in," Shaughnessy (1976) suggests they have to make cognitive and pedagogical changes that would not only benefit themselves as educators, but their students as well. She highlights this difficulty by suggesting that teachers in the diving in stage must have determination and courage to

continue to make the “decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (p. 238). In effect, she is challenging all teachers to take into consideration the background and experiences of their students, as well as the knowledge they gain from these various lived differences. Shaughnessy (1976) suggests that teachers need to spend more time getting to know their students—their lives, their experiences—and then use this information to help them succeed. I’ve spent years “working” and learning about and from my students. I’ve gone through Shaughnessy’s different stages—at times working through the stages in the linear movement I believe they were intended, but at other times falling back into a prior stage making Shaughnessy’s scale more of a recursive process. I would find myself making pedagogical strides only to be pushed back to a prior stage when something failed, like when I questioned student’s ability or questioned my own beliefs on the importance of developmental education.

As Shaughnessy (1976) recommends, educators need to remediate themselves. As I reflect on what has worked to help me achieve and maintain the diving in status of teaching, I can’t help but think about what I have learned—and continue to learn—about my students and their learning processes. I keep coming back to two learning theories I was introduced to early in my career but have different meanings for me today: schema theory and social learning theory. First, it is imperative that educators understand what students know so that they can connect that information to new knowledge. McGuire (2015) explains that all students bring prior knowledge and experiences to the classroom. This knowledge and these experiences can help or hinder learning depending on the accuracy, appropriateness, and completeness. Unfortunately, the experiences and background knowledge students need in order to make sense of and navigate through the

topics and texts explored within their college courses is often not sufficient. Without the proper background knowledge and schema, students meaning-making and learning processes are often not as fluent. Since background knowledge and schema are directly tied to learning and meaning-making (Kucer, 2014; VanderLind, 2018), modeling and providing students with opportunities to further develop in this area are necessary for more successful outcomes within the college classroom. Spending more time preparing my students for an assignment through acquiring essential background knowledge not only increases comprehension but can increase motivation and retention as well.

Second, my view on social learning theory has changed considerably throughout my teaching career. When first introduced to Bandura (1977) and his work, I appreciated the idea of student-centered learning and the importance of social interaction. These ideas continue to drive my pedagogical choices; however, in light of digital literacies and technologies in which students are immersed today, I have found the importance of observational learning, the act of modeling, and exhibiting self-efficacy as vital for understanding their learning processes. As reported, students spend a considerable amount of time with technology (Smith, Raine & Zickuhr, 2011; Williams, 2008). Since they have the desire and motivation to learn about and use technology, it’s important to look at their technological experiences and make connections between and among those learning processes. Today’s students are accustomed to learning from others through the use of observation and modeling. They perhaps choose technology over these more traditional educational experiences because they feel more confident with that choice and are often more successful. Technology has changed everyone’s learning processes and the way we receive and acquire new information. Understanding these changes in my students is necessary for successful remediation of my teaching beliefs and practices.

No more should we look at students as lacking or deficient. Instead, we should look at ourselves as teachers and realize that we have a lot to learn about ourselves and our students. These ideas put into perspective one of Shaughnessy's (1976) main claims about developmental education. That is, when we, as teachers, make the effort to learn more about our students "we begin to see that the greatest barrier to our work with them is our ignorance of them and of the very subject we have contracted to teach" (p. 238).

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# “Work” as Taking and Making Place

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**Joanne:** A second-generation Filipina-American in her mid-30s, my academic experience began in 1998 and was punctuated by repeated failures, with long stints in corporate America. Originally a STEM major, I understand work happens only when the force of friction that prevented the movement of an object is overcome, thereby causing the object to move ( $W=F_s\Delta d$ ).

There are experiences that illustrate this scenario. The mindset that everything valuable comes from academia frames the student simply as a receiver of knowledge. This reality is intensified by racist and discriminatory environments that exist in varying degrees on most campuses across the U.S. My voice in these spaces highlights hidden frictions by removing layers of generations of dominant narrative. Here, the Force of Static Friction ( $F_s$ ) that prevented these mindsets from moving could be defined another way:  $F_s=\mu_sN$ , where  $N$  is the number of students who supposedly don't complain about these behaviors, and  $\mu_s$  represents the stickiness of pedagogical systems, reward structures, and hegemonic reinforcements encouraging the internalization and repetition of those practices.

But through recent encounters with some professors, I learned that my knowledges and experiences bring value to academia. These encounters repositioned me as a co-contributor instead of only a consumer on campus; I saw my professors as possible partners in learning. I disrupt the equilibrium of the academy by challenging others to think differently in classrooms or in administrative meetings where I've advocated for myself. I've leveraged the knowledges gained through my experiences to work against injustices I see in class and on campus by introducing my voice, stories, and perspectives typically unheard in Predominantly White Institutional spaces. My perspectives will not be part of the ignored! Instead, my voice reduces  $N$  and slowly erodes elements of  $\mu_s$  so that  $F_s$  can be overcome: work is accomplished.

The shift from “everything valuable comes from academia” to “I bring value to academia” is evidence of the work done in me. Whenever different experiences and perspectives are considered, the predominant narrative is questioned, a mindset is moved, and work is done. If folks are willing to consider the realities and histories of others, work can happen.

**Romeo and Christie:** At the University of Utah, we regularly teach courses in which the majority of students are white Utahns. When these students are asked to undertake critiques of place-and-people(s)-based stories—stories linked to race, religion, and settler colonialism—they often articulate responses grounded in claims of local innocence, of not-in-Utahism. Should we read the resistance that emerges in classroom interactions as problematic? Or, should resistance be understood and approached as a condition of possibility generated by the presence of relations and the opportunity for those relations to go to work? We turn to a classroom moment in which we borrow from Joanne’s physics-based discussion of work and the concept of friction as theorized by Anna Tsing (2005). Tsing unveils the grip that interactions and exchanges can have on the circulations and flow of power, as well as the possibility of friction to co-produce knowledges and meanings.

**Romeo:** In fall 2017, racist flyers were posted on our campus the week before classes started. I was teaching an intermediate writing course. It was a majority white class, and all students were either from or had strong roots in Utah. I decided to begin with the flyers. We’d focus on how the university responded and what sense of responsibility we had to address racism on campus and in Utah. However, there was a literacy at work for some students: “We didn’t know that still happens.” Resistance became more explicit as I tasked them to study—by recording, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting—the rhetorical work of storytelling and stories of/about us. Resistance was generated because their foundations were being challenged by new stories entering their lives. But herein lay the potential for work, the grip between their stories, bodies, and knowledges and mine, to produce new movement and energy. I wanted them to know that stories, like place, are not fixed; that they can re-make both.

One of the prospects of the work of literacy and rhetorical instruction is a wearing down of foundations via friction. The possibility of new stories is what we seek out in our Department of Writing & Rhetoric Studies. So, I invited my colleagues Christie Toth and Jon Stone to visit my class. They teach about local religious rhetorics of settler colonialism, and they are familiar with some of the literacies flowing through these communities. I hoped their engagement with place-and-people(s)-based stories in Utah would introduce a new and generative kind of friction.

**Christie:** When the flyers appeared, our faculty responded by composing an anti-racism statement to be hung throughout the department, a counter-flyering we hoped would do rhetorical work. “We value the many ways of speaking, writing, and being that students and faculty bring to our classrooms,” it said. “We commit to engaging in teaching, learning, and scholarship that strengthens our communities beyond the university.” During our visit to Romeo’s class, Jon and I made three moves we hoped would generate friction. We modeled willingness as white people to interrogate the place-and-people(s)-based stories in our own heritages. We showed a video I made with students reflecting on settler colonial rhetorics at a local public memory place. Finally, I shared a friend’s essay about the violent hate crime he experienced in Salt Lake City. We hoped these stories would disrupt the flow of not-in-Utahism.

**Romeo and Christie:** The future of literacy instruction must have co-worker relations and co-working opportunities as consubstantial to conceptions of work. Without such my semester might have turned out differently. Students may not have asked to write blogs on white privilege, chosen to present on racism in Utah, and/or engaged in dialogue with students who truly did resist. The future, both of the academy and the classroom, must foreground students’ understanding of work. Friction, perhaps,

affords us a pedagogical concept for such work. To model the kind of work we envision, we close with one more student narrative.

**Claudia:** As a student of color, I wonder if the work I put in, of speaking back to the academy, actually matters? Speaking back creates a type of friction. But will I be heard? So, who benefits? I think about the anti-racist and white-supremacist document signed by faculty. It is displayed on faculty doors and at the entrance of the department. Despite the absence of student input, it suggests that this space is inclusive and liberal. I often wonder if the creation of the document is business as usual. So, who is responsible for putting in the work, beyond words on paper, of keeping the department accountable? These questions are central because students like me continue to experience racism in college literacy classrooms. And yet, the academy has created a systematic culture that teaches students to see activism as a call to responsibility. Activism, which overwhelmingly tends to rely upon students of color, cannot save us from oppression. It can create friction that can result in more equitable environments.

Despite feelings of skepticism, I continue to put in work, which brings me to the topic of the department's Writing Center (WC) and the ways in which it has overtly and obscurely fostered racism. The word center translates into a space, place, locus, and/or core. A student's rhetorical agency over their bodies is automatically reduced by having to go or move to a space determined by the institution to be the place where students have access to literacy instruction. No matter the pedagogical approach to tutoring, then, there is a form of management and control over student bodies. What if there were no place and no center that provides writing services? My work has involved developing a "Mobile Writing and Reading Assistance" student service. It breaks from a fixed space where literacy work takes and makes place and shifts to a model for and by students. This work, however, would not be possible if not for: (1) my own experiences

as a student of color working within this WC, and (2) co-worker relations with faculty that inspired co-working opportunities within and beyond the literacy classroom.

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# What Literacy Faculty Should Know and Be Able to Do: Reading as Literacy Work

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Teaching writing and/or leading a writing program can seem like a huge undertaking in combination with teaching reading: few faculty members with degrees in English feel prepared for the reading component of literacy work. Reading, however, is one area of theory and practice that is commonly neglected and urgently needed as preparation for literacy work. Carillo's (2015) recent study of current English/writing studies faculty suggests half of the 100 instructors in her survey said they felt they lack the training and background to help students become effective, efficient, critical readers (p. 32). She also cites David Jolliffe, who says that faculty do "not have access to ample resources to help them think about a model of active constructive reading in the courses or about strategies for putting that model into play" (2007, p. 478). While Carillo's survey is admittedly preliminary, it offers a sense that graduate students and current faculty who hold degrees in writing studies and related areas are not able to work on reading in literacy classrooms.

A further problem is that students' reading abilities are not as strong as they could be and should be. There is a growing pile of evidence for this claim from both quantitative and qualitative studies. Standardized tests, admittedly focused on short passages of text read under timed conditions and calling for multiple choice responses, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015) and ACT (2006, 2017) all show that

less than half of students entering college have the reading abilities they need to be successful. Moreover, those numbers are declining. Qualitative studies like the Citation Project (Jamieson & Howard, 2016) point to students' difficulties reading sources and using them appropriately in their own work. Students' skills online are also poor in terms of both searching and critical reading of materials they do find, as indicated by the untimed Project SAILS (2009) and iSkills (Katz, 2007) tests. The more recent work of the Stanford History Education Group (Wineburg et al., 2016) shows that something like 50-80% of the middle school, high school and college students had an "appalling" inability to judge sources on these kinds of tasks:

- (1) Article Evaluation: In an open web search, students decide if a website can be trusted;
- (2) Research a Claim: Students search online to verify a claim about a controversial topic;
- (3) Website Reliability: Students determine whether a partisan site is trustworthy;
- (4) Social Media Video: Students watch an online video and identify its strengths and weaknesses;
- (5) Claims on Social Media: Students read a tweet and explain why it might or might not be a useful source of information. (p. 6)

The Stanford researchers collected almost 8,000 student responses to tasks like these for students at the different educational levels. It

should be clear from both quantitative and qualitative studies that many students need serious help with reading.

Given the lack of faculty preparation in the teaching of reading and the need for better reading ability among students, the following set of outcomes—loosely modeled on the WPA Outcomes Statement (Council, 2014)—can help to shape both graduate programs and faculty development initiatives.

1. Faculty and graduate students in English/writing studies should themselves get help with their own reading and critical evaluation skills, including the ability to read efficiently and effectively, as well as the ability to analyze and synthesize a variety of different texts in the full range of venues.

Most of us would like to think we are capable readers; loving reading is part of why most English teachers have chosen their careers. Still, sharpening skills, especially in critical evaluation, is certainly warranted. An easy way to help students in time-pressed courses is for instructors to read aloud from material they have assigned and provide think-aloud commentary on their own reading strategies. Students often find this commentary revelatory. This strategy, however, demands that teachers tune up their own reading abilities before sharing with students.

2. Faculty and graduate students with training in teaching writing should have repeated opportunities to develop skills in critical reading and thinking, including the ability to evaluate texts for authority, accuracy, currency, relevancy, bias, and appropriateness. These opportunities should be provided in every graduate course or degree program and in professional development for current faculty doing literacy work.

This outcome puts some of the burden on graduate programs in writing studies to take two specific steps. First, a course in both developmental and critical reading pedagogy should be a requirement in every program.

Second, graduate faculty should themselves be trained in teaching critical reading techniques they can use in their own classrooms to improve graduate students' reading abilities across the whole program. In addition, above and beyond graduate programs, current faculty doing front-line literacy work should be offered professional development opportunities to develop their own reading skills and to learn classroom techniques for improving reading among all students.

3. Faculty and graduate students should be trained to teach reading along with writing and should practice this teaching as a collaborative enterprise above and beyond formal training. There are “ample resources” per Jolliffe (2007) for this training as well as assorted experts, online resources (the Global Society for Online Literacy Educators' webinars, for example), and support from librarians to achieve this outcome.

As more and more of our lives and our instructional venues move online, there is ongoing need for critical reading for everyone. Students seem to have the most trouble seeing bias; it might be true that all readers have trouble seeing bias if they rarely see, hear, or read material that offers a point of view very different from their own. I have suggested that students who have access to cable news watch Fox News if their ordinarily preferred channel is MSNBC, and vice versa. This exercise will surely expose them to readily accessible forms of bias. But reading thoroughly and critically takes specific, focused effort beyond such a superficial activity. The library faculty on every campus are thoroughly engaged in and committed to this kind of work, as demonstrated by the Association of College and Research Librarians' (2016) recently revised *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* document. Literacy workers at all levels should be working in regular collaboration with librarians to improve critical literacy for all students.

Literacy work is more important than ever

before in our current political, social, and economic environment. Helping students become critical thinkers will help them move toward developing expertise in critical reading and writing needed for full participation in a democratic society. Front-line literacy workers—that is, the graduate students and faculty whose main professional focus is reading and writing—bear the main responsibility to achieve this goal.

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#### Author's Note

An extended discussion of these issues will appear in the *Canadian Journal for Studies in Discourse and Writing* later in 2019.

# The Sky is Falling

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Educational skepticism is healthy, but when skeptics question the value of developmental education and find evidence to support its devaluation and demise, we must consider the reliability of their claims (Goudas & Boylan, 2012). Skeptics embrace the mistaken belief that developmental education is not working (Boatman & Long, 2017; Hodara & Xu, 2016; Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Xu, 2016). They consider time spent, direct cost, and psychological aspects as evidence of negative impact. They say we need to recreate another system and examine new data with the hope that this time it will prove differently. While they are cautiously optimistic their new plan will work, I remain skeptical of their evidence.

In a way, then, this piece is skeptical about developmental educational skepticism. Perhaps instead of thinking that what we do is not working, we need to reconsider what is needed and how success is interpreted (Goudas & Boylan, 2012). I admit that no one has all the answers. I know this because it has taken my entire career of more than 35 years as a developmental educator to come up with some plausible solutions, and I am still working on them. This piece serves not to share possible solutions, but instead to spotlight and value the real work that happens in developmental courses.

The essence of work in the developmental classroom is murky, complicated, and unpredictable. It deals with real people who have very real obstacles. Some skeptics say that the obstacles are too big and will take too long to address (Papay, Murnane, & Willett,

2016). They believe a speedier approach is needed so that no time or money is wasted. Other skeptics say to overlook the obstacles and mainstream developmental students with prepared students in credit bearing courses that really “count” (Boylan, Levine Brown, & Anthony, 2017). They say to offer additional support and somehow developmental students will magically progress as they model behaviors of the prepared students. Despite the evidence of what really works, or lack thereof, institutions’ quantifiable data do not hear the voices or the stories of the underprepared. It may be that what really works is undefinable. What works for one may not work for the masses because real people who have very real obstacles are undefinable. Their individual successes get lost in the data.

Teaching developmental students is extremely rewarding. Individual success may be limited when compared to prepared students but, when it happens, all the research in the world cannot refute the immeasurable feeling of students who finally believe that they can not only survive but thrive in academia. Overall, I think I have done a good job of working with developmental students. I feel good about the students I have reached. I have watched them blossom; yet, I know that, for these students, the credit goes to them. They are the ones who have had to embrace the success model and carry it forward. They are the ones who have learned resiliency from previous experiences and need to apply it here and now. The credit goes to others, too, faculty and staff who are involved in their

individual stories (Rose, 2015). These professionals have the intuitive ability to put students at ease, no matter the course, and help them truly believe that success is possible and then work tirelessly with them. When the skeptics say that the success numbers are too limited and that change is necessary, that we have not helped enough students to make it worth the effort to maintain these first-year developmental courses, I know the small numbers that are so readily ignored speak volumes.

Every student has a captivating story that offers a glimpse of the sociocultural and academic chaos from their past. Sometimes, even they do not know how to tell their story in a college setting. They come with individual, unread texts of themselves. They come with thirteen years of schooling that have left them with feelings of inadequacies. They are deemed at risk because of their past academic performance, incoming placement scores, and low literacy levels. They need time: time to acclimate, time to develop necessary literacy skills, time to believe in themselves, time to trust in the system that has failed them before, time to make connections with faculty, and time to embrace the success model and create a whole new identity (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Skeptics say we do not have enough time for all of this, that there is work to be done and we must focus solely on completion. Regardless, the faculty connections these students make help support their evolving identity and small snippets of growth begin to emerge—for some. For others, the connections combined with a strong, inviting environment are not enough, and some continue to have difficulties and need even more time.

Developmental students are extremely unpredictable. Because I do not always understand them, I try to capture some wisdom from written assignments and classroom behaviors in order to be able to define the undefinable. For many, it is a case of randomness.

Case one: A “random” kid. Robin (pseudonym) writes about her high school experience and she is clear about one thing. She feels like she does not fit in. She describes a high-school senior year activity where each student receives compliments from all the others in class. She is surprised when other people think she is a really good person and actually notice a “random kid” like her.

Case two: Collective randomness in my developmental class. The college culture is everywhere—logo headband, cap, t-shirt, sweatshirt, bag, and even earrings. They appear college ready; they look the part. Yet, as students, they are complex and mysterious; their literacy needs are diverse and multifaceted. Even so, the openness to transition into a successful student identity is apparent by their presence. As past behaviors are challenged, there is hope that I can help them blend into the complex community of college readers and writers.

First year developmental courses are filled with “random” kids. Even the skeptics will acknowledge this. But this randomness also adds a new dimension: their difficulties with school success are not solely literacy-related. They may have not yet mastered the art of reading and writing but they have also not yet mastered the art of success. If we ignore their randomness and only address their literacy needs, we make little progress. The data does not tell their full story. Their developing identities are fragile, and they need time to embrace what success really feels like (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Only with time will we learn their stories.

When the obstacles are undefinable and what works is undefinable, then measuring success becomes undefinable. First-year literacy courses work even when what works is undefinable. They familiarize underprepared students with the demanding expectations of college (Karp & Bork, 2014) within the confines of an accepting environment. As literacy skills and self-confidence build, insecurities melt away. Only then do students begin to trust the system and feel a sense of

belonging. The reality is that the sky isn't falling. Instead, the sky is the limit as these students create their successful school identities. I want to embrace their randomness and their inadequacies. This is the real work that happens in a developmental classroom.

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# The Spectrum of Service: Refocusing Academic Work through a Military Lens

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Put the welfare of the nation, the Army and your subordinates before your own. Selfless service is larger than just one person. . . . The basic building block of selfless service is the commitment of each team member to go a little further, endure a little longer, and look a little closer to see how he or she can add to the effort.

—*The U.S. Army Values*

Activities other than research and teaching...have little exchange value, no matter how highly they might be valued on an individual basis by fellow faculty, by administrators, or society...they generally appear under the ill-defined and seldom-rewarded category of “service” in promotion and tenure evaluations, a category to which the work of writing administrators is too often relegated.

—*Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration, Council of Writing Program Administrators*

In higher education, faculty, administrators, and students often use the term “work” casually: we go to work, we do our work, and we always have work left to finish. Thus, we appreciate the journal’s editors asking us to slow down and fully consider our work as instructors and scholars in the field of

composition studies. Here we explore what it means to approach work through the lens of service. While service is an essential component of academic work, we seldom explore how the two concepts inform one another. As a WPA and an Army veteran, we decided to join our unique notions of service to reconceptualize the term to highlight how service shapes our teaching and research. When we began collaborating, we found common ground in how we conceived of the “ethic of service” that shapes our work. Moreover, Dan’s military background influenced our thinking about where and how service fits into the work we do as compositionists. Much of our work is supported by a commitment to service, a term we understand to mean more than academic titles or the committees we sit on and goes beyond personal military aspirations. By refocusing service as central to knowledge production, we can newly theorize how ideas are generated, disseminated, and consumed in our field.

In *Terms of Work for Composition* (2000), Bruce Horner describes three conventions for using the term “work.” Horner regards work “simultaneously as an activity, the product of that activity, and the place of its practice” (p. xvii). In other words, work is located in our teaching practices, the writing we produce,

and our institutions and classrooms. Further, when instructors and students meet in academic spaces, they collaboratively shape and define each other's work. We interrogated the relationship between service and work in our unique experiences to create a foundational definition for our collaboration as student and instructor. In supporting Dan as a graduate TA, Brenda wanted to understand and validate Dan's experiences as a soldier, including the literacies he developed during his service. By identifying service as a commonplace for our work, we could identify and understand our "ideological assumptions" about each other's work from a relative vantage point (Horner, 2000, p. 7).

To explore the relationship between work and service, we consulted texts that explicitly address the work of Writing Program Administrators, in part because service and work seem closely intertwined within administration. Linda Adler-Kassner's (2008) *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman's (2008) edited collection, *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*, and Susan H. McLeod's (2007) *Writing Program Administration* help us frame the work we do together, but these texts do not explore service. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg's (2015) edited collection, *Keywords in Writing Studies*, offers detailed discussions of thirty-six terms that shape the field, yet it also omits "service." In contrast, Horner (2000) highlights the commitments that become "lumped under 'service,'" a nebulous catch-all category for committee work, assessment, advising, and leadership positions (p. 2). As Horner suggests, service is hard to make concrete and to commodify, unlike the number of classes we teach or articles we publish. If service is an important part of our work—and we believe it is—understanding who and what we serve could further ground our teaching and scholarship. Each point on the academic triad—teaching, scholarship, and service—should equally inform each other as they constitute our work.

Positioning composition "on the border between the realms of the academic and the social" (Horner, 2000, p. 3) enables us to look outside the confines of our own discipline to understand how we work and serve. Military discourse may seem an unlikely reference point for academics seeking to understand their work, yet thousands of veteran students across the country certainly have much to teach faculty. In the introduction to their 2015 anthology, *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat explore the complex relationship between civilian faculty and veteran students on college campuses, noting that these individuals' "values overlap in significant ways" (p. 18). We see such an overlap with work and service. Military leaders compose lesson plans, teach, and reflect with new soldiers while maintaining effective communication through writing and speech—pedagogical tasks akin to teaching first-year writing. Further, the military's conception of service offers valuable insight as we consider the larger causes that can be served by written literacies. Service is an essential element of veterans' literacies, and by understanding what service means in this realm, faculty may be able to understand their own work differently.

If we regard our own service as carrying the same intellectual and emotional weight as teaching and research, we could develop a more resonant definition of work. Dan regards service as a value he established in the Army: viewing his new role within academia through service provides a sense of security and belonging for his military/service identity and adds rhetorical weight to his ethos. Further, when work has been emblazoned in service—work that is recognized, distinguished, and selfless—an ethical individual cannot help but always work with a higher level of determination. Similar to soldiers asking for the toughest missions, the best scholars pursue more demanding texts and work to achieve advanced knowledge in their fields. The parallel is not perfect, yet we can glean new meanings about work by

considering how servicemembers and scholars offer their training and expertise to their communities with an understanding that such work may require sacrificing one's personal life, time, and even money. In some ways, service is an individual choice and a selfless act, much like taking an oath of military service or the noble dedication to student learning. When work has been imbued with service, one cannot help but perform at a higher and more fulfilling level.

When we revised this piece on Veterans Day, which marked the 100th anniversary of the WWI armistice, we also celebrated Dan's third year as a veteran. Dan's conception of service became ingrained in him during the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. What remains is the shouting of a Drill Sergeant, someone who instilled a sense of pride in some soldiers for the first time in their lives by telling them to value the choice they made to serve and defend. A dedication to ideals can motivate those who serve and become the nucleus of service. Echoes of this experience influenced Dan as he noted Brenda's dedication towards his academic development, particularly in fostering the intersection of his military and scholarly work. She closely assessed his work, motivated him, and pushed him for deeper thinking and reflection. When mentoring drifted out of the classroom into office hour chats, walks across campus, and coffee shops, Dan made a connection: this is service, too.

As a non-commissioned officer, Dan was familiar with the time and effort involved in mentoring soldiers, an experience that contextualized how he understood Brenda's commitment to his academic work. From our own experiences, we see service as the vigilant polishing of one's scholarly ethos through committed praxis to one's students and field. Of course, the term service is far from neutral, as service carries echoes of volunteerism, altruism, and sacrifice—hence, the Army's use of the phrase “selfless service.” While we have begun to unpack the meaning of work and service, we also have

more thinking to do. Yet, we maintain that by exploring work through the lens of service, we might be able to elevate the work we do to an even higher standard, one that deserves greater merit and recognition.

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