Chapter 5. How Might Writing Programs Become Vital Resources to Communities?

To practice the central arguments of this book—that is, the importance of putting our community partner's gains first and how that changes our approaches to community-engaged writing—I have saved my discussion of student learning until the end. As a committed educator working at a Jesuit institution that requires rigorous ethical teaching and critical reflection, it has been a significant challenge to postpone this discussion. I suspect other writing teachers may find it just as challenging as well. This is, after all, the point. Our work and approaches to that work look different when we prioritize community partnerships.

Since 2010, I have formally and informally researched the program-level learning experiences and outcomes of the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative, the community writing program at my institution. Each year, based on teaching, peer, and partner evaluations as well as personal "field notes," I frame inquiry around student learning to ask questions such as the following:

- How can emerging communication technologies in the classroom be harnessed to embrace the public work of composition?
- How can those who teach and learn with emerging communication technologies design projects that extend beyond traditional curricular boundaries to become agents of social change?
- How might evaluation and assessment of such work cultivate a network of reciprocity within our local communities?

The questions that frame each chapter of this book arose out of the slow, informal, methodological inquiry of a particular community writing program, the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative, in its local context. I describe that inquiry in this chapter.

Study Description

While student, peer, and partner evaluations help shape the program and help assess outcomes at the program level, I wanted deeper insight into whether the desired learning outcomes were achieved at the individual level—I particularly wanted to know whether students' attitudes and beliefs changed due to working with community partners. Research indicates that "community-based methods emphasize civic and social responsibility while enacting principles of collective action such as dialogue, reflection, and advocacy as means for improving and contributing to public life" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 7). To delve deeper into student

learning, I asked this research question: Does working with community writing partnerships influence "agency"—students' ideas about their ability to act in and on the world in ways that relate to civic purposes?

To address this research question about agency, I opted for a pre-test/post-test model using surveys designed to provide qualitative feedback. The pre/post-test model provides a straightforward tool to systematically gather data about student learning—specifically to gain "better feedback about whether the intervention is working in the way you expected" (Clipperton et al., 2020, p. 2). Since the pre-test and post-test survey was completed as part of routine classroom activities, it was deemed exempt by the IRB board at my institution. It should be noted that a significant limitation of the pre-test/post-test design is that it cannot detect other possible causes of results. There was also no control group for comparison. At both the beginning and the end of the semester, I asked students to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs regarding civic agency, defined as ideas about one's ability to act in and on the world in ways that relate to civic purposes. The survey prompts consisted of open-ended questions:

- Are you prepared to participate in civic life (i.e., the public life of the citizen concerned with the affairs of a community)?
- Do you feel that you have the ability to influence an organization or work with your community partner to create lasting change?
- What fosters your beliefs about your ability or inability to influence an organization or create change?
- Will your experience working with community partners this semester motivate subsequent engagement, action, or behavior in your community or your life?

Findings

Analysis of the pre-test/post-test scores indicated that more than 80% of students felt their experience and learning in the course greatly influenced their attitudes and beliefs about their capacity to create change. Students indicated they learned how to take writing and emerging media beyond the personal, beyond entertainment, and into places for activism and social change by writing with and for organizations. Students worked side-by-side with community leaders who were fighting injustices, advancing the rights of marginalized populations, and amplifying underrepresented voices, and they indicated they learned skills to harness the power of writing and rhetoric for social change through working on projects alongside these community partners. Importantly, students noted that they gained new attitudes and perspectives while working with communities committed to making change.

The study findings on agency say much about what it means to take the lead to make positive change via emerging communication technologies. Taking the

lead means different things to different people. For some, it means learning how to become a social entrepreneur or an activist. For others, it means building skills in digital rhetoric (or researching how people communicate through digital discourse). For others, it means learning by doing—becoming active citizens who are empowered to act. The findings of this study fall into four main themes: design, community, power, and beliefs.

Design

Community partnerships changed the way students considered design as both a practice and an outcome. One student, Ariana M., reflected,

> I had initially assumed that people would instantaneously feel connected to a nonprofit because of their cause and the good work they do in the community—but it's really more than that. I learned that we weren't just promoting the cause—we were promoting the benefit of that cause to their multiple stakeholders.

Effective design strategically communicates the message with the community partner's core values and audience at heart. Through the community design process, students indicated they were able to understand how design can be a tool to fight systemic oppression and to work toward more equitable futures. Placed in the role of designers and design researchers, students noted they could see that what they created fostered specific values. They indicated they learned that design can be a vehicle for ethical action and transformative change.

Practically speaking, collaborating with community-based organizations is a way for students to gain real-world experience for their work with emerging media. As composition scholar Eva Brumberger (2013) noted, "For too many students, design experience is slim, and a community-based project may be their only opportunity for professional development in a given semester" (p. 114). Students can use community-based projects as opportunities to add work to their portfolios and add experience to their resumes. On a deeper level, students are also engaged in a design process that emphasizes equity and justice. As noted by the Creative Reaction Lab (2018), "Every design has an impact on equity, including the decisions we make in a community project, the blueprints created for a new building, and the policies implemented in our workplaces" (p. 11). Writing with communities helps students understand how design impacts others. Costanza-Chock (2020) has acknowledged that design processes are often "structured in ways that make it impossible to see, engage with, account for, or attempt to remedy the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens that they reproduce" (Introduction section). However, equity-based methods as used by students participating in the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative are able to ground student learning in complex intersectional considerations of gender, race, and class.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Students' attitudes and beliefs changed dramatically. Lauren K. indicated that

> collaborating with Life After Life challenged the perception I
> had of the justice system in our country being one that fights
> for fairness and equality, and it made me realize that it's actually
> one that is built on putting some people first and others last: that
> it's a system that favors the color of your skin, that it's a system
> that needs to be changed.

Significantly, students reported that working with community partners changed
what they "believed was possible." Students did not feel as "completely over-
whelmed" by the complexity of social issues but began to believe that they (just
one caring person within a community) could take action and make positive so-
cial change.

Importantly, students can gain new attitudes and perspectives while work-
ing with communities committed to making change. According to Shah (2020),
"Direct engagement can offer opportunities for college students to find meaning
in their academic work and learn from community members' stories, interpreta-
tions, and feedback" (p. 45). My study indicates community writing partnerships
help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to promote a
culture of change-making.

Community

Community-engaged teaching and learning changed the way students thought
about citizenship and their role in the community. As student Anna S. indicated,

> The trajectory of my future has changed after working with
> the community farmer's market. I have always wanted to make
> things, but now I know who I really want to make things with.
> What I want to do and also where I want to work has changed
> because of this course. I want to be with an organization that
> works towards improving a community through healthy eating.

Many students indicated the experience gave them a clearer idea of how they
"want to live life" and how their skills could "make a positive impact on the world."

In general, contemporary students place a high value on 21st-century litera-
cies—collective action, collective problem solving, and democratic processes that
are distributed and shared by all. Not only does the model of community-uni-
versity partnerships used by the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative build
21st-century literacy skills, it creates citizen-leaders with a social conscience. A
writing program's commitment to community-building and civic action offers
students opportunities to address immediate real-world issues. Other research-

ers' findings suggest that once students are involved with social purposes and issues larger than themselves, a civic ethic is fostered, which "can allow students to link their own self-interests with public concerns" (Eble & Gaillet, 2004, p. 351). For students, working closely with organizations with purpose-driven missions leads to a greater sense of participation, activism, and desire to pursue nonprofit or community-based work after college.

Power

Working alongside community partners changed the way students thought about power. As student Maggie T. reflected,

> This semester with Internews, we learned how South Sudan does not have many news outlets that provide reputable information due to the lack of technology access in the area. This kind of barrier creates misinformation for communities, especially during a global pandemic when access to trustworthy information is necessary. This experience has led me to be more thoughtful about my privilege and how I can work with marginalized and under-resourced communities through my own work.

In addition to acknowledging the knowledge, skills, and beliefs developed in class, students reported feeling empowered to keep addressing social issues after classes have ended.

Not only do students involved in community writing projects share power and decision-making with community partners, but they also see their work influence decision-making, mission statements, and policies at nonprofits and local organizations. Seeing that their work has value leads to more empowerment, capacity-building, and leadership development. Not only does the experience prepare students for the real world, but also it seems to "prepare students for changing the world" (Prell, 2003, p. 187).

Conclusion

How might writing programs become vital resources to communities? How do we see our research as a form of community building? What does it look like to center community building in our work? This book charts a path for engaging in a process that intentionally builds community through writing programs. There are many pathways to center community building in our work and our programs, each specific to local contexts and communities and each requiring more than just a shift in mindset. If we are committed to a process that builds community, it will require a continued reimagining of our approaches to program building—particularly our approaches to equity, our investment in intentional infrastructure, and our commitment to decolonial methods.

Equity-Based Approaches

As argued in the field's literature, community-engaged projects have historically benefitted the university at the expense of the community. As Jennifer Bay (2019) described, "Drive-by service-learning projects, un-usable or missing end products, publications that are not shared with community partners, and failed partnerships are plentiful in the literature on service-learning and community engagement" (p. 10). When we shift the focus to putting the community first and viewing our partnerships as a community-building enterprise, we can better commit to creating conditions for reciprocity and mutuality with our partners. An equity-based approach demands that we commit to a process that helps us consider how power, oppression, resistance, privilege, penalties, benefits, and harms are systematically designed into the very systems we want to change. A commitment to "equity requires us to redesign structures and processes to consciously redistribute power across role groups and institutions. Co-creation acknowledges that we build **with** and not **for** others—we invite, engage and design solutions and co-produce knowledge in partnership" (National Equity Project, n.d., We Believe section). Equity-based approaches to community writing, as detailed in Chapter 2, offer a flexible method for conducting with communities design research that can point us toward more just and equitable partnerships.

Infrastructural Approaches

In light of our history of inequitable partnerships, approaches to infrastructure need to be intentionally addressed. As discussed in Chapter 1, community-engaged initiatives and programs are frequently "sporadic, disconnected or redundant, supported by individual faculty, specific funding or fleeting leadership, without incentives for broad-based support or long-term institutional commitment" (Yates & Accardi, 2019, p. 6). When designing infrastructural approaches to community writing projects, not only do we need to consider how to share power and knowledge with our partners, we need to support the building of internal capacity from within our local communities. As John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight (1993) argued, "Outside resources will largely be wasted if the internal capacity of the community is not developed" (p. 376). In our work with community partners in inner-city Philadelphia, we have seen grassroots initiatives create resources from within—rather than rely on outside resources and assistance. For example, the West Philly Tool Library lends tools (donated by the community) to community members for home maintenance, repairs, and DIY projects, much as a book lending library operates. Another organization, Prevention Point, which began syringe services in North Philadelphia in 1991, now serves the community in various ways, including the provision of overdose prevention education, the distribution of naloxone, and the provision of housing, meals, and legal services. Instead of imposing new part-

nerships and programs on communities, we can ask how "existing centralized institutions can support local invention rather than act as the inventor" (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993, p. 372). We can imagine programs that are defined by their "capacity to respond to community," rather than manage, replicate and proliferate local initiatives" (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993, p. 372). Our efforts to build capacity from within communities will highlight those communities' "ability to shape their worlds through relational and collaborative tools and solutions (Escobar, 2018, p. 20).

Decolonial Approaches

Without a commitment to decolonial approaches in our partnerships, we risk the danger of contributing to the reproduction of systemic oppression. A focus on design that encompasses the impact (and the unintentional impact) behind an outcome creates pathways for us to consider the potential consequences of design and to recognize that we have significant accountability within the partnership. Even as we work to dismantle oppressive forces, we will still falter—such as when we put our agendas before the community's agenda, when we serve the status quo, and when we make unquestioned assumptions. Engaging in opportunities for continuous reflection and improvement, for humility, for recognizing where we may cause harm and where we made the wrong choices ultimately allows for a process of change and transformation to occur. Community writing needs approaches that will not privilege imperialist or university agendas; that will not further cause harm, oppress, or victimize our community partners; that will not privilege or rely on expert knowledge; and that will not attempt to control and codify knowledge and meaning-making practices in the name of progress. Writing partnerships can leverage community-building approaches to support local grassroots activism, decolonization efforts, co-resistance movements, and social change initiatives. By centering solidarity in our work, design can be "an ethical praxis of world-making" (Escobar, 2018, p. 313).

Community-building work is vital work. brown (2017) proposed that

> we can align our behavior, our structure and our movements with our visions of justice and liberation, and give those of us co-creating the future more options for working with each other and embodying the things we fight for — dignity, collective power, level generative conflict, and community. (p. 6)

The simple and straightforward question—*Are we engaging in a process that builds community?* —supports us as we work to honor and uphold the knowledges, dignity, strengths, and resources of our communities. Supporting community-led visions and grassroots organizing in our communities is the path toward transformative change. As the Highlander Research and Education Center (n.d.-a) has affirmed,

>Together, we will continue to spark radical imagination in our
work to manifest another world that we know is possible, where
our communities are transformed and our people are liberated.
The building of that world is underway, but its foundation will
not and cannot rest atop the roots of white supremacy. (para. 5)

The approaches illustrated in this book support us in doing that work—that
is, the work of moving away from colonized educational systems that privatize,
abstract, and codify knowledge and toward more grassroots, collaborative, and
place-based approaches to building bridges of understanding and support with
our local communities.