Introduction. Lesson (Still Not) Learned

On an October day, while attending a workshop at the Conference on Community Writing, a well-known scholar made a racially biased comment during her slide presentation. *Did she just say that?* I felt the tension creeping toward my neck. Ironically, the presenter's talk focused on social justice pedagogies and how she engages in writing projects in her community. I can't say whether the presenter knew how the comment came across to workshop participants. But the longer I sat there, the more uncomfortable I became with the statement and what I felt was my responsibility to address it. While I tried to refocus my attention on the talk, the comment had done its work. Although it had not been openly hostile or even intentional, its words had a quieter effect. They made me perceive the presenter as sheltered, privileged, ensconced in the ivory tower, as someone with a touch of a savior complex—not the effect we are going for as scholars having a conversation about social justice and community writing. Regrettably, I didn't speak up. *Should I interrupt the talk to discuss what she said? Will I appear overly righteous? More than 20 minutes have passed; it's just too late.*

Another workshop participant—coincidentally, a former Writing Studies graduate student of mine and the only Black woman in the room—eventually did speak up. As we gathered around a table for a workshop activity, she gracefully brought up to the group the presenter's comment. It hung there above the table for a startling moment. Then the denials began. Unfortunately, the presenter did not stop to listen and consider what the workshop participant had to say. Instead, the presenter steadfastly "doubled down," with no acknowledgment of the potential harm done. This dismissal (and I'm guessing here) was likely an all-too-human defense mechanism to save face. No doubt, the participant's comment, however congenially delivered, didn't fit with the presenter's self-perceived identity—how she saw herself as a person in the world. The other co-presenters corralled around her—each dismissing any possibility of guilt or harm done. This is another related issue: we are not always aware of our blinders or our blunders. Even when someone tries to inform us collegially, we might not be able to hear it. I imagine that this issue is even more complicated if social justice and community engagement issues are a large part of our position as scholars. This tendency can be attributed, at least in part, to confirmation bias, "the tendency for people to embrace information that supports their beliefs and reject information that contradicts them" (Kolbert, 2017).

I've rehearsed how it could have gone differently. During the presentation, I could have found the courage to say, "I'm curious about the use of 'the comment,' can you tell us more about that?" That might have loosened up a generative conversation with the group. It could have invited people to share their insights and perspectives about who might be harmed by the comment or whose experience

could have been minimized. It could have been an opening for them to share how the statement affected them and how to imagine other, more helpful ways to frame ideas or think about what language we might want to use in the future as a community of scholars and writing teachers. When confronted by the workshop participant, the presenter (or any of her co-presenters) could have deferred judgment in favor of understanding. They could have validated her experience. They could have listened with compassion. There could have been a productive conversation to invite not just a teaching moment but also a community-building moment for us as a field. It didn't happen, and I know that at least two of us, consequently, felt even more uncomfortable while gathered around the table. Ideally, the workshop participant shouldn't have had to speak up. While I am grateful that she did, she shouldn't have had to shoulder that work alone. This incident left her insulted twice over. For her, the conference room had become a hostile environment that protected whiteness. And I'm not sure the audience even noticed. This incident left me seriously wondering about the harm we might be doing regularly—without even being aware.

Asking "How am I doing harm?" or "How are we doing harm?" is tricky and humbling. It's a question we must address in our IRBs, in our evaluations, in our classrooms, and in working with communities. An honest reckoning with this question is more complex than I would like to admit, as I hope this story illustrates. This is a story that is happening everywhere, and it could have been almost any of us standing up there that day in front of the data projector. It probably has been us. I want to show, through this anecdote, how self-interested, insulated, and colonizing we in academia can be—even unwittingly. Despite touting current social justice pedagogies and anti-racist and decolonial methods, we may enact the very thing we are fighting against without even realizing it. I'm not recounting this story to induce guilt and self-reproach. I want us to be realistic about the fact that we are still living and working within oppressive systems. Nowhere is this awareness more critical than in working with community partners. Probably like you, I'm invested in social justice and working with historically underinvested communities. And possibly like you, I've carried my unintentional baggage and colonizing behaviors beyond the classroom walls and into the community—even while trying not to. This book is about working together toward designing more intentional, more equitable partnerships. It attempts to answer the question "What does it look like to center equity and social justice in our community writing work?"

Justice by Design

This book is about equity-based approaches to writing and designing with communities—methods that have grown from theory and practice within the field. Without a commitment to equity-based and decolonial approaches in our community-engaged writing partnerships, we risk the danger of contributing to the reproduction of systemic oppression. As the opening anecdote illustrates, it's all

too easy to be unaware of the harm we might cause. It's all too easy to uphold the status quo and carry out the inequity designed into our systems and institutions—probably even into our own writing programs. If we haven't done the work to understand how to create more inclusive and equitable outcomes with community partners, we are inadvertently adhering to default settings, which include colonial mindsets, unconscious assumptions, and self-interested agendas. Without doing this work, we are complicit in a system designed to uphold injustice. After all, our systems reproduce what they are designed to produce. In the vein of disrupting this pattern, the Creative Reaction Lab in St. Louis, Missouri, was founded as a nonprofit community action organization focusing on civic leadership. The Creative Reaction Lab (2019) has contended that "systems of oppression, inequality, and inequity are by design; therefore, they can and *must* be redesigned….We all have the power to influence outcomes. Every choice that we make every day contribute to a greater design" (para. 3). As this organization has suggested, intentionally centering equity and justice when collaborating with communities requires us to consciously redesign both mindsets and infrastructures to move us toward more just and equitable partnerships. The approaches shared in this book work toward that goal.

Although this is a book of many questions, one guides the entire work: Are we engaging in a process that builds community? When we center the community, and the community's vision, above everything else in the context of a research partnership, we change our approaches to community-engaged writing. When we hold our collaborations up to this question, we "have to adjust our lines of inquiry and our discourse to be sure we are engaging with communities with every effort to partner mutually with, and to the equal benefit of, our communities" (Bortolin, 2011, p. 56). By putting the community's gains first (over the university gains and commitments such as our publications, grants, and even student learning outcomes), we can frame our research as "a process which builds community," and our "research can be viewed as community-building" (Checkoway, 2015, p. 139). Community-building approaches pursue social justice. They are equity-focused approaches to collaborative partnerships that call on a community's resources and strengths. A community-building process entails

- a focus on assets versus a focus on needs;
- a focus on strengths versus a focus on issues;
- a focus on asset-mapping versus needs assessment;
- a focus on community as co-creators versus beneficiaries;
- a focus on strategies versus a focus on problem-solving;
- a focus on community knowledge versus expert knowledge;
- a focus on amplifying voices versus giving voice to the voiceless;
- a focus on internal agency and capacity-building versus outside "saviors";
- a focus on a solid and capable community versus a poor, struggling community;

- a focus on creating collaborative relationships versus transactional relationships; and
- a focus on the community members as producers versus community members as needy people seeking services.

When we shift the focus to putting the community first and viewing our partnerships as community-building enterprises, we can better commit to creating conditions for reciprocity and mutuality with our partners. Community writing scholars, working toward more equitable partnerships for decades, are uniquely positioned to lead the way in designing more just and ethical collaborations with community partners. As examined in Chapter 1, community writing scholars have led important ethical conversations around reciprocal partnerships, infrastructure, and the public good—longtime discussions in the field. However, there is a point where those conversations are failing us. As Paula Mathieu (2005) noted in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition,* "Our scholarship does a good job of spelling out tenets and guidelines for street work. The difficulty lies in how to move from calls for reciprocity, public action, and self-reflexivity toward specific ways of acting and imagining concrete visions in local times and places" (p. 20). Although numerous theories of co-creation, mutuality, and reciprocity circulate in the field's literature, community-based writing practitioners may still find it hard to put such theories into practice. Katrina M. Powell and Pamela Takayoshi (2003) argued that theorizing about the complex ethical issues practitioners can find themselves in and actually doing the work can be two different things, warning, "Without narratives of prior experiences that suggest some of the ethical terrain, researchers can find themselves unprepared for responding to dilemmas that arise in the processes of researching. . . . As a field, we have very few guidelines for ethical, appropriate decision making 'in the moment" (p. 401). Robbin D. Crabtree (2008) suggested that "we need more than an ethos of reciprocity as a guide; we need to learn the theories, methods, and on-the-ground strategies that are more likely to produce mutuality in process and outcomes" (p. 26). Jessica Shumake and Rachael W. Shah (2017) also acknowledged the large number of theories and calls for reciprocity but lamented that "these theories may remain anemic because they are not grounded in practices that grow organically from doing community-based work" (p. 11).

The field of community writing values the co-creation of knowledge and strives for more generative forms of collaboration with our partners. Part of this work involves deepening our forms of evidence and our stories of actual, on-the-ground reciprocity. Another part of this work involves building applicable methods to design community writing partnerships that can reflect these richer forms of engagement. As our scholarship acknowledges, there are many articles and books that sustain theories, evaluation, and critique; fewer resources make visible the everyday, local action that we implement in our classrooms and in our communities. The hands-on tactics in this book are offered in the spirit of filling that implemen-

tation gap and providing a specific vision of how to enact social justice work with community partners. Throughout the book, readers will find much-needed examples of concrete, situated action that have grown organically out of disciplinary knowledge and fieldwork running a community writing program in Philadelphia that has sustained well over 100 partnerships. This book argues for a community-building approach to writing partnerships that centers justice and equity in our work. This work demands that we commit to a process that leads us to consider how power, oppression, resistance, privilege, penalties, benefits, and harms are systematically designed into the very systems we want to change. By asking, "How are we building community?" in each step of the research process, we better commit to creating conditions for reciprocity and mutuality with our partners and supporting their visions for transformational change.

Chapter Overview

This book is for writing teachers seeking to enact socially just, civically engaged collaborations with community partners. The primary audience for this book is teachers of community writing and those in writing studies, computers and writing, service-learning, digital humanities, and technical communication who engage in community partnerships that pursue social justice. Natasha N. Jones (2020) has argued for moving toward coalitional learning—what disciplines can learn from each other—"especially in regard to how each discipline engages with issues of social justice" (p. 517). Rebecca W. Walton and co-authors (2019) proposed, in *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action,* that all members of the field of writing studies invest in social justice through a coalitional framework, but they noted the "field has yet to establish what that work can or should look like" (p. 5). In an attempt to address this gap, this book demonstrates how to co-create class projects with community partners (local not-for-profit and community-based organizations) from an equity-based, community-building perspective. Whether it ultimately sparks a conversation, a media assignment, a method for collaboration, or even a vision for a future writing program, I hope this book offers something of value for those seeking more intentional and socially just approaches to writing and designing with communities. The approaches offered here are examples of how we might draw on our disciplinary knowledge and experience to create equity-based approaches to writing and designing with communities. These include

- Chapter 1—ways to enact mutual and reciprocal partnerships;
- Chapter 2—ways to conduct design research with communities;
- Chapter 3—ways to engage in community-building approaches in a writing classroom;
- Chapter 4—ways to approach media and social change in the classroom for capacity-building; and

- Chapter 5—ways to become a better ally to communities via student learning, infrastructure, and decolonial methods.

How might we enact a transforming commitment to social justice by engaging in projects that benefit the community and the university? Chapter 1 begins by exploring the broader call for mutual and reciprocal partnerships in the context of community-engaged scholarship. Universities are increasingly placing a high value on opportunities to translate academic knowledge into collaborative projects that benefit both the community and university. Community-engaged scholar Derek Barker (2004) asserted that "the language of engagement suggests an element of reciprocal and collaborative knowledge production that is unique to these forms of scholarship" (p. 126). In community-engaged scholarship, not only do we deepen what it means to be civically involved, but we also learn more about what it means to collaborate "with communities in the production of knowledge" (Barker, 2004, p. 126). Part of our work moving forward is how to orient our partnerships so that both community-based knowledge and university-based knowledge are valued in a true "context of partnership and reciprocity" (Commission on Public Purpose in Higher Education, n.d., Defining Community Engagement section). Writing studies scholarship looking at the nature of community-university partnerships has much to offer the community engagement movement. Guiding principles gleaned from the field's literature represent signposts emerging from within writing studies. These principles can provide a framework for our own goals and aims as we work with communities.

How might we join in a process of inquiry with community partners that embodies the values of mutuality and reciprocity? Chapter 2 focuses on methods of networked collaboration in community-engaged partnerships. Four approaches to collaboration are examined: (a) design thinking, (b) co-design, (c) design justice, and (d) equity-based approaches to community writing. Brief definitions of each of these approaches are as follows:

- *Design thinking* is an audience-centered approach to creative problem solving. The design thinking process features a method of inquiry that favors empathizing, bias to action, and the prototyping and testing of solutions. This approach favors a client-designer relationship.
- *Co-design* is a collaborative approach with roots in participatory design techniques. A fundamental tenet of co-design is the building and deepening of equal collaboration between citizens affected by or attempting to resolve a particular design challenge. Co-design positions participants as experts of their own experience, thus becoming central to the design process.
- *Design justice* is an approach that focuses explicitly on "how design reproduces and challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, settler colonialism, and other forms

of structural inequality)" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, Introduction section). Design justice is also a growing community of practice that ensures a more equitable distribution of design's benefits and burdens, meaningful participation in design decisions, and recognition of community-based, Indigenous, and diasporic design traditions, knowledge, and practices.

- *Equity-based approaches* in community writing emerge organically from theory and practice in the field. Focusing on community building requires us to intentionally redesign both mindsets and infrastructures to share power and decision making with our partners. Equity-based approaches include building empathy, framing inquiry, co-creating knowledge, researching, composing and recomposing, testing and revision, and evaluating capacity. This flexible approach for conducting design research with communities can point us toward more just and equitable partnerships.

A discussion of the challenges and affordances of each method as well as a discussion of which method would work best in a given writing classroom situation is included.

How might we engage in the classroom in community-building approaches that pursue social justice via emerging media? Chapter 3 examines how we can employ emerging media to both build up and engage powerfully with communities, allies, stakeholders, and policymakers. When community partners build capacity with emerging media platforms and literacies, they can make an impact, even with modest resources—becoming more effective in their work and their reach as they challenge injustices and systemic inequalities. Engaging in media projects with community partners helps organizations grow, making them even more effective at creating change in our communities. Emerging media projects provide our community partners with the tools and strategies they need to create a more effective, lasting change. This chapter features the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative, a community-engaged writing program I founded in 2010 at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The collaborative employs three approaches to working with community partners on course projects that pursue social justice via emerging media: (a) media projects, (b) training projects, and (c) research projects. The collaborative is committed to working with community organizations to carry out projects with real-world impact that advance and share knowledge about media and communication. Students in this writing program have led free of charge more than one hundred projects with communities. These projects have involved new media and social web consultancy, training, professional writing, social media management, online survey design, web design, and web-based video. The driving aim behind this collaborative is not just to achieve measurable impact or results on any given project (rewarding in its own right) but rather to create mutually beneficial relationships with allies who are committed to building just and equitable futures. This chapter concludes with a case study of our work with our community partner Life After

Life, illustrating our equity-based approach to writing and designing with communities. This section provides an inside view of the situated local action and decision-making process that guides the Beautiful Social Research Collaborative's work but that is often invisible from view.

How might we develop our students' skills in writing and rhetoric via emerging media while working with our community partners to build capacity? Chapter 4 offers writing teachers a series of practical media analysis projects that build capacity for community partners. Through media analysis, students learn to strategically leverage media platforms to advocate with and for community organizations. Students learn to frame themselves as participants within a learning community through these activities as they examine and participate in timely issues and tools pertinent to work in professional and technical writing, digital rhetoric, new media, advocacy, nonprofit communications, and organizational storytelling. Students conduct a series of activities, each addressed in separate sections of the chapter and briefly described as follows:

- **Design question analysis**—This analysis activity frames inquiry around a community-identified goal and works to structure the project. A design question is a clear statement about a phenomenon of interest, a condition to be improved upon, an opportunity to be explored, or a question that exists in theory or practice for the partner's field or organization. Since our partnerships are based on a community-driven desire to build capacity or to create change, this question should originate from the community partner. We then work with partners to refine the query.
- **Social media analysis**—In this analysis, groups observe and describe the state of the community partner's social media platforms. This activity examines our partner's platform tactics, content, and audience interactions. This analysis aims to arrive at a clear awareness of how our community partners are currently using social media platforms and to identify opportunities for future action.
- **Comparative media analysis**—In this activity, groups compare media drawn from three mentor accounts. Based on the section "Nonprofit Examples of Excellence" in *Social Media for Social Good: A How-To Guide for Nonprofits* by Heather Mansfield (2011), students construct their comparisons tailored to the organization's needs. By locating three mentor accounts, groups explore potential strategies and possibilities for our community partners to employ.
- **Golden circle analysis**—Sometimes called "knowing your why," the golden circle is an effective tactic to get a bird's eye view of an organization (Sinek, 2011, p. 50). The golden circle helps map an organization's why, how, and what and was popularized in brand strategist Simon Sinek's 2011 book S*tart With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, which examines how inspiring leaders communicate.

- **Social object rhetorical analysis**—Drawing from contemporary social theorists Karin Knorr Cetina (1997, 2001, 2007) and Jyri Engeström (2005), we look at how people connect through shared objects. The argument here is that the object is the thing that links people together. Understanding social objects can help bridge an essential gap between (a) the more formal and technical aspects of design and (b) the social and cultural aspects of how social objects engage users and build communities.
- **Organizational storytelling**—A story for a nonprofit is a way for an organization (a nonhuman entity) to *humanize* itself. By leading with a heartfelt story, our partners can elicit a strong sense of *pathos* while engaging deeply with their audience on a personal level. This section examines storytelling mechanisms, including a "story generator" that can be used to create various content—from long-form articles, to blog posts, to social media campaigns, to takeovers, to lone social media posts.

After students conduct these activities, they can be combined into a community partner report. This substantive report offers our partners custom approaches to engaging their audience via emerging media.

How do community writing partnerships influence the concept of *agency*—ideas about the ability to act in and on the world in ways that relate to civic purposes? When collaborating with organizations, students learn how to take writing and emerging media beyond the personal and entertainment and into places for activism and social change. Chapter 5 delves into some of the affordances of attempting this kind of work in the writing classroom and discusses my preliminary research findings on agency and how community partnerships influence students' ideas about design, community, power, and beliefs. These findings support writing instructors as they move concerns beyond classroom walls and consider pedagogies that feature collaborations that are wired for meaningful experience, activism, and community engagement.

To become a vital resource to communities outside university walls, we need to view our community-engaged teaching and research as a form of community building. The book concludes by examining the changes that can occur to center community building in our work, particularly our approaches to equity, our investment in intentional infrastructure, and our commitment to decolonial methods. When designing equity-based approaches, 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. Writing partnerships can leverage community-building approaches to support local grassroots activism, decolonization efforts, co-resistance movements, and social change initiatives. By centering equity and solidarity in our work, design can be "an ethical praxis of world making" (Escobar, 2018, p. 313).