

# BEYOND COMMUNITY: FROM THE SOCIAL TO THE MATERIAL

*ABSTRACT: This revised version of a talk given at the 2001 meeting of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors continues a line of thinking in A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966 (Prentice, 1997), which offered a critique of current use of metaphors of community in teaching writing as both utopian and confining. This essay suggests alternate ways of imagining writing and teaching as taking place in more open, contested, and heteroglot spaces, proposing three counter-concepts to community: public, material, and circulation.*

I write this essay in response to a series of invitations to reconsider work I have done on the uses and limits of the idea of community in teaching writing. The first came from Caroline Pari, who invited me to speak in the fall of 2001 to the 25<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS) on the theme of "Redefining Community." I said yes, glad of the chance to meet with a group that has influenced the teaching of writing since the days of Mina Shaughnessy — and, of course, unaware of how charged the concept of community would become in New York in the weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>. The second came from George Otte, who asked me at the CAWS conference if I would prepare a version of my remarks for this issue, and who mentioned that Mark Wiley was writing an essay for *JBW* on "Rehabilitating Community" that responded to my work. And the third then came from Mark Wiley, who graciously allowed me to read his essay as I was writing this.

I mention these invitations both for the chance to thank Caroline, George, and Mark, and because I hope that situating my comments in this way will help me make my central point — which is that we need to be skeptical of terms for social groupings like *community* which valorize what they claim merely to describe while at the same time aware of how much of what we think, write, and teach is shaped by the mate-

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© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2001

rial circumstances of our work. Along with the rest of the world, I watched first in horror at the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and then in awe as the citizens of New York City turned to help their neighbors with extraordinary courage and generosity. Having done so, I was not going to lecture on the meaning of community to a group of New Yorkers a few weeks later. And yet I had been invited to say something about the social contexts of the teaching of writing, and I have never lost my uneasiness with the use of metaphors of acculturation or conversion, of moving from one community to another, to describe learning. The academy imagined as a series of gated intellectual communities, bounded by disciplinary norms and checkpoints, seems to me to have little to offer students and teachers of writing, for reasons I offer in the closing chapters of *A Teaching Subject* and which Mark Wiley summarizes nicely in his essay. But what I perhaps fail to do very well in that book is to move beyond critique, to offer alternatives to metaphors of community. How can we talk about writing and teaching as social practices without resort to metaphors of consensus and enclosure? My sense is that we need a change in idiom. I would thus like to bring forward here a set of terms that I think can help us imagine our work as teachers as taking place not within the bounded and familiar space of a disciplinary community but in more open, contested, and heteroglot spheres of discourse. Those terms are *public*, *material*, and *circulation*.

But let me make two quick disclaimers: First, I claim no originality in offering these concepts as alternatives to community. I will try instead to show that all three are now emerging as generative ideas in our field. And, second, I have no desire to argue over semantics. The program that Mark Wiley describes in "Rehabilitating the Idea of Community" seems a powerful, tactical response to the problem of how to reach out to students at his college who feel alienated from academic work. The last thing I would want to do as a theorist is to get in the way of such efforts. What Mark's essay helps me understand better — and so, I hope, to clarify here — are my own impulses in arguing against an easy reliance on the idea of community. When I began to think and write about community, I did so out of a strong sense of kinship with scholars like Richard Hoggart and Richard Rodriguez — who had both written eloquently about the sense of loss that can haunt working-class youths when they find themselves newly schooled as part of the professional, middle class. I wanted (and still want) to argue for a mode of teaching that resists the fusing of social values with the acquiring of critical skills, and so was (and am still) wary of invitations to join a "community" of middle-class professionals. My objection has thus always been to imagine the *goal* of intellectual work as agreement or team play, rather than as dissent or argument. But I have never meant to suggest that the classroom or college should be a tense, indifferent,

or combative place. On the contrary, my experience has been that for people to work through their intellectual disagreements in a serious and sustained way, they need to feel at ease with one another—not as members of some abstract, organic, disciplinary community, but simply as interlocutors who have agreed to hear each other out at this time and in this place. This seems very much the aim of the Learning Alliance that Mark Wiley describes—to create a social network that encourages students not simply to absorb but also to talk and argue together about the ideas they encounter in their classes. If *that* is what community means, then I'm all for it. But I would continue to insist that our job is not to initiate students into a discrete world we think of ourselves as already inhabiting—to induct them, that is, as members of our disciplines and professions—but rather to help them find ways to use the texts, practices, and ideas we have to offer in discussing issues that matter to them.

## Public

If the teaching of college writing once made a kind of comfortable sense that it no longer does, then it is not hard to see why. For the most part, the faculty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American college knew exactly who their students were and what instruction they required—they were young gentlemen aspiring to the elite professions of the ministry, law, medicine, or finance. The task of the professor of belles lettres (or oratory, or composition) was to imbue his charges with the verbal skills and sensibility required to take on such roles. But if this view of students as gentlemen scholars has seemed more nostalgic than convincing for at least the last 50 years, then no compelling alternative to it has yet emerged. Instead composition has simply tended to imagine students as, well . . . *students*—as people whom we are asked to help get through the business of school. Taken to its logical conclusion, this form of thinking has ended up picturing students as apprentice members of the academic disciplines, in training as developmental psychologists, literary critics, cultural anthropologists, or the like. But there is something dispiriting and confining about such a way of imagining students, and so some teachers have begun to construct writing courses that cast students instead as something more like *public intellectuals*—that is, as writers whose work tries to address readers and issues outside of the academy.

Now *public* is surely as vexed a term as *community*. In its classic formulations, the *public* refers to a social space existing outside the direct control of either the state or private business where individuals can discuss issues of general concern. But Bruce Robbins has rightly complained of the phantom-like quality of this concept, of how the

public sphere always seems just out of reach, either receding into a nostalgic past or glimpsed as part of a utopian future. And a distinguished series of theorists—Lippman, Dewey, Habermas, Sennett, Fraser—have argued vigorously over the meanings and uses of the term without ever going so far as to suggest that anything like a robust public culture has ever been achieved in mass society. In more practical terms, if *public* also implies *national*, then few of us can hope to attain the level of publicity enjoyed by media intellectuals like Cornel West or bell hooks. On the other hand, though, Susan Wells has argued convincingly against the pretense that training students in brief and ineffectual forms of civic discourse like letters to the editor will somehow help them enter a public culture that may or may not actually exist. My sense is that the term is more useful as an adjective than as a noun—that we might best speak of certain uses of writing as *more or less* public, as opposed to more or less private, or more or less disciplinary.

One form of teaching towards public-ness in this adjectival sense asks students to consider how their lives are connected to and shaped by social events and forces. Amy Goodburn, for instance, discusses a first-year writing course she has taught in which students are asked to identify a historical event that has somehow had an impact on their own families or communities, to do research on the event and its local effects, and to write an essay reflecting on this intersection of the public and personal. Goodburn reports that many students began by writing about the sorts of events one would commonly find in history textbooks—The Battle of the Bulge, the Great Depression, Vietnam—but often shifted to events and issues that were, literally, closer to home: combat troop reunions, a polio epidemic in a small town, the impact of the birth control pill on the women in a writer's family, and so on. Such a course asks students to write about their lives in ways long familiar to composition teachers but also to problematize such work by viewing their experiences as not wholly personal. Similarly, in a first-year course on Writing the Modern University here at Duke, my colleague Pegeen Reichert Powell asks students to write on a set of public controversies that directly concern them as college students: a set of debates over the quality of intellectual life at Duke, the recent campus campaigns against the sale of clothing made in sweatshops, and the imbroglio over whether or not student newspapers should have run advertisements arguing against racial reparations. In writing on such issues, students are asked to imagine themselves as something more than just students, as participants in an institution whose actions and policies have consequences in the world. Courses like those designed by Goodburn and Reichert Powell thus offer students intellectual training that is framed not as part of a disciplinary project but as a way of commenting on, and perhaps entering into, a set of more pub-

lic concerns.

Another form of teaching towards the public asks students to become more directly involved as writers in the neighborhoods and communities around their schools. I am thinking here of what is often known as service-learning, a movement whose influence on the teaching of writing is well-described by Thomas Deans in his recent *Writing Partnerships*. Deans identifies three models for connecting writing courses to communities: writing *for*, *about*, and *with* the community. The writing *for* the community approach puts students to work as writers for local, non-profit agencies, helping to produce the kinds of documents (proposals, newsletters, press releases, brochures, manuals, and the like) that such organizations need in serving their clients. Writing *about* courses ask students to work in community settings and then to draw on these experiences in writing academic essays about the politics of work, literacy, or schooling. In contrast to the more pragmatic tasks emphasized by the writing *for* model, the focus here is on helping students acquire the moves and strategies of critical or intellectual discourse. The third approach, writing *with* the community, has students collaborate with local activists and neighborhood residents in creating materials for a public discussion of issues impacting their communities.

The driving force behind service-learning is clearly its politics, its vision of service to others as an integral aspect of professional life. But we shouldn't lose sight of how the intellectual agenda of service-learning also shares with other forms of critical teaching a disquiet with disciplinary boundaries and a desire to see writing as a mode of social action. It is that impulse to push beyond the walls of the academy, to apply critical habits of mind to something other than disciplinary work, that most interests me about what I am here calling public teaching.

## Material

In the late 1980s scholars in composition began to take what is now known as a "social turn," shifting their focus from the composing processes of individual writers to the broader contexts of literacy, and foregrounding issues of race, gender, and ideology in teaching. While this turn has always struck me as salutary, there is also a way in which an increasing interest in the workings of power seems often to have been accompanied by a decreasing attention to the workings of texts. The question, for instance, of what specific skills students might need to acquire in order to claim authority as writers in the university could sometimes seem to get lost in discussions of the politics of academic discourse. Similarly, and ironically, the question of what practical

moves compositionists might need to make to gain more control over their courses and programs often seemed to be subsumed by sweeping (and unfeasible) demands for all writing teachers to be put on the tenure track. And so the 1990s saw both the establishment of composition studies as a research field and an increasing reliance of composition programs on part-time faculty and graduate students to actually teach writing to undergraduates.

To work through this paradox I believe we need to shift our focus from the global to the local, the ideological to the logistical, the social to the material. In arguing for such a concern with the physical, economic, and institutional constraints on the work of writing teachers and students, I am following the lead of Bruce Horner in *Terms of Work for Composition*, an exceptionally rigorous study of how the intellectual project of composition has been shaped by the site of its work — that is, by the demands of administering the first-year writing course. One response to these pressures, unfortunately tagged as the New Abolitionism, has been to suggest that composition somehow disentangle itself from overseeing the universal requirement — that we quit our defining affiliation with the service course and instead become a field of study much like any other in the academy. My interests, though, center less on forging a new discipline and more on reforming the work that goes on at the contested and politically-charged sites of basic and first-year writing. To do so, I think we will need to find ways of improving the conditions of work for three sets of stakeholders in composition: *undergraduates*, *teachers*, and *administrators*.

## Undergraduates

I teach now at a private university where almost all undergraduates are between the ages of 18 and 22, go to school full-time, reside on campus, and are supported by their parents — a context in which I can assume that academics is their central concern. But this is not the situation faced by many writing teachers, especially those in public and urban universities, whose students must often try to wrest time for study from hours in days that are already over-committed to work, family, and commuting. It's easy to see how such schedules might overwhelm even those students who are well-prepared to take on the work of a writing course. So what about those who have been badly served by their high schools, or who are struggling to learn English as a second language, or who come from families or neighborhoods skeptical of the value of college? Some of the most humane work on teaching in the last 10 years has directly addressed such questions, insisting that we view students not simply in the context of our classrooms but in the full context of their lives. For instance, in her landmark study, *Time*

*to Know Them*, Marilyn Sternglass tracks the progress of several working, first-generation college students at the City University of New York, demonstrating that they can succeed in the academy, can indeed do very strong intellectual work, *if* they are allowed to pursue their studies beyond the traditional four or five years of college and *if* tests which measure little more than their ability to produce idiomatic and error-free prose are not set up as curricular roadblocks for students whose first language is not English. In order to achieve the democratic hopes of American higher education, Sternglass suggests, we need to be willing to work with adult students over extended periods of time and to help them in balancing the demands of school, employment, and family.

This hopeful and patient vision of teaching has been continued by two younger scholars who have both worked closely with Sternglass. In "Class Dismissed," Mary Soliday shows how she and others at City College have tried to make the writing curriculum less of a series of arbitrary obstacles and more of a delimited and coherent learning experience for beginning undergraduates. Soliday offers an incisive class-oriented analysis of the university curriculum, suggesting that the layering of required courses in the early years of college study can, in the name of rigor, actually serve as a covert form of insuring that many working-class students will run out of time, energy, or funds before they even get to take courses in their intended majors. Similarly, in *Defending Access*, Tom Fox offers a spirited argument against the ways an uncritical embrace of the notion of "standards" limits access to education by minority and working-class students. Fox begins his book with a concise history of how appeals to standards have served as a gatekeeping mechanism in US colleges over the last century — with a special focus on the uneasy complicity of compositionists with such efforts. He then moves on to offer several compelling examples of how teachers can act to deflect attention away from formalist measures of writing abilities (with their correspondingly reductive understandings of student writers) and toward a more rhetorical sense of literacy. He insists in order to grasp students' achievements and difficulties in the academy, we need to look beyond the walls of the classroom, to situate their work as students in the (often daunting) material circumstances of their lives. When we consider what many non-traditional students go through simply to remain in college, Fox suggests, what might at first seem mediocre performances on their part begin to appear almost heroic. What we can't do, Fox asserts, is to judge the work of minority and working-class students according to an abstract set of standards that fails to account for the ways the economic realities of their lives impinge on their careers as students.



## Teachers

We similarly need to find ways that allow the teachers in our programs to make use of the scholarship in our field. To attend CCCC or read our journals is to come into touch with an array of thoughtful, nuanced, and informed approaches to teaching composition. But it is hard, realistically, to imagine that teachers who are overloaded and underpaid—often working on a per-course basis, with little support from or contact with other faculty, and sometimes teaching several sections of basic or first-year writing at a number of different campuses—will have the time or inclination to keep up with recent scholarship in composition, design innovative courses, and respond to student writing in detailed and careful ways. And yet one should not expect any teacher to do less. We don't need new theories of rhetoric or composing, or new approaches to classroom practice, in order to improve much of the teaching that goes on in our programs. What we need are ways to give teachers the time and support they need to do their jobs well, and the power to hold them accountable for doing so. Curriculum is personnel. So long as the first worry of a writing program director is simply to make sure that all the sections she is responsible for actually get staffed, then the quality of teaching in that program will suffer. Composition has been a textbook-driven field because so many programs are staffed in large part by a contingent army of part-timers and graduate students who have little formal training in teaching writing and thus limited abilities to design courses on their own. The long-term solution to this problem is not to write better textbooks (or at least not simply to do so), but to create a better supported and more professional faculty.

One way to do so is to insist that writing be taught by tenure-stream faculty—and where this is possible, it should be done. But the very scale of the enterprise at many universities, which must staff scores or hundreds of sections of writing courses per term, coupled with the aversion that many tenure-stream faculty show towards teaching beginning undergraduates, often makes such a solution impracticable. In such cases we need to consider alternatives to tenure which offer writing teachers some real measure of job security and professional authority—and not simply continue current hiring practices in the hope that the revolution will some day come. No one response will suit all programs. In some institutions, collective bargaining might be the most effective tactic; in others, it might be longer-term contracts for experienced teachers, or postdoctoral fellowships or visiting lectureships for recent PhDs, or named instructorships for advanced graduate students. Or other programs might open up the chance to teach first-year writing to scholars outside of English, or think of ways of recasting the course in composition as a writing-intensive seminar taught by faculty



across the disciplines.

The point is to think outside the box—to imagine that our first charge is not to support the graduate program, or to defend tenure, or to make sure that current staff are given as many sections as they want, but rather to set up working conditions that support the most effective teaching of writing to undergraduates that is possible. I am encouraged that many recent and compelling proposals for doing so come from non-tenure-stream faculty—in the pages of the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Forum in *CCC*, by Michael Murphy in his longer *CCC* essay on “A New Faculty for a New University: Toward A Full-Time Teaching-Intensive Track in Composition,” and in Eileen Schell and Patricia Stock’s volume of essays detailing strategies for improving working conditions for writing teachers, *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education*.

### Administrators

In thus shifting focus from curriculum to labor force, a familiar figure in composition gains a new importance: the writing program administrator or WPA, whom it now seems possible to picture not as a mere bureaucratic functionary but as an activist reformer in the university, the person best situated to argue for improved working conditions for composition students and teachers. In *As If Learning Mattered*, Richard Miller argues that academics need to embrace their roles as mid-level bureaucrats in large corporations (universities) if they are to have much hope of changing how those institutions work. This point seems especially relevant to the situation of many compositionists, who are often pressed into managing one of the largest programs of the university without being offered the status or power of chairs of much smaller departments. One response to this crisis of authority has been to suggest that composition should aspire to become a discipline in its own right, with the imagined effect of turning the director of composition into something more like the chair of the department of rhetoric. I think that this would be a strategic mistake—that much of the interest and energy of composition stems both from its *not* being a discipline in the traditional sense and from its engagement in the vital if sometimes inchoate project of first-year writing. Rather than working to set up new departments or graduate programs, then, I would like to see us try to gain more direct control over the staffing and curriculum of our basic and first-year writing programs. At issue here will be whether these programs are housed within English departments or not—and the responses to this question will no doubt vary for tactical reasons according to local contexts. But once she gains real control over who teaches first-year writing and how, it becomes easy to imagine the WPA as a key player in the undergraduate curriculum, even if she lacks the

disciplinary cachet of the chair of English, precisely because of her substantive influence on student learning. That is, it seems to me, a key advantage of thinking in local and material terms of programs rather than in the more abstract terms of disciplinary communities.

## Circulation

My argument so far has pulled me in two directions: On the one hand, my interest in teaching towards the public sphere has led me to advocate pushing beyond the concerns of our disciplines; on the other hand, my commitment to the material reform of writing programs requires an intense focus on the institutional structures in which we work. I think that this tension can be resolved, though, by distinguishing, as Evan Watkins suggests in *Work Time*, between the meanings that circulate inside the classroom and the values that circulate outside it. Watkins points out that while many teachers of English (or in our case, writing) consider the work they ask students to take on to be critical and oppositional, the value given that work (in the form of grades) outside the classroom is often quite different. And so, for example, while I might think that the 'A' I've given a certain student reflects her ability to interrogate the discourses of power, what that grade signifies to an admissions committee or prospective employer may simply be that she can use language powerfully. Writing from the perspective of the individual professor, Watkins despairs at this lack of control over the value of his work as it travels beyond his classroom, but I think that, from the point of view of a writing *program*, we have a much better chance to collectively define the meaning of what we do. At many universities, almost *every* undergraduate must take at least one course in composition. This circulation of students allows writing programs a remarkable chance to stand for a particular kind of intellectual work in the university by offering courses that, while not necessarily following a common syllabus, are directed towards a coherent set of goals. In this way, an intelligent program can augment rather than constrain the work of its faculty. My argument here is that we need to strengthen the position of our programs within the university in order to promote a view of writing that pushes beyond disciplinary boundaries.

A key part of advancing such an agenda will be to find ways in which the writings of students might circulate beyond the classroom. New web-based technologies that allow writers to exchange and respond to texts online have already begun to sidestep the need for the classroom to serve as the physical site where hard copies of papers are traded among students and teachers. In allowing much of the routine work of a writing course to take place *outside* of the classroom, I have

found that such technologies help me move more quickly and powerfully *in* the classroom to precisely the sort of close work with student texts that I have always felt a writing course needs to center on—since students enter class having already read one another's work and prepared to discuss it. Teaching in such an environment offers one a glimpse of how the decentralized, digital university imagined by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid in the closing chapters of *The Social Life of Information* might actually work—as a place to which people come less to gain access to an archive of materials than to interact with a set of knowledgeable people. In such an emerging university, we might find it even more useful to picture the writing class not as an enclosed community but as a public space crossed by many persons and discourses. And certainly the Web offers at least the increasing possibility that student texts might find their way outside the confines of the writing classroom, that students might begin not merely to analyze but also to participate in the ongoing disputes and controversies of our culture.

I don't mean here to equate putting up a web page with political action. But I do think that in looking for ways to help student texts travel beyond the classroom—through service-learning, through participating in campus debates (as in Pegeen Reichert Powell's course), and perhaps through web work as well—we can start to loosen the grip of disciplinarity on our own ideas of writing. In a brilliant essay on "Composition and the Circulation of Writing," John Trimbur argues that we have been too willing to think of the writing classroom as a quasi-domestic space, where we act *in loco parentis* in assigning and monitoring student discourse, making sure that their work conforms to one standard or the other of authority. Trimbur suggests that we instead ask students first to analyze and then to intervene in how a particular social issue gets discussed in competing spheres of discourse: academic, journalistic, governmental, popular, activist, and so on. And so, for example, as a final project for a course he teaches on Writing about Disease and Public Health, Trimbur asks students "to work in groups to produce in any medium they choose (e.g., brochures, pamphlets flyers, posters, videos, radio announcements, skits, Web sites, t-shirts) public health publicity on teen or college-age sexuality" (214). The point of such teaching is to problematize (rather than reinforce) the role of expertise in producing knowledge. The crucial issue in teaching writing, for Trimbur, thus has to do "with whose questions we take up—students, laypersons, and experts in the disciplines and professions" (217). I worry that in locating the act of writing in a single place, in a hypothesized community of academic discourse, we limit the chances students get to do work that is truly critical of the culture of expertise to which we, as professional intellectuals, belong.

At the close of "Rehabilitating the 'Idea of Community,'" Mark

Wiley asserts that learning communities cannot simply attempt to “recoup the past” (p. 31), to recreate a kind of safe and familiar space protected from conflict, but must rather help students “move between home and public space” (p. 30-31). I couldn’t agree more. But I must also say that I know of few visions of community that also don’t seem to lapse at points into a nostalgia for the mutuality of family or the small town. And so, for instance, in the principles that Wiley lists for the Learning Alliance, we learn that: “Good communities . . . encourage cooperation, compromise, and consensus . . . develop identity through group norms, standards, and values . . . [and] promote caring, trust, and teamwork” (pp. 30). These are hard values to argue against, and yet I find myself still, at this late moment, wanting to ask: Whose norms? Whose team? How does one learn how to dissent as well as to cooperate and compromise?

Again, I admire the work of the Learning Alliance in helping students acquire the discourses of school and to engage with the ideas and persons they meet at the university. We need to find more such ways of supporting the efforts of faculty to connect with undergraduates as intellectuals. And I am glad to hear Mark Wiley argue that “a community is not a club” (p. 24) and that the sort of learning community he advocates does not aim for the “safety of familiarity and like-mindedness” (p. 31). But once such qualities of warmth and cohesion are stripped away from the concept of community, I’m no longer sure what’s left to distinguish it from other ways of imagining social groups. Rather than trying to rehabilitate an old idea, then, I’d like to see us work towards a new sense of writing as a social and material practice.

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