



## **OPEN WORDS: ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES**

Volume 12, Number 1 (December 2019)

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## ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES

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*Open Words: Access and English Studies* is dedicated to publishing articles focusing on political, professional, and pedagogical issues related to teaching composition, rhetoric, reading, creative writing, ESL, and literature to open-admissions and “nonmainstream” student populations. We seek original scholarship in areas such as instructional strategies, cultural studies, critical theory, classroom materials, technological innovation, institutional critique, student services, program development, etc., that assist educators, administrators, and student support personnel who work with students in pedagogically difficult settings. Articles should consider the particularities of context—issues, for example, surrounding the identifier of “open access,” intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, regional and cultural differences, and the range of competencies students bring with them to classrooms—in conjunction with the goal of English studies to empower students’ critical and creative endeavors. We value works pertinent to specialists yet accessible to non-specialists, and we encourage submissions that take into account what interactions with students teach us about the broader, democratic goals of open-access education and English studies.

*Open Words* is an established journal, which began in 2007, and has produced at least one issue a year since then with the support of Pearson. John Tassoni and Bill Thelin served as the previous senior editors. In 2016, the journal was handed over to Sue Hum, who brought on two additional co-editors, Kristina Gutierrez and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa. The work of producing an annual issue—reviewing submissions, identifying reviewers, sending manuscripts out for peer review, working closely with authors on revisions, creating proofs, and making copyedit corrections—is handled by the three senior editors. The first issue under their editorial leadership was published on March 13, 2017.

In 2019, the new editorial team transitioned the journal away from Pearson and to the WAC Clearinghouse for ongoing support and as the venue for publication. The open-access approach of the WAC Clearinghouse aligned with the philosophy of *Open Words* as an open-access journal with goals to cultivate a robust and dynamic body of scholarship on issues of access in higher education institutions and within communities. By addressing issues related to class, this journal has been historically a part of the CCC Working Class, Culture, and Pedagogy Working Group with a target audience that includes scholar-teachers and practitioners in rhetoric and composition, education, and affiliated disciplines who want to read critical discussions about issues of access. The scholarship published by *Open Words* complements the scholarship highlighting issues of access in other Clearinghouse journals, such as *The Journal of Basic Writing* and *The WAC Journal*.

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### **Editor's Introduction: Civic Activism: Community Writing, Practices and Observances to Counter Marginalization**

Kristina Gutierrez, Ph.D.

Lone Star College-Kingwood

A social issue that tears at the social fabric of the United States is the poor treatment of migrants, such as the dehumanization of migrants arriving at our Southern border in political discourse, including those from the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. According to a national media release, published by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol on August 9, 2019, “[i]n July, U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 71,999 individuals on the Southwest border, bringing the total apprehensions on the Southwest border to 760,370 this year” (para. 5). Statistics of apprehensions, including those in this media release, are used in political discourse to create images of large groups of undocumented migrants attempting to enter the US, simultaneously attempting to provoke fear and justify greater restriction of access/movement. At the same time, the extended detention of migrants in overcrowded facilities threatens their physical and emotional wellbeing. In “Border Patrol Detains Adults with No End - Until Lawyers Sue,” Nomaan Merchant of the *Associated Press News* describes a pattern of migrants being transferred out after their attorneys sue on behalf of their clients. Merchant explains, “The lawyers believe the government is trying to avoid a federal judge issuing a sweeping order that would require the release of potentially thousands of people detained by the Border Patrol or changes to improve the conditions in cells that government inspectors and advocates have said are squalid” (para. 6).

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During the summer of 2019, many people were distressed to see images of migrants, including children, held in overcrowded detention centers and at Border Patrol stations as described by Merchant. The Lights for Liberty immigration vigils, held on July 12, 2019, provide example of civic activism in the advocacy for the ending of the wide-scale detention of migrants, including unaccompanied minors. The vigils helped keep the images of the treatment of migrants, including reports by the news media and on social media, in the public consciousness of the United States. Equally important, these reports document the conditions in the facilities, along with the continued wide-scale detention of migrants.

Over the last three years, civic activism and lawsuits have attempted to counter policies informed by stereotypes. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is one organization that fought against President Trump's travel bans in court. After the Supreme Court upheld the Muslim Ban 3.0, the ACLU Washington released the "Statement on Supreme Court Muslim Ban Ruling," which notes that "[l]ike previous versions [of the Muslim ban], this one blocks immigrants and temporary visitors from several Muslim-majority countries" (para.1). The statement also underscores how the travel bans undermine "fundamental values: values such as religious freedom, due process, and equal protection of the law for *everyone* in our country" (para. 4). In January 2019, the Trump Administration included Nigeria as one of six countries for failing to address security concerns in its expanded travel ban. The Nigerian expatriate community in Houston is one of the largest in the US; the expanded travel ban will harm families in Houston by denying visas to family members (Kriel paras. 1-6). The ongoing civic activism of organizations like the ACLU is essential to preserving/restoring democratic values and protecting such vulnerable communities.

Although some readers may believe that such civic activism may not be effective in our current political environment, it is one of many tools that can counter the feelings of exasperation and hopelessness.<sup>1</sup>

The 2019 issue of *Open Words* spotlights civic activism by providing access for the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. Contributors in this issue highlight the importance of access as it relates to literacy, assessment, service-learning, and active reading. These articles express and reflect on forms of activism within the context of educational/community settings.

Michelle Hall Kells, invited contributor and author for our lead article, turns our attention to civic activism in the form of community writing in her article, "Doing Democracy: The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project--Citizen Scholars and Activist Writing Across Communities." The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project came into



fruition through community writing workshops that emphasized “deliberative democratic practice” and the creation of the *Digital Cuentos* archive, providing opportunity for community members to share their experiences and memories of the Empire Zinc Mine strike (8). In addition to using Writing Across Communities as a framework that values the literacies and experiences of local communities, Kells with a group of graduate students, applied Chantal Mouffe’s concept “agonistic pluralism” to create spaces for community members with “adversarial positions” to engage in deliberative dialogue informed by the principles of democracy “and together determine the fate of the historic Local 890 union hall where Mexican American citizens staged one of the most effective labor strikes in U.S. history.”

Of interest is the political activism of members of the Ladies Auxiliary 209, as they held the picket line to counter efforts of a law enforcement injunction that attempted to end the strike by forcing the men of the Local 890 to stop picketing. The strike resisted inequitable wages and resources, such as housing, to Mexican American and Mexican miners, as compared to Anglo American miners. The civic activism in the form of a strike sought to counter the value systems and policies informed by prejudiced, racial belief systems of the 1950s, which in turn influenced the working conditions and life experiences of a marginalized community. The strike, Kells elucidates, called out the institutionalized racism in the US that kept in place workplace inequalities.

The Salt of the Earth Recovery project is an important example of civic activism, which promoted social justice through the process of telling history from a historically marginalized community perspective, thereby bringing the voices and experiences of community members into the spotlight, as described by Kells.

In the next article “Hurricane Rhetorics: An Ontological Analysis of the Recovery and Rebuild of Lone Star College-Kingwood after Harvey,” Cindy Ross explores the issue of access to education, specifically how a natural disaster can affect equitable access to higher education. After her college Lone Star College-Kingwood in Houston flooded during Hurricane Harvey, administrators delayed the fall 2017 semester start date and converted originally planned 16-week courses into 12-week courses, with many of the courses taught online or at temporary locations off campus. Building on her experiences as a faculty member at Lone Star College-Kingwood, Ross uses an object-oriented ontological framework to encourage critical reflection on the ways in which higher education institutions and writing programs can respond to, as well as plan for, rhetorical situations caused by natural disasters.

As a fellow faculty member of Lone Star College-Kingwood, I concur with what Ross describes as the rhetorical exigency initiated by the agency of the

floodwaters. It was also challenging teaching first-year students with limited or no experience learning in online environments. Moreover, many students were attempting to recover from flood damage to their homes and/or were searching for new jobs because their workplaces had flooded. Although I encouraged students to meet with me on campus to discuss their writing, only a handful of students were able to meet regularly. Some students also stopped logging in to my course websites to complete assignments. The ability to convert to an online learning environment only addresses the immediate restriction on access to education after a natural disaster. Ross's article underscores how issues, such as technological literacy levels in the online learning environment, also restrict access to equitable education, creating opportunity to plan to address such issues instead of responding retroactively after a natural disaster.

Marking the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey in August of 2019, the Greater Houston area remains vulnerable to flooding even with flood mitigation projects occurring, including the dredging of the San Jacinto River in the Humble-Kingwood area. This vulnerability creates anxiety, resulting from concern that climate change will continue to increase the intensity of storms and the resultant flooding. Ross provides us a timely article given the effect climate change can have on communities such as Houston, which is situated just above sea level and has a history of flooding partly because of its flat landscape as well as the destruction of prairies and wetlands for commercial and residential development.

Next, in their article "Service-Learning in the Community College Composition Classroom: Lessons Learned from Sustainable Projects at One Community College," Darlene Beaman and Julie Jackson describe the challenges of organizing sustainable service-learning projects informed by the objective of not only creating potential for civic engagement, but also addressing attrition rates. As Beaman and Jackson reveal, faculty fatigue is one issue that restricts the potential for such sustainable service-learning projects. Nevertheless, Beaman and Jackson identify the characteristics of successful and sustainable service-learning projects at the college, one being allowing students to determine how best they can collaborate with community partners.

This issue also features Ronna J. Levy's "Literature Circles: Access to Texts" article, where Levy reflects on the application of Harvey Daniels's methodology for implementing literature circles to facilitate active reading in her community college classrooms. She posits that writing instructors can use the model of the literature circle to teach students the reading process, which she highlights is just as important as teaching the writing process in scaffolding student learning and critical engagement with texts. Levy explains, "literature circle roles encourage students to access the

construction of a range of mental representations in the service of a deeper and more critical understanding of a text.”

Also, the articles by Brandon Erby and Jolivette Mecenas offer new perspectives on how to engage marginalized groups in educational settings. In “Learning is an All Black Thing: Literacy, Pedagogy, and Black Educational Institutions after *Brown v. Board of Education*,” Erby examines the pedagogies used by the Mississippi Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Day Schools to nurture the literacy practices of students, drawing from literacy practices and rhetorical traditions (e.g., call and response) in Black communities. By so doing, he underscores “how the multiple literacy practices found in Black alternative educational spaces after *Brown* strengthened Black lives and communities by *cultivating* the knowledge(s) being *suppressed* in White-controlled schools.” Erby also demonstrates “how Black students were introduced to an organizing tradition in these spaces that merged educational concerns with political activism.” Erby underscores how contemporary writing teachers can learn from the histories of Black educational institutions to design curricula that build on and value the literacy practices and rhetorical traditions of Black students and students of color more broadly. By highlighting the importance of access to curricula that values the literacy practices and rhetorical traditions of Black students and students of color more broadly, Erby seeks to promote equitable learning opportunities in contemporary writing classrooms.

In “Recognizing Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Students: First-Year Writing Placement and Success at a Small Community Four-Year HSI” Mecenas presents the findings of a study on assessment, designed to evaluate how best to “support students’ degree completion by revising FYW,” taking into account “current movements to reform FYW placement and curricula, based on research illustrating the harmful impact of deficit narratives on Latinx students.” Crucial in this article is Mecenas’s finding that the “study may help inform faculty and administrators as to how FYW programs support pathways toward degree completion for Latinx students, and for all students, at private, nonprofit four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions.”

The final article for our 2019 issue brings us back to our southern border and highlights the interconnectedness of US and Mexican communities. Susan Garza and Gabriel Ferreyra, in “El Parque de la Amistad / Friendship Park,” visually analyze restricted access to Friendship Park, located at the US-Mexico border wall in the San Diego–Tijuana region. In 1971, First Lady Pat Nixon dedicated Friendship Park; the park is located at monument Number 1, which demarcates the boundary line drawn between the US and Mexico for the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. To learn different perspectives on the issue of access at Friendship Park, Garza and Ferreyra

interviewed stakeholders, including Border Patrol officers, an immigration lawyer, a geographer, and members of the grassroots organization Friends of Friendship Park. Friends of Friendship Park engages in civic action through its efforts to negotiate with Border Patrol to increase access to Friendship Park for communities on the US side and Mexico side to interact, within the current context of US policies designed to restrict access at the border (e.g., ongoing construction of Border Wall).

In closing, the articles in this issue broaden the concept of access by stressing the interconnectedness of access and civic activism. Fostering opportunities for civic activism to occur through access is especially important to counter ideologies and policies that marginalize vulnerable communities, particularly in the current political environment.

## Endnotes

1. Since the completion of the 2019 issue, the US has experienced extensive instability and change:
  - COVID-19 cases have surged in the US, resulting in the need for a collaborative federal, state, and local effort to reduce the spread of coronavirus to save lives.
  - The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis was a catalyst for Black Lives Matter demonstrations internationally, underscoring police brutality.
  - On June 15, 2020 the Supreme Court ruled that LGBTQ workers are protected from discrimination against gender status or sexual orientation.
  - On June 18, 2020, the Supreme Court upheld Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), preventing the deportation of DACA recipients.

The instability in the US has underscored racial and social inequities and health inequities.

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### About the Author

**Kristina Gutierrez** is Associate Professor at Lone Star College-Kingwood in Houston, Texas. She earned her PhD in English from The University of Texas at San Antonio, where she specialized in rhetoric and composition and in Latinx cultural studies. Her research interests include visual rhetoric, new materialism, and popular cultural studies. She is currently co-writing an essay on the memorialization of Selena Quintanilla Pérez in Corpus Christi. She has presented at the *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, *National Council of Teachers of English*, and *Rhetoric Society of America*. She had also taught full time at Texas A&M University at College Station and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

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### **Doing Democracy: The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project – Citizen Scholars and Activist Writing Across Communities**

Michelle Hall Kells, Ph.D.  
University of New Mexico

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article triangulates the story of the women the Ladies Auxiliary 209 of the Local 890 chapter of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers during the historic 1950s Empire Zinc Mine strike in Bayard, New Mexico with an examination of Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) as an efficacious approach to enhancing meaningful access to literacy practice through the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. WACommunities principles and practices are applied to promote literacy, civic engagement, and open access to knowledge-making and political participation, and the article chronicles the process of researching, conceptualizing, and implementing the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project with a team of graduate students during the summer of 2018. The implications of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project are discussed for teaching public writing and community literacy in open admission institutions. Reflections on the project show the work involved in mentoring new leaders in a generative and restorative space of community activism and writing and the implications of those actions for literacy education for a “threatened generation.” The construction of community writing workshops through the development of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project help to engage local community members, activists, and citizen scholars in a deliberative process toward a collective vision for promoting the recovery, preservation, and restoration of the community’s historic memory and rhetorical imagination.

The resonances of Cold War-era public rhetoric currently circulating in U.S. civic discourse challenge us as writing teachers and literacy educators working with historically under-served and under-represented student populations to respond and make visible institutionalized systems of oppression. The recovery of historical

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narratives that insidiously inform and reproduce the violence of exclusion increasingly promulgated throughout the public sphere—in our classrooms, courtrooms, press conferences, senate hearings, and presidential addresses—can help to expose and resist the volatile current of “whitelash” inflecting national and global cultural rhetorical ecologies today.<sup>1</sup> Engaging the geo-political disturbance ecologies in this post-colonial, post-industrial historical moment is central to the mission of literacy education in open access institutions.



Figure 1: Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop in Silver City Museum, Silver City, New Mexico July 28, 2019.

Photo by Michelle Hall Kells and available online (<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>).

As we have emptied out our classrooms and sheltered in place with the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed the tragic impact of this public

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<sup>1</sup> For further examination of political “whitelash” through Mexican American civil rights history and in U.S. post-Obama cultural rhetorical ecologies, see: Michelle Hall Kells, *Vicente Ximenes, LBJ's Great Society, and Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018).

Kells

health crisis on our most vulnerable communities. In her *New York Times* op-ed, University of New Mexico graduate student, Sunnie Rae Clahchischiligi writes, “The coronavirus virus outbreak in the Navajo Nation is showing that nowhere is as remote as it might have once seemed. And the reservation is not prepared. My nation is held together by a culture of togetherness — but that tradition of gathering also makes the spread of the virus worse.” Within and beyond our borders, we are looking for language that promotes healing, wholeness, and hope. We are looking for language to teach in a world that is more divided, more polarized, more threatening, and more unjust. The environmental and public health impacts of a world out of balance have been visible in the social and political violence well before the COVID-19 crisis, however.

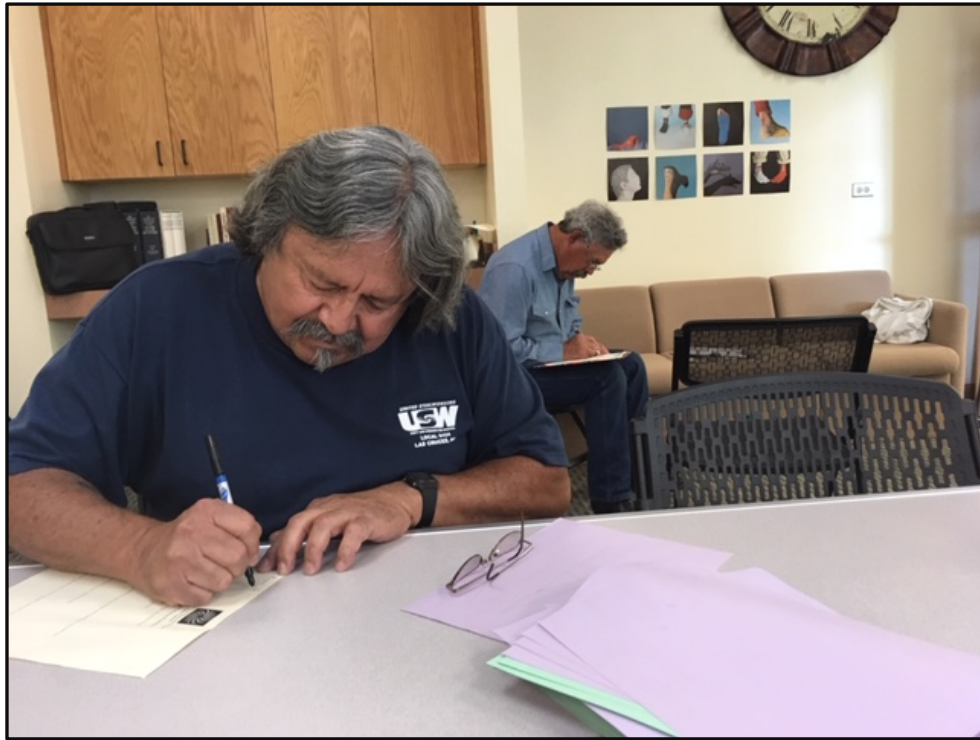


Figure 2: The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop at Bayard Public Library, Bayard, New Mexico, July 27, 2019.

Photo by Michelle Hall Kells available online

(<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>).



The human rights crises evidenced by thousands of environmental, economic, and political refugees pressing the limits of the U.S. imaginary over the past five years dramatically attests to unsustainable market economies and political tyrannies impacting local and global vulnerable communities. The paramilitary show-down against women and children seeking refuge in a growing caravan of the “haves and have-nots” of Latin America continues to play out at the geopolitical borders of our nation. As scholars and teachers living and working in what we might best term as a white nationalist proto-fascist political climate, I argue that educators have a moral responsibility and civic duty to respond by enhancing social access to literacy practice, engaging democratizing discourses, and opening spaces for public deliberation and dissent.

### **Open Access: Literacy as a Civil Right and Civic Responsibility**

This article triangulates the story of the women of the Ladies Auxiliary 209 of the Local 890 chapter of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers during the historic 1950s Empire Zinc Mine strike in Bayard, New Mexico with an examination of Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) as an efficacious approach to enhancing meaningful access to literacy practice through the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. First, I illustrate how the application of WACommunities principles and practices promotes literacy, civic engagement, and open access to knowledge-making and political participation. Second, I chronicle the process of researching, conceptualizing, and implementing the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project with a team of graduate students in the summer of 2018. Third, I discuss the implications of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project for teaching public writing and community literacy in open admission institutions. Finally, I extend this story to include reflections on the work of mentoring new leaders in the generative and restorative space of community activism and writing and the implications for literacy education for a “threatened generation.”<sup>2</sup>

This article illustrates how the formation of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project offers a rich allegory for the challenges of community-based writing projects. The construction of community writing workshops through the development of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project in southern New Mexico (situated at the border nexus of Texas, Arizona, and Mexico) ultimately helped to engage local community

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<sup>2</sup> For explication of the notion of a “threatened generation, see: Derek Owens, *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* (Urbana: NCTE, 2001).

members, activists, and citizen scholars in a deliberative process toward a collective vision for promoting the recovery, preservation, and restoration of the community's historic memory and rhetorical imagination.<sup>3</sup> The use of community writing to protect the collective memory and local archive of material cultural represents a powerful approach to enhancing community connections and political access. Deliberative practice as the act of giving witness to citizens' own civic experiences within their various spheres of belonging is democratic engagement in its most essential form.

Additionally, the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project offers a case study in the implementation of WACommunities principles and practices beyond the classroom. The governing principles of WACommunities provided the conceptual underpinnings for framing the mission and vision of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. In turn, the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project provides a proof of concept illustrating the veracity and generativity of WACommunities principles and practices outside the academy where citizen scholars and activists seek to constitute local knowledge and exercise civic agency.

### **Writing Across Communities: Citizen Scholars in and beyond the Classroom**

WACommunities began in 2004 at UNM as an alternative approach to traditional WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) models of cross-disciplinary and cross-community literacy education. Juan Guerra chronicles the turbulent evolution of WACommunities resisting what I have termed "vanilla flavored WAC" at UNM in *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*.<sup>4</sup> WACommunities was initially conceptualized and institutionalized in response to the complex cultural rhetorical ecology and ethnolinguistic landscape at the University of New Mexico, a designated Research 1 Hispanic-serving institution. WACommunities represents the first, if not only, approach to cross-curricular and cross-institutional literacy education that asserts that literacy education is both a civil right and civic responsibility.<sup>5</sup> As the primary conduit for the distribution of social goods such as food, shelter, work, health care, medical care, among others, WACommunities asserts

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<sup>3</sup> A version of this article was presented for the *La Canoa* Lecture at the National Hispanic Cultural Center with our team of graduate students on October 20, 2018 <<http://www.nhccnm.org/event/la-canoa-women-local-890-empire-mine-strike/>>

<sup>4</sup> Juan C. Guerra, *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* (Urbana, IL: NCTE-Routledge, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See: Michelle Hall Kells, "Writing Across Communities: Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies and Transcultural Citizenship." John Lioy, ed. *The International Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching* (Malden: Wiley Press, Winter 2017/Spring 2018).

that literacy represents a basic civil right (and basic necessity) for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Building on the fifty-year institutionalized history of Writing Across the Curriculum, WACommunities reconceptualized the governing principles of cross-disciplinary literacy education to foreground the needs of vulnerable communities in and beyond the college classroom. In brief, traditional WAC historically privileges SAEE (Standard American Edited English), focuses on teachers as the principal agent of literacy practice, and largely engages academic discourse and genres across the disciplines (or curriculum) as the primary scope of literacy education. WACommunities, in contrast, privileges the ethnolinguistic diversity of writers as agents of complex literacy practices across academic, professional, civic, and cultural spheres of belonging.

WACommunities, as an intellectual commonwealth, promotes a set of principles and practices that have since been incorporated into WAC programs by other institutions nationally. With my colleague Juan Guerra (University of Washington), I have been conducting workshops, presenting conference papers, and offering invited speaker presentations for the past fifteen years, working toward the broad circulation of a WACommunities framework to assist other institutions in developing and innovating their own site-specific, culturally responsive models of literacy education.<sup>6</sup> There is not a one-size-fits-all model for every institution. In these ways, WACommunities represents a resistance discourse not only to traditional WAC, but the corporatization of the university, the commodification of Big Comp, and the homogenizing discourses of Writing Program Administration programs that unequally benefit traditional, white, privileged, and Standard English-speaking student populations.

WACommunities, in contrast, argues that writing programs should reflect the cultural rhetorical ecologies of the diverse communities they serve.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, WACommunities has been adopted by St. John's University under the leadership of

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<sup>6</sup> For additional perspectives on WACommunities principles and practices, see: Juan C. Guerra. *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*. Urbana: NCTE-Routledge, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For an open-source user guide for adopting a Writing Across Communities approach to literacy education, see: Writing Across Communities Resources. Online. 2015 Community Writing Conference "Citizen Scholars and the Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies of Writing Across Communities" Workshop Working Papers. <<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcewac/>>

Kells

Anne Ellen Geller in support of its social justice mission of serving first-generation college student populations.<sup>8</sup>

First the WACommunities approach regards language and literacy as human processes integral to building and maintaining human communities (cultural rhetorical ecologies). Second, it recognizes language diversity as a reflection of rich cultural connections locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. Third, it adopts the notion that the acquisition of academic literacy (and of standard edited American English) should enhance students' communicative resources, not erase them. Finally, it advocates culturally responsive approaches to literacy education across and beyond the curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, WACommunities applies language learning and literacy education principles for diverse student populations toward the enactment of an organic (process-centered), synergistic (cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary), holistic (integrated), sustainable (flexible and resilient), and ethically and culturally sensitive approach to writing across academic, civic, and professional spheres.<sup>10</sup>

During its ten-year tenure at UNM (2004-2014), WACommunities hosted five civil rights symposia and more than thirty different literacy colloquia series, writing workshops, and celebrations of student writing focused on enhancing access to higher education by historically excluded groups. Community outreach remained integral in UNM WACommunities programs and events since its inception, seeking to enact critical pedagogies across a broad range of discourse communities (academic, civic, and professional).

### **“The Town-Gown Divide:” Inventing the Salt of Earth Recovery Project through Writing Communities**

Using WACommunities as a conceptual framework for community writing activism, four graduate students and I imagined and implemented the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project to generate and curate a Digital Cuentos archive of stories and memories of

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<sup>8</sup> Writing Across Communities has been most recently adopted by St. John's University under the direction of Writing Program Administrator, Anne Ellen Geller. For further information see: <<https://www.stjohns.edu/resources/places/writing-across-communities>>

<sup>9</sup> St. John's University. Writing Across Communities. Mission Statement. 15. May 2019. <<https://www.stjohns.edu/resources/places/writing-across-communities>>

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion about Writing Across Communities, see Juan C. Guerra, *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* (Urbana, IL: NCTE-Routledge, 2015).

the members of the historic Local 890 union in Bayard, New Mexico. From January to June 2018, the Salt of the Earth Project Coordinators Elvira Carrizal-Dukes, Steven Romero, Zakery Muñoz, Kelli Lycke-Martin, and I together conceptualized the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project along with community leaders in Bayard, Silver City, and the United Steelworkers Union Local 9424 in Las Cruces, New Mexico. We imagined the project from the onset as a cross-regional and cross-institutional endeavor. Our ultimate goal was to construct a public digital archive of *testimonios* and archival materials from community members about their experiences and memories related to the historic 1950s Empire Zinc Mine strike. A start-up research grant from the UNM Center for Regional Studies provided support for travel and materials for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project and the Digital Cuentos Writing Workshops in Bayard and Silver City, New Mexico.

From the onset, we sought to engage the cultural rhetorical ecologies of these local communities. At the crossroads of the Southwest, this community has been shaped by indigenous cultures, colonial histories, and mining economies for hundreds of years. The Central Mining District of the region was also the site for one of the most politically robust Mexican American labor unions (Local 890) in the twentieth century. It was my primary goal as chair of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project to cultivate the conditions for deliberative democratic practice and to construct a platform, a safe space for community members to exercise their own voices and represent their own experiences as citizens of this historically complex community.

I looked to Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism as a productive perspective from which to engage deliberative democratic discourse in this highly polarized political environment. Rather than approaching the community writing workshop as a space for reproducing a battleground of enemies, we sought to construct an agora of citizens for engaging adversarial positions. In the *Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe, argues that an adversary, in contrast to an enemy, is "somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question."<sup>11</sup> Antagonism, from this point of view, represents a conflict between enemies whereas agonism represents a conflict between adversaries. Applying Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism we hoped to cultivate the community writing workshops in public spaces (within local libraries and museums) as an *agora* (a democratized public sphere) where citizens could engage with each other in the messy work of citizenship, to tell their stories, to advance their own rhetorical positions, to represent their truths and together determine the fate of the historic Local 890 union

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<sup>11</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 102.

hall where Mexican American citizens staged one of the most effective labor strikes in U.S. history.

Moreover, as an academic researcher and scholar who has engaged in the slow-research of inquiry, I was determined to keep the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project research findings free, open, and accessible—not buried away in the lengthy, mystified, and protracted process of scholarly publication. It was imperative to me to keep the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project current, relevant, free, accessible, transparent, and inclusive.<sup>12</sup> Above all else, the stories, the murals, the artifacts, and archival materials related to the historic Local 890 union hall needed to remain the intellectual property of the community. We sought to resist the academic practice of cultural extraction and to eschew using research methods that risked appropriating community narrative resources. We concluded that a community writing format would be most efficacious toward these goals.

Hence my team and I painstakingly designed the Salt of the Earth Digital Cuentos Writing Workshops as an open-source, multi-modal platform and implemented what community members fondly referred to as “old school” (analog print text) as well as “new school” (digital online) modalities. All print texts (writing materials) generated by participants remained the property of the participants to take with them or were shredded on site. All digital material was uploaded or “published” by the participants themselves and/or downloaded on a memory stick for participants to take with them. As such, we did not collect any “data” or identifying information about the participants.

Additionally, we implemented bilingual literacy practices by generating workshop materials in both English and Spanish. We facilitated a series of community writing workshops at a variety of public venues to generate an open-access digital archive. The content for the archive was composed entirely by community members themselves as they came to write their own stories and curate their own archival materials together in public spaces. From May to July 2018, our team coordinated and hosted community writing workshops at the University of New Mexico, Western New Mexico University, Silver City Public Library, Silver City Museum, and Bayard Public Library. We generated bilingual promotional flyers and writing prompts in both Spanish and English (See Appendix). We aimed to provide the support, resources, guidance, and opportunity for local community members to write and publish their

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<sup>12</sup> Local media articles about the Salt of the Recovery Project is available through these newspaper sources, see: *Silver City Sun News* <<https://www.scsun-news.com/story/news/2018/07/19/salt-earth-recovery-project-museum-july-28/792593002/>> and the *Grant County Beat* <<http://www.grantcountybeat.com/news/news-articles/45959-salt-of-the-earth-recovery-project>>

own stories. The circuitous journey that had brought us to the Central Mining District in 2018 had begun some four years before when I first launched research about the women of the Empire Zinc mine strike. Bringing a scholarly understanding of the historical context and the current challenges facing the local community in the aftermath of the recent decertification of Local 890 was critical to the success of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. The emergence of the Salt of the Earth Recovery remains inextricably aligned with this community's enduring connections to the Cold War era labor activism and the post-World War II Mexican American civil rights movement.

### **The Story of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project: Engaging the Topoi of Writing Across Communities for the Public Sphere**

In October 2014, eight months after the death of Cold War era Mexican American civil rights activist Vicente Ximenes, I read the startling news in the *Albuquerque Journal* that the historic Local 890 made famous by the groundbreaking 1954 film, *The Salt of the Earth*, had voted to decertify the union after more than 72 years of existence. I was drafting the final chapters of *Vicente Ximenes, LBJ's Great Society, and Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric* and examining how the cultural rhetorical ecology of New Mexico shaped the rhetorical imagination of post-World War II Mexican American activists like Vicente Ximenes. The use of deliberative practice as political resistance throughout the Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement (and the 1950s Empire Zinc Mine Strike, most specifically) was especially illustrative of how the engagement of public rhetoric across diverse groups can successfully move communities toward democratic pluralism.<sup>13</sup>

With further inquiry, I became puzzled by the conspicuous absence of the voices of the women of Local 890 about their role in the Empire Zinc Mine strike and the conditions influencing the decertification of the historic union after more than seven decades. The film *The Salt of the Earth* had become a powerful icon of the Chicana/o movement through the 1970s. The decertification of Local 890, whose union members were actually featured in the film based on their role in the 1950-52 Empire Zinc mine strike, seemed to happen beneath the notice of the rest of the region. The silence was deafening. This vote to decertify Local 890 became the exigence to explore more deeply how the women involved in the epic Empire Zinc

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<sup>13</sup> A short history of the role of the 1950s Empire Zinc Mine Strike in the evolution of the Cold War Mexican American Civil Rights movement is available in Kells, *Vicente Ximenes, LBJ's Great Society, and Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric*, 86-88.



mine strike of the early 1950s had shaped the rhetorical imagination of the Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement.

Two years later in April 2016, I found myself driving over the Gila Mountains to meet with the leaders of the Local 9424 of the United Steelworkers Union in Las Cruces, New Mexico to discuss the decertification of Local 890 and to see the decommissioned union hall in Bayard, New Mexico. With the decertification of Local 890, the fate of the historic union hall with its remarkable murals and archival materials was uncertain if not threatened. I started asking questions of local historians, scholars, leaders, and public officials about the women of the Local 890 who held the picket line. The history embedded in the archive and the murals painted on the front of the union hall represented one of the most dramatic protests of the Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement.

The Local 890 chapter of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers of Bayard, New Mexico was comprised of 1,400 members of predominantly Mexican American and Mexican-migrant laborers during the early 1950s. The members of the Local 890 launched one of the nation's most effective and groundbreaking strikes, extending fifteen months from October 1950 to January 1952. The deconstruction of ancestral communities into company towns as illustrated in this landmark case provided a catalyst for political activism. The grievances of the Empire Zinc workers included racial discrimination in job duties and unequal pay, toxic work environments, no-strike contract clauses, and inequitable power-sharing between labor and management. The standoff between the women and local law enforcement agents and the resulting incarceration of more than forty women, seventeen children, and a six-month-old baby shocked newspaper reporters and audiences locally and nationally.

The *Silver City Enterprise* reported on July 1, 1951 at the peak of the Empire Zinc mine strike: "Past experience has shown the situation a difficult one and the jailing of nearly 60 women and children brought considerable sorrow to the office of Sheriff Goforth."<sup>14</sup> While local media depicted the women holding the strike line, none of the local media directly interviewed or published the perspectives of the women strikers themselves. Local 890 union activism had deep roots in the Central Mining District in southern New Mexico that long preceded the turbulent show-down with Empire Zinc. The women of the Ladies Auxiliary Local 209 were already mobilizing for gender equality and full inclusion in Local 890 before their groundbreaking role in the Empire Zinc mine strike.

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<sup>14</sup> "Court Rules in Favor of Empire," *Silver City Enterprise* (Silver City, NM), July 5, 1951, 1.



According to James Lorence in *How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America*, the political activism of Local 890 members provided the necessary exigencies leading up to the Empire Zinc job action and “the militance of Chicana women in New Mexico actually preceded the long strike of 1950-1952.”<sup>15</sup> In 1949, the women of Ladies Auxiliary Local 209 had drafted and submitted a manifesto titled “Resolution on Equality and Fraternity of Mexican American Women” to the Mexican American male members of Local 890 to challenge historical patterns of gender discrimination and inequitable distribution of power within the union. When the women of the Ladies Auxiliary 209 stepped up to take over the picket lines after law enforcement agencies placed an injunction of the men of Local 890 preventing them from holding the strike line, they were already well-versed in political activist and feminist rhetorics. None of the women who drafted the 1949 “Resolution on Equality and Fraternity of Mexican American Women” or voted to hold the strike line in 1951 survive today. Seven decades later the legacy of the film *The Salt of the Earth* endures as a fictionalized account of the events of the Empire Zinc mine strike while the lives and labor of the women of the Local 209 remain silenced and relegated to historical obscurity.

The story of loss and suffering of the workers of Local 890 and Ladies Auxiliary 2019 still resonates in this small mining community. The battered landscape outside the Central Mining District of Southern New Mexico is a disturbing reminder of the tremendous impact, human as well as environmental, of the multi-national copper mining industry on the high desert landscape. The collective resistance of the women and men of the Local 890 captured regional and national attention, ultimately inspiring independent film producers, Paul and Sylvia Jerrico to make a film based on the incident. The Jerricos first heard about the mine workers strike in Bayard on a trip to New Mexico from Hollywood to attend a gathering of leftist artists, intellectuals, and activists in Taos. They made a journey to Bayard to visit the members of Local 890 and to support their labor efforts. The 1954 film about the women of the Empire Zinc Mine strike became the collaborative artistic and political project of the Jerricos along with local community members who performed and helped to write the script for the film. Screen writers ultimately adopted the trope that become the title of the film, *The Salt of the Earth*<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> James J. Lorence *How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Salt of the Earth*, produced by Paul Jerrico and Sylvia Jerrico, directed by Herbert J. Biberman, (Independent Productions/International Union of Mine, Mill, & Smelter Workers, 1954; Alpha Video Distributors, 2004).

The decertification of Local 890 union, as such, provided the social catalyst of *paideia* for democratic deliberative action through the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. Inviting the community to tell their stories and advance their own arguments about the fate of the decommissioned Local 890 union hall represented an occasion for deliberative democracy.

The film offered the organizing trope for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project, helping us as coordinators provide a rhetorical frame for the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshops. The triangulation of what we knew about the Cold War Mexican American labor movement with the key principles of WACommunities as a model of civic engagement set the framework for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. The *topoi* or framing argument therefore that provided the first principles for designing and implementing the writing workshops these WACommunities ideological assumptions about literacy assert: writing as a cultural ecology is organic; synergistic; holistic; resilient. These five *topoi*, therefore, set the conceptual parameters for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project and the enactment of the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshops.

### Writing is Organic

Culture like language, oral as well as written, is a living thing. From the outset, the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project team adopted this first principle of WACommunities for the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshops. Writing involves an inherently dynamic, unstable, and transformative organic process. Put most simply, culture and language--and by extension, writing as a cultural practice--are conditioned by the same natural cycles of birth (emergence and invention), death (entropy), growth (transformation), and dormancy (incubation) that determine the larger universe which environs (envelopes) us. We see writing as first and foremost an ecology of relationships.

The writing workshops needed to engage these very same organic processes. We needed to accommodate and account for the larger energy cycles in which participants live and work. Recognizing these needs meant expecting that some of our workshop participants would need space and time to grieve the losses about which they wanted to write (death and entropy). Some just came to talk. For others, the moment provided a startling emergent (birth and invention) opportunity. Some came eager and ready to write. Many came looking for encouragement and support in writing their stories (dormancy and incubation). Most came wanting help transcribing, articulating, developing, and narrating the stories buried deep within them. Most

wanted technical support in order to digitize the archival materials and documents they wanted to contribute to the archive. And in one workshop setting at the Silver City Public Library, no one came at all.

### **Writing is Synergistic**

The second *topos* we adopted from WACommunities principles was that writing is inherently creative and synergistic. We needed to allow and cultivate opportunities for synchronicity. In other words, the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshops needed to be playful, open, invigorating, and generative. We considered the diversity of our target audience first and foremost. We established three workstations or makers' spaces for the workshop. The participants began the writing process at Station One with colored pens and pencils, scratch paper, and a simple writing prompt in Spanish and English, responding to these four framing questions:

1. Describe your experience or knowledge on any of following: Empire Zinc mine strike; Local 890 Union; Bayard Local 890 Union Hall; The Salt of the Earth film.
2. Recall how these experiences and knowledge were significant to you and your community then.
3. Explain why they are still significant today.
4. Tell us what should become of the Local 890 Union Hall in the future.

Next, workshop participants worked with a writing consultant at Station Two to develop their invention notes from the writing prompt into narratives. Finally, another writing consultant assisted participants at Station Three in editing, digitizing, scanning, and uploading their documents to the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project website. I remember watching several participants enthusiastically calling their grandchildren on their flip phones to tell them to "google" them to see their stories on the Salt of the Earth Project website.

### **Writing is Holistic**

The third WACommunities *topos* informing the invention of the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop is the pragmatic notion of culture as a holistic system. The part contains the whole and the whole contains the part. Hence, we did not try to saturate the local community with marketing and branding campaigns for the Salt of

Kells

the Earth Recovery Project. We operated on the assumption that the natural ripple effect of information circulation would reach the primary stakeholders in the community. Local citizens had invited us into the community. As such, we decided to allow the community members to control the circulation of information and invite citizens through the local “grapevine” to shape participation.

Moreover, if the parts connect to the whole and whole is contained in the parts, then news of the writing workshops would reach those citizens with the greatest interest (politically, culturally, historically, and socially) in the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. We hoped that the workshops would be self-selective and naturally representative of the community stakeholders. The risk of taking a saturation marketing model would be to inadvertently catalyze historic “whitelash” and possibly overwhelm the elderly Mexican American Spanish-speaking minority groups in the community with the dominant Anglo majority detractors. We believed that a holistic approach to writing would be the most productive, while also protecting the workshops from becoming hostile writing environments. Our assumptions were correct, and our approach proved largely effective.

### **Writing is Resilient**

The notion of resilience represents the fourth principle and perhaps one of the most important *topos* informing the implementation of Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshops because none of the workshops in practice were actually implemented exactly as planned. We planned and prepared ourselves for the unexpected, and the unexpected became the reality. We did not expect to have a dozen community members waiting for us at 9:00 a.m. on Friday, July 27<sup>th</sup> at the Bayard Public Library, the first day of the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop. To complicate matters, one of our writing consultants canceled the day before the workshop for family emergency reasons. Another writing consultant joined us for the first time without any previous experience or training working with the Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop.

In short, we arrived at the Bayard Public Library, carrying baskets of freshly sharpened pencils, soft pastel-colored scratch paper, whimsical scented pens, a scanner, a TV monitor, two laptop computers, digital memory sticks, and a set of writing prompts. We expected participants would trickle in over the course of the workshop. Instead we found the local citizens waiting for us, lined up along the walls in the library conference room. I quickly began helping participants write their stories with a note app on my iPhone while Kelli, Zakery, and Elvira opened up their laptops

and started assisting writers one by one. We took turns helping the participants snap “selfies,” scanning archival materials, and uploading their documents. The TV monitor projected their uploaded stories and images as soon as they were published on the Salt of the Earth Project website. Some of the participants began calling other community members on their cell phones to come join the exuberant chaos at the Bayard Public Library. A few participants, led by Rachel Valencia, a lifetime Bayard citizen and survivor of the Empire Zinc mine strike, helped edit and give feedback to the new arrivals. In sum, without resilience, neither the synergistic or organic processes of writing can or will happen.

### Writing is a Cultural Ecology

“Ecology” as an organizing *topos* helped us situate the writing workshops within the cultural rhetorical ecology of the local community. To understand the concept of ecology at its root term *oikos* (home), we engaged the occasion to share stories within these public locations from a stance of hospitality and reverence. This notion ultimately allowed us to cultivate the conditions for what evolved into remarkable generative acts of self-authorization by the participants in the workshops. I will always remember the moment I met Rachel Valencia. She was among the first community members to arrive at the Bayard Public Library on that Friday morning. My graduate students and I glided through the glass doors like a circus parade carrying our flyers, writing prompts, colored papers, techie equipment, and rag-tag assorted materials in a flurry of excitement and anticipation.

Citizens stood, waiting for us with their own memorabilia of vintage photos, old union posters, bumper stickers, Local 890 flyers, newspaper articles, and Chino Mine newsletters from the Cold War era. Rachel approached me directly as we set up the stations for the writing workshop. She asked me what the mission was for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. Rachel queried me about our process, our goals, and our intentions. She similarly interrogated each member of the team. She watched. She listened. And then she came to me and said, “I have seen so many activist types come here to push their own agendas over the years. Then we never hear from them again. They take our stories; push their politics, and they leave.” I immediately recalled these same expressed fears I had encountered by other community leaders with their tales of outside agitators coming into the Central Mining District. I briefly mentioned to Rachel my recollections of reading newspaper reports about the Brown Berets arriving in 1971 and staging a protest in Silver City as described by the Western New Mexico University newspaper *The Mustang*:

An unexpected, unannounced, and unwelcome visit was bestowed on Western New Mexico University by members of the Brown Beret organization that was stationed in Grant County. The Berets, termed by the Associated Press as a militant far-left Chicano organization, visited Western several times in attempts to encourage Mexican American students to aid them in their cause of social revolution.<sup>17</sup>

“Yes,” she said, “That’s what I’m talking about. Outsiders come here to push their own agendas!” Rachel sat facing me and began to share her story. She started to recount her own memories of the Empire Zinc Mine Strike. Rachel said: “Sometime during the summer, as the women were picketing, the district attorney Thomas Foy, gave the sheriff and some deputies permission to break the women’s picket line. We didn’t anticipate the violence that would come.” Rachel paused and showed me her hands. She told me that she had walked out of a conference celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Salt of the Earth* because outside agitators had used the event to promote their own political agenda. “I can see that you aren’t doing that here,” she concluded. Then, she stood up and said that she was ready to write down her story.<sup>18</sup> Rachel remained at the workshop for some two hours writing, talking, and helping other participants edit their narratives for the Digital Cuentos website. As a retired high school English teacher, Rachel had spent her working life teaching literacy in the Central Mining District. As she was getting ready to leave the workshop, Rachel asked me to write down the website URL for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos and then poignantly told me, “I’m going to give this website to my grandchildren. I never really told them about my experiences in the strike.”

### **Testimonios: Enduring Cold War Rhetorics and Border Histories**

More than sixty-five years after the Empire Zinc Mine Strike, I am inspired by the moral courage of the leaders of Local 890 and their descendants who are keeping the story alive in Bayard. This story continues to reach across generation, class, race, gender, and national boundaries. The power of moral courage, like the Empire Zinc Mine Strike, extends through our collective consciousness to stir our souls when we need it most. After more than six decades, those stories ripple across time in the sites,

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<sup>17</sup> Jerry Walz, “Berets Visit Western,” *The Mustang*. (Silver City), November 23, 1971, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Rachel Juarez Valencia. Digital Cuentos. Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. <<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>> 10 December 2018.

images, and narratives surrounding the preservation and protection of the Local 890 union hall. In follow-up to the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project, local leaders have since constituted *ad hoc* advisory groups to shape the public memory and chart the future of the historic union hall.

The leadership demonstrated by the women of the Empire Zinc Mine Strike represents one of the most compelling and inspiring moments of civic activism in U.S. history. The legacy and sacrifice of these leaders remain inscribed in the murals, narratives, and paintings of the Local 890 Union Hall. These are the *testimonios*, the resonances breaking the silence. This is the very purpose of the Salt of the Recovery Project: to celebrate the lives, labor, and leadership of the women and men of Local 890. Complicating the narrative of democracy with dissent, difference, and deliberation has always enlarged the U.S. rhetorical imagination. If there is a moment when we needed to complicate our story of self-governance and civic engagement, it is *this* moment of unabashed white nationalism, unfettered xenophobia, and unrestrained male heteronormative hegemony.

Triangulating my findings from over twenty years of archival research on the Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement with the fifteen-year trajectory of WACommunities as a resistance model of WAC for K-16 institutionalized literacy education and the past three years imagining and implementing the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project all underscore the generative scope of civil rights discourse as epistemic rhetoric. These alignments reaffirm my commitment to opening up community spaces for deliberative democratic practice within and beyond the academy, working toward a more inclusive, more diverse, and more sustainable future. Our experiences constellating WACommunities principles and practices through community writing practices with the Digital Cuentos platform of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project suggest productive strategies for serving and supporting shelter-in-place student writers grappling with the implications of belonging to this current COVID-19 generation. The distinct challenges we as teachers face working, writing, and advocating for vulnerable student populations across a digital divide will require a deliberate effort to humanize literacy education across communities. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reflects in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, “Language is our gift and our responsibility.”<sup>19</sup>

Constituting open access educational environments (in and beyond the classroom) must be organic, resilient, synergistic, and holistic. As a dynamic ecology

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<sup>19</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 2013), 347.



of relationships, I would urge advocates and teachers in open access institutions to strategically resist overly-determined (what I call “Big Comp”) models of literacy education and seek pedagogical approaches that cultivate small circles for writing, sharing, and supporting writers engaged in the struggle to tell their own stories. We need to be careful not to engage students as consumers in big data online practices that mine our students’ personal resources and then turn the raw material of their experience into narratives of extraction. Approaching students as citizens helps to resist the tendency within neo-liberal corporate university models that construct students as consumers and markets and reduce ethnolinguistic identity to property. As Juan Guerra argues in *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*, our students are first and always citizens-in-the-making.

The work of citizenship involves rhetorically navigating systems of power and taking a role in governance of the public commons. Incorporating community-based writing in open access college classrooms, as such, is inherently political, adversarial, and controversial. Backlash is an inevitable outcome. The *paideia* of community-based writing is so multi-directional—writing from, writing with, writing to, and writing about who and where we are positioned as citizens. It is so intuitive and so threatening because by coming to tell our stories and writing ourselves as citizen scholars we ultimately bridge the distance between us. We are all experts of our own experience. The challenges are tremendous.

By and large, the academy as the arbiter of knowledge-making resists this kind of intellectual porosity and partnership. We cannot expect educational institutions to readily welcome de-centering literacy education away from the dominant discourse of academic authority. History tells us that arbiters of authority never share power without struggle. While writing about civil rights activist Vicente Ximenes I soon learned that he was asked to leave his position as an economist and researcher at the University of New Mexico because of his labor activism in New Mexico throughout the 1950s. Similarly, the women of the Local 890 struggled for gender equality and fair labor practices and faced serving jail sentences for their activism. Those stories risk erasure. Like the story of Vicente Ximenes, the women of the Empire Zinc mine strike have remained relegated to historical obscurity for some seventy years. The fiction of the film evolved over time into a kind of presence to fill the absence of their personal narratives. Rachel Valencia, who was a twelve-year-old girl standing in for her adult relatives on the day she was hauled into the Bayard jail, is the only living survivor today of the historic Empire Zinc mine strike. She was the only survivor to ever write and publish her own story—and that opportunity was made available through the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project.



Finally, as an allegory of the future of writing programs, WACommunities while flourishing at open admission institutions across the nation over the past fifteen years, has yet to receive the administrative support and institutional recognition it has achieved in these other colleges and universities.<sup>20</sup> Hence, only by enacting WACommunities as an intellectual commonwealth that crosses over academic, professional, and civic spheres—both institutionally and regionally—is it possible to realize the full spectrum of rhetorical agency. If we are not overly invested in controlling our textual outcomes (as intellectual property for exclusive academic audiences) and our own positions as scholars and experts (as platforms for illusive extrinsic rewards of the academy), we can invigorate the deliberative sphere with new voices, new visions, and new stories that leaders like Rachel Valencia write for themselves.

Keeping a current of democratizing discourses flowing through our university writing programs is critical to resisting the increasing corporatization of the university and the enabling role of writing program administration in standardizing and homogenizing the inherent ethnolinguistic diversity and intellectual pluralism of our student populations. WACommunities resists this growing tendency in the field of Composition Studies and challenges writing programs to become more culturally responsive and structurally de-centered. Otherwise, we risk reproducing the dominant narratives of oppressive educational systems which replicate themselves hierarchically to benefit those already in power and to serve the most elite (rather than the most vulnerable) constituencies in our communities.

The increasing trend within Writing Program Administration (WPA) toward appropriating the role of public fiduciary over the institutional resources of literacy education as the intellectual property of WPAs themselves and the university administration risks turning our writing programs into “company towns” and our classrooms into mining operations for textbook companies extracting the cultural resources of local communities for profit-centered enterprises. The institutional administrative backlash that ultimately dismantled WACommunities at UNM, in turn, serendipitously aligned with the formation of Salt of the Earth Recovery Project and the eventual mobilization of UNM faculty and graduate students toward unionization during the Spring 2019. When the *LatinoUSA* documentary about the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project was released in April 2019 by National Public Radio, UNM graduate

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<sup>20</sup> The University of New Mexico Writing Across Communities digital archive and website was deactivated in 2019 by the UNM administration. For an open source archive of WACommunities online resources and support materials see: <<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcewac>>

students were coincidentally organizing a Walk Out in solidarity with the faculty movement toward unionization (Figure 3).

Interesting, the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project emerged within a kind of regional political chiasmus with the decertification of the ill-fated Local 890 in 2014 and then the emergence of the UNM union in 2019. Reflective of historical anti-union patterns, UNM administration hired a nationally recognized “union busting” legal team through 2018-2019 at the same time as the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project was gaining traction in Southern New Mexico. As the flagship institution of the state with branch campuses throughout the region, UNM ultimately adopted some of the same retaliatory and obstructionist tactics implemented by the multi-national mining companies in Southern New Mexico during the Cold War era. Whereas the strategic erasure of historical memory by public institutions in Southern New Mexico and the sustained targeting of union organizers and supporters by multi-national extraction industry prevailed with the ultimate decertification of Local 890 in September 2014, these same anti-union tactics did not overtake the unionization movement at UNM five years later.<sup>21</sup>

The history of social justice movements indicates that democracy does not follow a linear trajectory of change. It is a chiasmus, a braiding, a continuous spiral of change and resistance. The struggle to protect fair labor at the Chino Mine succumbed in Bayard, New Mexico with a vote 236-83 to decertify the 72-year-old Local 890 union in 2014. However, as the UNM faculty union vote demonstrated, the unionization movement in New Mexico did not die out completely. Five years later, in an unprecedented show of support, two-thirds of UNM faculty ultimately voted to approve unionization five years later in October 2019 in spite of the sustained repressive and retaliatory tactics by the administration and board of regents of the largest institution of higher learning in the state (Figure 4).<sup>22</sup> Within these shifting political currents and turbulent cultural rhetorical ecologies of New Mexico, the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project found both local and national traction. Evolving from a local grassroots advocacy research project, the story about the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project quickly transformed into a nationally circulated documentary.

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<sup>21</sup> Olivier Uyttebrouck, “End of the Line for Chinos Storied Union.” *Albuquerque Journal* (Albuquerque, NM), October 12, 2014, A1.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan Boetel. “UNM Faculty Wins Landslide.” *Albuquerque Journal* (Albuquerque, NM), October 18, 2019. <<https://www.abqjournal.com/1380231/unm-faculty-approve-unions.html>>

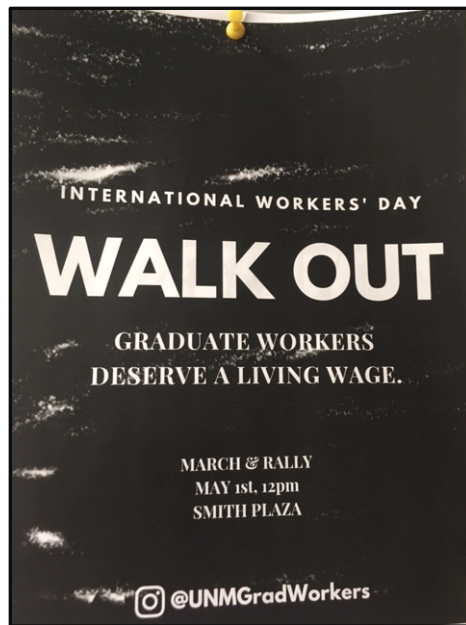


Figure 3: UNM Graduate Students staged university-wide labor protest and walk-out on May 1, 2019 in solidarity with unionization movement.

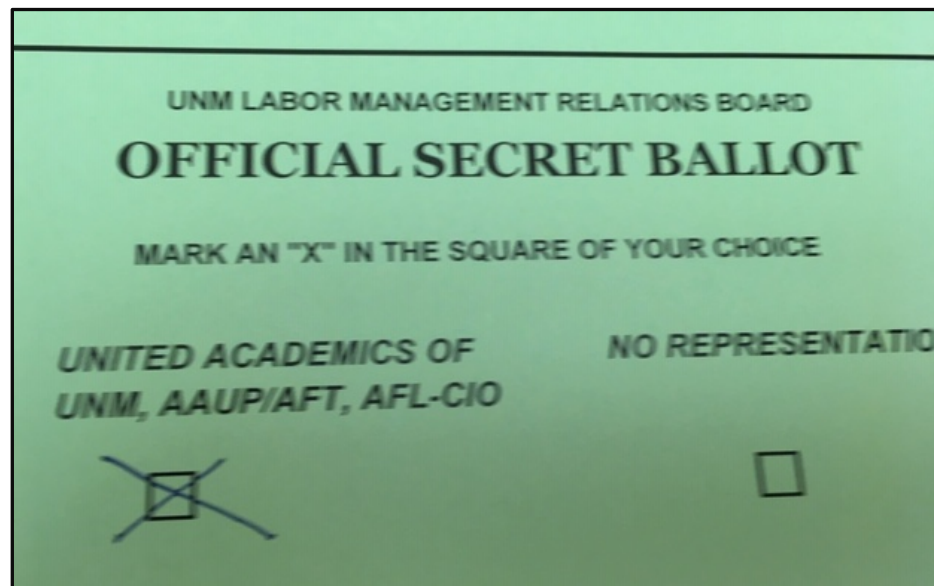


Figure 4: In a historic vote, UNM faculty voted to approve unionization with United Academics of UNM, AAUP/AFT, AFL-CIO in October 2019.

Sayre Quevado, associate producer of National Public Radio's *LatinoUSA* contacted me in October 2018 immediately following the completion of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project. He had learned about the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project through the local grapevine and asked to interview me in Bayard, New Mexico to discuss the process and outcomes of the project. I queried the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project coordinators as well as the local citizens of Bayard. With their approval, I personally shared my story of launching the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project and provided Sayre Quevado and National Public Radio host Maria Hinojosa with over two hours of interviews. I conducted these NPR interviews in the Bayard Public Library, the local M&A café, and by phone for the *LatinoUSA* documentary "And They Will Inherit It" which was released on May 1, 2019.<sup>23</sup> Other community members came to tell their stories as well.

Since my team and I did not gather personal contact information about any of the participants in the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project, I had no insider information to offer the NPR research team when they drove into Bayard cross-county from New York City in November 2018. The production crew soon discovered upon arrival that they needed to exercise patience and just wait for the local citizens to reach out to them. When asked for guidance, I advised Quevado and his production team to simply make themselves available to anyone who wished to share their stories at the local library. They did as I suggested. And many of the citizens who participated in the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project elected to come out and contribute to the *LatinoUSA* documentary. Rachel Valencia, however, did not. Her absence from the documentary is telling. The only other survivors of the Empire Zinc mine strike died within weeks of the NPR research visit to Bayard. The silence remains deafening.

My team and I sought to privilege, first and foremost, historically marginalized voices in telling their stories of the landmark Cold War era Empire Zinc Mine Strike. The community response for the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project was not only overwhelming; it was awe-inspiring. The safety and solidarity constituted among allies and advocates opened a space for an outpouring of storytelling. The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project participants exercised authority and retained agency over their own texts, their own writing, and their own stories. Our team simply provided the conduit for circulating their stories and the publishing the cultural materials they wanted to share. The community came to us. In turn, we simply provided the media and the means for citizen scholars to exercise authorship. They remained the experts of their

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<sup>23</sup> Sayre Quevado. "And They Will Inherit It." National Public Radio LatinoUSA. Documentary. <<https://www.latinousa.org/2019/05/01/empirezincstrike/>>

own histories. Likewise, open access educational spaces need to protect students' right to resist and take authority over their own writing. Furthermore, as writing teachers and researchers we should not be mining and extracting student writing from local institutions as raw intellectual capital for producing textbooks and fueling the textbook industry. Educational resistance in this current national political climate, however, can become an act of civil disobedience.

### **Implications for Teaching Writing in Open Access Colleges and Universities**

The Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement and the Empire Zinc Mine strike remind us that civil disobedience always has its costs, visible and invisible. There are inevitable consequences of resistance. The emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social outcomes of taking a stance against the dominant discourse are often carried for a lifetime. The community members who risked their lives and personal wellbeing to hold the picket line and then tell their stories seventy years later through the Salt of the Recovery Project spoke of the residual loss, ostracism, and trauma. The glorification of the post-World War II civil rights movement direct-action events, like the Empire Zinc Mine Strike, unwittingly masks the enduring collective trauma, personal losses, and embodied pain that endures long after the battle is won. These are important take-away points for those of us teaching writing in open access institutions that serve historically excluded student populations. The right to remain silent is as important as the right to speak. The key take-away for us as literacy educators illustrates that building community partnerships that efficaciously engage the “the available means of persuasion” and the robust range of academic discourses in service to the work of enhancing the agency of vulnerable communities is possible and rich with possibility.

As writing instructors of historically underserved citizens, we can cultivate the conditions that allow our students to represent the perspectives and narratives of their journeys. By constituting makers' spaces within our classrooms, writing centers, studios, and workshops that engage the *topoi* of WACommunities, we can invite emerging writers into academic, professional, and civic discourses. When we operate on the assumption that writing is organic, synergistic, holistic, resilient, and that it represents a cultural ecology of relationships we honor the languages, literacies, and legacies of writers. WACommunities offers a framework that encourages us as teaches to constitute writing habitats within which the translingual, transgenre, transcultural, and transnational identities and experiences of our students become productive

rhetorical *topoi*, those rich places where our students' own arguments are constructed and found.

Finally, the growing hispanicization of twenty-first century U.S. society demands greater attention within and outside the academy foregrounding Latina political and social histories. Sexual violence, discrimination, erasure, and marginalization remain insidiously gendered. There was no erasing the political, racial, economic or social binaries across which the women of Local 890 transgressed to hold the picket line and risk their own safety and security (as well as the safety and security of their own children). Enduring economic, health, political, educational, and professional disparities among groups reinforce the need not only for sustained engagement with civil rights rhetorics, but also for more histories of the rhetoric employed by Latina leaders in their own civil rights struggles. The current public health pandemic disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities and people of color along with the human rights crises on our southern borders where tens of thousands of environmental refugees from South and Central America seek asylum (women and children detained and deported in staggering numbers) collapse the boundaries between immigration, civil rights, ecology, and humanitarian issues in ways that will continue to agitate the limits of the U.S. political imagination throughout the twenty-first century.

The scarcity of scholarship about the work of Latina leaders in K-16 literacy education is slowly being addressed in the field of Rhetoric and Composition.<sup>24</sup> As an increasingly threatened population, immigrant communities across the Americas are facing growing educational, linguistic, cultural, and political conditions that threaten the safety and survival of millions of women and children. The need for strengthening the educational bridge between K-16 and university-level education has never been more critical.<sup>25</sup> The false divisions erected between the work of elementary, secondary, and post-secondary educational leaders ultimately balkanize literacy education for

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<sup>24</sup> Jessica Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1864-1911* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> To extend the conversation on Latina leadership in literacy education across the curriculum see: Laura Gonzáles and Michelle Hall Kells, eds. *Latina Leadership: Language and Literacy Education Across Communities*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, Forthcoming).

Latina (as well as Latino) student populations and create intellectual hierarchies to the detriment of historically underserved and politically vulnerable student populations.<sup>26</sup> Like the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project, we need to make more visible Latina leaders in the public sphere. We need to support Latina leadership across the curriculum in open admission as well as research-level institutions to map the future of literacy education for a threatened generation. The voices of women leaders like Rachel Valencia remind us as teachers that our scholarly lives are always political, always consequential, and always engaged in the necessary messiness of knowledge-making across communities.<sup>27</sup>

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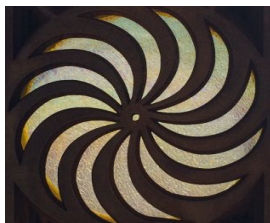
<sup>26</sup> I prefer using the term “Latina” to honor the self-representation of Latina grassroots activists through history and to problematize the cover term “Latinx” currently in circulation in academic and intellectual communities. Consistent with self-ascribing labeling practices of Latin American women, mestiza social activists, and working-class Latinas, I resist erasing the historical institutionalized discrimination of women of color by adopting the gender neutralizing adoption of “x” for the purposes of this article.

<sup>27</sup> I wish to extend a special thanks to Kristina Gutierrez, Yndalecio Hinojosa, Sue Hum, and Anne Ellen Geller for their generous and insightful guidance through the writing of this article.



## Appendix 1

### LA SAL DE LA TIERRA, PROYECTO DE RECUPERACIÓN *TALLER COMUNITARIO DE ESCRITURA DE CUENTOS DIGITALES*



**Visite el *Taller comunitario de escritura de cuentos digitales*, traiga sus historias, fotos clásicas y demás recuerdos para compartir.**

Los asesores de La Sal de la Tierra, proyecto de recuperación, estarán disponibles para acompañarle en la escritura del borrador, la digitalización y la inserción en la red de sus historias. Además de darle recomendaciones para el futuro.

El viernes, 27 de Julio, 2018  
9:00 a.m to 12:00 p.m.  
Bayard Public Library

El Viernes, 27 de Julio, 2018  
1:00 P.m. to 4:00 p.m.  
Silver City Public Library

El Sabodo, 28 de Julio, 2018  
10:00 P.M. to 2:00 P.M.  
Silver City Museum

DIGITAL CUENTOS  
<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>

#### **Misión**

La misión de La Sal de la Tierra, proyecto de recuperación, es reconocer las vidas, quehaceres y liderazgo de mujeres y hombres del Local 890 y conmemorar su rol revolucionario en la huelga en la Mina Empire Zinc desarrollada en los años 1950 a 1952.

#### **Visión**

La visión de La Sal de la Tierra, proyecto de recuperación, es honrar las historias de mujeres y hombres del Local 890 y apoyar la restauración y preservación del ayuntamiento del Local 890 en Bayard, Nuevo México, para el beneficio de la comunidad, los ciudadanos de Nuevo México y la memoria histórica de la nación.



## Appendix 2

### THE SALT OF THE EARTH RECOVERY PROJECT *DIGITAL CUENTOS COMMUNITY WRITING WORKSHOP*



#### **Drop-in Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop Bring your Stories, Vintage Photos, & Other Memorabilia to Share**

The Salt of the Recovery Project Writing workshop consultants will be available to assist you with drafting, digitizing, and uploading your stories & recommendations.

#### **Dates & Locations**

Friday, July 27, 2018  
9:00 a.m to 12:00 p.m.  
Bayard Public Library

Friday, July 27, 2018  
1:00 P.m. to 4:00 p.m.  
Silver City Public Library

Saturday, July 28, 2018  
10:00 P.M. to 2:00 P.M.  
Silver City Museum

#### **DIGITAL CUENTOS**

<https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>

#### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project is to recognize the lives, labor, and leadership of the women and men of Local 890 and celebrate their groundbreaking role in the 1950-1952 Empire Zinc Mine Strike.

#### **Vision Statement**

The vision of the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project is to honor the stories of the women and men of Local 890 and to support restoration and preservation of the Local 890 Union Hall in Bayard, New Mexico for the benefit of the local community, the citizens of New Mexico, and the historic memory of the nation.

### Appendix 3



#### Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos

#### Writing Workshop Guidelines

¡Bienvenidos!

Welcome to the Salt of the Earth Recovery Project  
Digital Cuentos Community Writing Workshop!

This is a Community Writing Workshop and Maker Space. We are here to help you share your story. At the end of the workshop, you can view your and other participant's stories at the *Salt of the Earth* Recovery Project website here: <https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>

- ✓ Step 1: Steven will help you organize your story on a worksheet.
- ✓ Step 2: Zakery will help develop your story.
- ✓ Step 3: Kelli & Elvira will help you publish your final story and other materials on the website.

## Appendix 4



### Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos

#### Taller Comunitario de Escritos Reglas Writing Workshop Guidelines

Bienvenidos al proyecto de recuperación, salt of the earth, taller comunitario de escritura de cuentos digitales.

Este es un taller comunitario de escritura y un espacio de innovación. Estamos aquí para ayudarlos a compartir sus historias. Al final del taller, pueden ver su historia y las de otros participantes en el sitio web de Salt of the Earth, Proyecto de Recuperación: <https://saltoftheearthrecoveryproject.wordpress.com/>

- ✓ Paso 1: Steven le ayudará a organizar su historia en una hoja de trabajo.
- ✓ Paso 2: Zakery le ayudará a desarrollar su historia.
- ✓ Paso 3: Kelli y Elvira le ayudará a publicar su historia final y otros materiales en el sitio web.

## Appendix 5



### Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos

#### Writing Workshop Worksheet

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1. Describe your experience or knowledge any of following:
  - The Empire Zinc mine strike
  - The Local 890 Union
  - The Bayard Local 890 Union Hall
  - The Salt of the Earth film
2. Recall how these experiences and knowledge were significant to you and your community then.
3. Explain why they are still significant today.
4. Tell us what should become of the Local 890 Union Hall in the future?

## Appendix 6



### **Salt of the Earth Recovery Project Digital Cuentos**

#### **Taller de Escritos Oja de Trabajo**

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1. Describa sus experiencias o conocimiento de alguno de los siguientes hechos:
  - La huelga de la mina Empire Zinc
  - La Unión Local 890
  - Bayard Local 890 Union Hall
  - La película Salt of the Earth
2. Recuerde cómo estas experiencias y conocimientos fueron importantes para usted y su comunidad en ese momento.
3. Explique por qué todavía son importantes hoy.
4. Cuéntenos qué debería pasar con el Local 890 Union Hall en el futuro

Kells

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## About the Author

**Michelle Hall Kells** is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of New Mexico where she teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in Rhetoric and Writing. Kells served as Program Chair of the Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) initiative at UNM 2004-2014. She is currently Program Chair for the National Consortium of Environmental Rhetoric and Writing (an affiliated organization of the Rhetoric Society of America). Kells also serves as Project Chair of the *Salt of the Earth Recovery Project*. Kells's scholarship centers of the public rhetoric of citizenship. Her research interests include public rhetoric (civil rights and environmental discourses), ethnolinguistic diversity, literacy education, and community writing studies.



Kells is lead editor of *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines* (Heinemann, 1999) and *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity, and Literacy Education* (Heinemann, 2004). Her work is featured in the journals *TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, *JAC*, *Written Communication*, *Journal of Reflections*, *Journal of Community Literacy*, *Praxis*, and *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* as well as a number of edited books including *Cross-Language Relations in Composition, Dialects, Englishes, Creoles, and Education*; *Who Belongs in America?: Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*. Kells is the author of *Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006). Her recent book release is *Vicente Ximenes, LBJ's "Great Society," and Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2018). She currently working on a new edited volume with K-16 Latina scholars across the nation with lead editor Laura Gonzalez (University of Florida), *Latina Leadership: Language and Literacy Education Across Communities* (Syracuse University Press).

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### **Hurricane Rhetorics: An Ontological Analysis of the Recovery and Rebuild of Lone Star College-Kingwood after Harvey**

Cindy Ross, Ph.D. Candidate  
Lone Star College-Kingwood

#### **ABSTRACT**

Hurricane Harvey ravaged the Houston area in August of 2017 causing the closure of Lone Star College-Kingwood's main campus. This article employs Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as a lens to explore issues of access facing faculty, staff, and students during the rebuild of the campus after Harvey's impact. OOO is a relatively new theory in rhetoric and composition studies that values granting "things" like water, technologies, spaces, and other objects agency equal to that of humans by acknowledging the "suasive natures of nonhuman beings and materialities" (Barnett 4). Looking critically at objects and things as vibrant actors helps students recognize rhetorical activity occurring around them daily that affects their lives in real and personal ways. By supplying practical pedagogical examples of how Lone Star College-Kingwood solved problems to grant access for both faculty and students moving forward in the wake of disaster, this article also addresses a concern raised by Lisa Kirby: "Learning about an experience in a theoretical realm is one thing, but what are the practical applications?" Responses to Harvey's exigencies revealed critical opportunities to improve pedagogies and overall access to learning for students and faculty. Harvey displaced over 12,500 students and more than 500 faculty and staff members. As a result, the college reimagined itself, and faculty and administration collaborated to create new avenues of access for students using technological innovations. Harvey created opportunities to re-envision the rhetorical situation, placing students as critical evaluators of their own selves, lives, and social and economic standing in the wake of disaster and trauma. Using OOO as a lens helps us to better understand and think critically about the environment and world around us to develop appropriate responses to economic and social exigencies revealed by "things," such as Harvey.

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“Rhetoric, too, might well designate the art of being between: of being between things and yet also being their means of connection. These things that we find ourselves between possess a certain ‘thing power’ in the way they gather forces and actors and in so doing ‘affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power’” (5).

Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle  
*Rhetoric through Everyday Things*

## Introduction

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey struck San Jose Island in south Texas as a Category 4 hurricane with speeds exceeding 130 mph and a massive storm surge flooding coastal communities. Embodied, and real, wind and water attacked moving through the Houston area leaving a defining trail of mayhem documented by media and evidenced in damages to campuses, neighborhoods, buildings, streets, and sidewalks. National Public Radio (NPR) reported that “500,000 cars flooded, 336,000 customers lost power, and 40,000 sought safety in shelters” (Kennedy). These places became intersecting and critical contact zones teeming with disaster rhetoric—emerging texts that center on chaos and loss associated with catastrophic events—and trauma almost equal to that of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005 as a Category 5 hurricane and as the most expensive and deadliest storm in U.S. history. Katrina caused the closing of a major university, Tulane, for four months: “13,000 students and nearly 7,000 employees, packed up and left” (Hall). Also, as countless news sources reported, Katrina left thousands of residents homeless with forced relocation. Slightly less catastrophic, Harvey lingered over the Houston area for three harrowing days—dumping 60.58 inches of rain (a year’s worth in one week), causing roughly \$125 billion in damage, according to NPR (Kennedy). The storm virtually destroyed the Lone Star College (LSC)-Kingwood campus. But, unlike Tulane, Kingwood did not close! LSC-Kingwood reimaged and re-invented itself during the chaos and disaster by responding to the rhetorical dimensions of water as what Jane Bennett refers to in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* as “vibrant matter”.

In the fall of 2015, I took a job teaching composition at the Kingwood campus. At the time, I could not fathom a hurricane hitting the area two years later and displacing 12,849 students, the 535 faculty who taught them, and the staff who served

them. Forty-six Developmental Studies (DS) English sections transitioned online, and 140 sections of first-year writing (Comp I and II) went online or hybrid—combination sections of online and face to face. The Lone Star College System boasts five campuses located throughout the Houston area. With 99,000 students, it is the second largest community college in the nation. Kingwood's campus sits just north of the San Jacinto River, a major river dividing the area. Hurricane Harvey triggered a catastrophic rise in the river's water levels resulting in flooding of not only the Kingwood campus but also of the entire area and major shopping centers surrounding the river supporting the community economically (see Figure 1, taken from the college's website). Many students who lived and worked in the area became homeless and jobless in a matter of 24 hours. Six of the nine buildings that make up the Kingwood campus suffered major flooding.



Figure 1. Photo taken from Kingwood Drive approaching the campus near the Student Conference Center (SCC) building, which houses registration, admissions, financial aid, and other offices pertinent to the orderly running of the college.

The rapid growth of bacteria and mold in stagnant waters accelerated by sewage and heat made these structures that once housed the vein of life for the college—faculty offices, classrooms, and a daycare—uninhabitable (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Flooding around Administration building after Harvey.

Faculty, staff, and students suffered trauma due to inaccessibility preventing the retrieval of valuables and personal belongings because of health liability associated with contaminated waters. Fetid water took on a “vital materiality” with performative capabilities blocking and impeding the will and designs of humans; water acted as “quasi agent” and force with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of its own (Bennett viii).

As the days passed and the situation with fetid floodwaters grew worse, so did the situation brought on by water’s thing power—the power to become catalyst for change. Administrators scrambled to train ill-prepared faculty and students for teaching and learning in virtual formats. The English Developmental Studies (DS) program suffered most, however. Both Developmental and regular English faculty faced a teaching crisis, resulting in collective trauma. Unlike college-level courses, developmental courses help students gain command of basic skills for college readiness; consequently, faculty teaching DS courses may not possess a master’s in the field. Most are also adjuncts and not required to keep current with new theories and trends in Composition Studies, such as multi-modal composing, or other morphing technological advancements involving course management systems like Desire2Learn (D2L), Blackboard, Canvas, or Moodle, among others. Instead, effective pedagogical strategies depended on teacher-student face-to-face interaction. The opposite, online or virtual teaching, required faculty to effectively navigate complex course management systems such as D2L and iStar (Lone Star’s online employee portal to post syllabi, access schedules and course rosters, manage payroll, make address

changes, and much more) to create imaginative assignments and lectures accessible to students by implementing creative discussions to promote student learning and course engagement. To bring this newfound situation into perspective, in four weeks faculty had to build organized online courses with lecture notes, voice recordings, videos, assignment dropboxes, discussion forums, and gradebook settings readily accessible to students. Navigating D2L and iStar for anything other than basic information created a heightened anxiety for some DS faculty (and some regular long-term faculty) and students. Daily training sessions quickly filled with those seeking help and demonstrations on how to use Jing—a screen capturing program that allows instructors to circle, draw arrows, and make comments on visuals for instructive purposes—to insert videos and other ways to manipulate data and information within D2L.

Revised courses not only had to meet state learning objectives and goals, but also materials had to appear in simplified, straightforward formats that students could understand easily. Previously, DS instructors came to campus and interacted with a small group of students (10-15 at most) in a small classroom, equipped with basic technology to display visuals on a screen or to use a PowerPoint as a method to teach basic paragraph development and the five-paragraph essay. DS students were not required to use D2L to access lectures, assignments, quizzes, or grades, and faculty were not required to use video or voice recording technology to enhance instruction delivery. The use of such technology beyond basic Microsoft Word processing was neither mandatory nor the norm. Fetid waters—vibrant matter—revealed these areas of additional pedagogical opportunities that may otherwise not have been revealed. Furthermore, not possessing the skill to hypermediate—"arrange text, graphics, and video in multiple panes and windows and joining them with numerous hyperlinks"—proved an access barrier. Hypermediation enriches lesson delivery and learning formats (Bolter and Grusin 9). Faculty and students need a strong technological base to remain current in a rapidly advancing wired world; remaining current and sharing this knowledge with students helps ensure access to learning using multiple formats and contexts.

In this article, I use an ontological lens to present an analysis of the water damage to Kingwood's campus and critical discourses created by fetid waters that influenced a successful rebuild and recovery. I explore what water as an agent teaches us about campus as an agent and how these two "things" speak to one another outside the influence of human control. I also investigate how such realities can inform composition pedagogy. To do so, I first define Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Next, I present an etymology of related philosophies and engage a practical

application. Lastly, I hope to show that a realist philosophy, such as OOO, can help students make sense of their lives in a meaningful way. The intent of this article, however, is not to delve into the mysticisms associated with water or environmental rhetorics of natural disasters, as Nathaniel A. Rivers<sup>1</sup> discusses. It is also not my intent to explore the rhetoric of cultural policy in connection with rebuild efforts associated with hurricanes and their after effects; this work has been done by M.B. Hackler in *Culture After the Hurricanes: Rhetoric and Reinvention on the Gulf Coast*. Instead, I look at water ontologically and tangibly, as a thing acting agentially in relationship with other objects within a system of networked and dynamic patterns. Ultimately, this interrogation asks can we as writing teachers inform our pedagogies and classroom practices by looking critically at “thing theory”—OOO? How might OOO or “thing theory” reveal politics preventing access and promote student engagement and critical thinking?

“Thales fell into the well while in deep contemplation of the stars above. According to Socrates, Thales was ‘wild to know what was up in the sky but failed to see what was in front of him and under his feet’” (1).

Scot Barnett  
*Rhetorical Realism*

Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle define rhetorical ontology as a harnessing of “the energies of past and present theories of materiality in rhetoric [and] anticipat[ing] possibilities for new rhetorical approaches to materiality going forward” (2). Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) or Object-Oriented Philosophy, as coined by Graham Harman, is a realist philosophy concerned with how we know things. According to Harman, OOO decenters the human and human agency and positions the external world as existing apart from human awareness (Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* 10). OOO offers a theoretical approach to valuing the material element of all things—humans and objects—equally to examine how they work together “suasively and agentially in rhetorical situations and ecologies” (Barnett and Boyle 2). For example, in the case of Kingwood, water acted agentially and suasively—having the power to persuade—to create a reality that demanded human response. The water cut human access to campus, thereby making crucial the need to think critically on how to proceed with usual college business in a timely manner. The reality of human response designed to counter water’s agency differs greatly from the water’s reality. Both realities (water/object/thing and human), although networked, exist separately. Barnett and



Boyle explicate: “Understanding things as active agents rather than passive instruments or backdrops for human activity requires different orientations on rhetoric, orientations exclusive of human beings, language, and epistemology, but expansive enough to speculate about things ontologically” (2).

Drawing from German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Harman explains that “[o]bjects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world”<sup>2</sup> (9). Specifically, nonhuman objects influence invention. Water has a tense relationship with itself in that it can flow, settle, boil, freeze, etc.; it also has a tense relationship with humans in that it creates alternate realities for us. We can use it in various capacities to drink, shower, swim or in any other way we choose; at times, water becomes necessary for us to avoid altogether, as in the case with Harvey and flooding. Each relationship is unique and transforms the situation in some real way. Bacteria-infused water networked with buildings and other matter around campus—including the matter making up the bacteria itself—created in administrators, staff, teachers, and students an awareness of possibilities, resiliency, shortcomings, and abilities. To phrase this thought another way, both students and faculty never realized they lacked, or failed to engage, the technological literacy to transition to a virtual learning environment (or at least realized their limitations) until water created a crisis-packed rhetorical situation; from this vantage point and thinking on this newfound opportunity, administrators, faculty, and staff collaborated to create and invent new avenues of access. Using OOO as a lens reveals how matter metamorphoses into a dynamic actant in conflict with human agency, as a thing acting outside human intentionality to reveal dynamics of access by our inability to circumvent exigencies created by the thing.

Whether or not students gain understanding from the interaction between fetid water and themselves or fetid water and the campus is irrelevant; the reality of the interaction still exists with or without conscious human interpretation. Considering this irrelevance of human interpretation, OOO seeks to accommodate and situate technologies, spaces, and everyday things into rhetorical theory outside the scope of linguistic and social epistemologies of human consciousness. Heidegger first attempted this shift from knowledge to one of a “preontological being-in-the world” in 1971 (qtd. in Weisser and Dobrin xii). He saw “things” as having the ability to gather and create discourses; Heidegger preferred the word “thing” as opposed to the word “object” because, to him, “object” suggested opposition instead of a network of mutuality. OOO offers students an opportunity to think critically about how “things” in network influence and direct daily decision making and how these things have



shaped their lives. Things and objects—technologies—have politics that alter the conditions of life and the way people think and behave (Winner 13). After Harvey, networked objects gathered people and forces around shared interests and concerns to ensure students access to quality learning in different formats in a virtual environment and in multiple modes that transcend limitations of physical space.

Interdisciplinary theorizing in composition studies moved the field from linguistic epistemologies to ontological inquiry. Barnett and Boyle point out that rhetoric's epistemic tradition and "paradigm constrains our ability to grasp the 'thingness' of things—the way things *are* and the rhetorical force they wield in relation to us and other things" (2). In "A Rhetorical Response to Hurricane Katrina," Marcia Dawkins, analyzing the ability of symbols—things—to convey messages says, "Scary symbols and images can prompt us into a heightened state of awareness, in which we can recognize and learn about patterns of experience that have been literally and figuratively submerged by our cultural conditioning" (12). Although ground in a social construction of knowledge based on how cultures view objects as symbols, Dawkins' theorizing provides a foundational explanation of how objects speak. OOO seeks to move beyond the cultural to a more objective respect of an object and its agency. Theorizing material rhetoric (new materialism), feminist scholars, such as Carol Mattingly, Roxanne Mountford, and Laurie Gries,<sup>3</sup> demonstrate how everyday material things possess agency; feminists also identify gaps for inquiry from alternate spaces (things). In "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy," Bennett suggests we have entered the "geo-political epoch of the Anthropocene... [.] and "various vital materialisms arise to supplement and complement historical materialisms, ...inspired by twentieth-century feminisms" (223). Material rhetoric provides a necessary bridge to rhetorical ontology. Bernardi and Dimmock explain that material objects speak (referring to objects in digital environments) and "enable us to see things differently" and "test assumptions" to "challenge conventional modes of scholarly communication and knowledge production" (187).

While material rhetoric concerns itself with knowledge about things and their meaning based on a social construct, invoking OOO extends beyond examining things for cultural meaning and becomes a critical point of inquiry. OOO concentrates on a thing's relationship or connection to other things within an assemblage or network and their capacity to make meaning independent of social constructs. Theorizing collective existence and networks requires gazing on a thing and allowing it to speak and reveal its qualities. Granting the object agency and allowing it to speak to us often reveals covert politics associated with things and objects—access to all things and how

social class either allows or restricts opportunity, as pointed out by Dawkins (13). OOO offers a plethora of possibilities to enhance and develop critical thinking skills for DS programs in writing and first-year writing in general by giving students a lens for metacognition.

Of course, theorizing with and about things is not a new way of knowing, but only in recent composition scholarship have theorists begun looking at the “thing” itself apart from linguistic and social constructs of knowledge that value human interpretation. In *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Barnett and Boyle point out Aristotle’s artistic and non-artistic proofs—syllogisms and enthymemes—rested on the basis of their “thingness and material reality” (5). “Thingness” is the power an object possesses to draw, act, or effect change in some way in the environment.<sup>4</sup> Composition teachers do students a disservice if their pedagogies fail to help students understand how things and objects create exigencies and how things possess politics.

Studying the arrangements and politics of objects reveal important lessons about social order and how objects create and maintain such order. For example, Langdon Winner explains how Robert Moses engineered overpasses in the 1920s as physical arrangements to keep minorities and low-income groups away from certain areas of New York City (22-3). Moses’ overpasses are still in place today, and David Staley contends that studying the histories and politics of objects and things offers valuable insight into the social status and agency of one group to control or limit the possibilities of another (34). The necessity to theorize objects, space, and things cannot be underestimated for the advancement of rhetorical inquiry in composition studies.

In the “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Pushing the Limits of the *Anthropos*,” Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif challenge scholars to seek new theoretical orientations that allow for rhetorical inquiry from “different places, with different attunements and different assumptions about what it means to be—to be rhetorically—in the world” (Davis and Ballif 347). Generally, in the academy, we value rhetorical exchange initiated by and for humans, exchanges contemplated and delivered after giving careful thought and analysis to at least four of the five canons of rhetoric (invention, organization, style, and delivery). Such inquiry values humanistic epistemologies—ways of knowing that position humans as knowledge constructors and at the center of interpretation. Humanistic inquiry does not account for knowledge or theorizing outside the realm of human interaction and interpretation as Ballif proposes. OOO, on the other hand, invites a realist, ontological examination of objects and things working independently, together, or as assemblages,<sup>5</sup> decentering the human; OOO also enhances invention by helping students realize the resources and assets they possess or lack that help them access systems of achievement, a point I illustrate in

more detail in a later discussion of pedagogies. For example, students have free access to Microsoft Office 365; however, not all students take full advantage of the benefits of this access. The situation with fetid water revealed an opportunity to educate students on available resources and how to find and use those resources; simultaneously, it also revealed the extent of students' neglect to utilize free resources—probably due to unawareness—and the technological deficiencies present in both students and faculty.

In addition, placing the human outside the realm of knowledge exchange disrupts long accepted critical methodological approaches to knowledge as a social and epistemic construct (Grusin xii). Granting agency to things like water and buildings challenge notions of human agency of intentionality. If the sewage-infested waters flooding the campus acted *suasively*, and I believe they did, then knowledge exists in the absence of human interpretation. For instance, the water brought about the occasion for rhetorical inquiry. Water brought about the occasion for this article. If floodwaters acted *suasively*, how can we fail to allow the vitality of the object to inform our pedagogies? OOO casts things like water as “vibrant actors,” having the ability to draw and effect change, whether humans desired such change or not (Barnett and Boyle 1).

In the next section I discuss and analyze unique experiences Kingwood faculty, staff, and students faced during Harvey and some of the ways faculty worked together to counter fetid waters' agency. Furthermore, fetid waters taught us students would benefit from implementing pedagogies and assignments that required teaching features of MS Office programs as well as programs such as Google Docs for file sharing and editing. Realizing areas of improvement motivated many faculty and students to educate themselves on the capabilities of the technology for file sharing and editing and inserting video clips, voiceover, and otherwise taking full advantage of software capabilities.

### **Situated Challenges Facing Kingwood Faculty**

Students are networked in social and economic environments that can either grant or impede access. One's social and economic status sometimes restricts movement and thereby success. The flooding and how faculty responded depended largely on technological resources available at that time. Furthermore, faculty having resources did not necessarily mean students could take advantage of those same resources for opportunities to ensure their success. Opportunities are largely dependent on one's social and economic status, and helping disadvantaged students becomes a situated

event because each area and region has its own unique contextualized student population. Under these circumstances, using OOO as a lens helps make sense of what it means to “be” for students from unique circumstances brought on by fetid water’s agency. Furthermore, Kingwood’s experience offers lessons to composition studies in dealing ethically with socially and economically disadvantaged students. Similarly, in “First, Do No Harm: Teaching Writing in the Wake of Traumatic Events,” Sarah DeBacher and Deborah Harris-Moore explain the ethics associated with grading and accountability for both teachers and students in wake of such disasters. Ultimately, our vision and goal are to ensure students’ agency and access with the greatest capacity of ethics, which requires critical pedagogies.

In this section, I attempt to unpack the exigence and rhetorical situation brought on by water. Allowing fetid water to speak as it ushered itself across campus’s most intimate spaces, the dynamism thereof revealed communication and sharing breeches between faculty and staff. That fall, I taught two overloads—seven classes total—in condensed format: two sections of Reading and Writing II (ENGL 0309), a noncredit bearing course; two sections of Composition and Rhetoric I (ENGL 1301); and three sections of Composition and Rhetoric II (ENGL 1302). I have taught writing online for 15 years, using different course editors such as Angel, Moodle, Blackboard, D2L, and Canvas. This experience has helped me realize the benefits of having certain materials readily available for an array of different reasons. Also, having taught different levels of composition affords me the insight to critically understand student needs at different levels. Four weeks into the semester, I found my students struggled with the online format because of reading comprehension. And to complicate matters more, some students actively enrolled in the course did not have access to appropriate technology to successfully engage to complete coursework.

The fact that some students lacked the resources, such as reliable Internet, to successfully complete the course troubled me. I thought about ethics, considering the obstacles preventing most of them from achieving their goals. I thought about why they decided to come to college to begin with. Many simply want a better life for themselves and their children, and college provides an avenue by which to access the American Dream—owning a home and having enough resources to make life comfortable in a capitalist economy. I realized I was asking them to do too much within a short period of time. Faculty realized the limitations of resources we had in place, creating the exigency for faculty to pool together to find positive ways to solve problems and move forward.

For example, faculty immediately realized the lack of enough digitized material to go fully online. We needed a bank of lesson plans and activities that could be readily

implemented in a short period of time and with little preparation. To counter this problem, we teamed up and created community groups in D2L for sharing, which resulted in a virtual bank of ideas, lesson plans, and quizzes available through D2L shell courses; we made shells readily available to all teachers to borrow from or copy directly into a course if the instructor so desired. We also collaborated with library staff and created instructional guides for library access and video integration and uploaded these into D2L for both faculty and student use.

In addition, faculty and staff worked to fully reimagine and transform the library—the intellect of Kingwood—from a physical to a virtual space without borders or structures. On campus, students physically “see” the library. Seeing creates a different level of awareness and access than that of the virtual. Tangibility feels more real and inviting. Before the fetid waters Harvey left behind, students walked directly into the library and asked for what they needed without technological barriers. Reference librarians gathered sources, provided handouts, and gave one on one instruction when needed. Once we transitioned online, my students needed a library card with an access number to access online databases and eBooks from off campus sites. It shocked me to discover that many lacked library cards and the technological literacy needed to acquire one. Students suffered frustrations negotiating links to obtain library cards, an exigency Harvey revealed. Many of my students admitted to never using the chat feature from the library’s website. Furthermore, downed phone lines on and to campus impeded communications. No matter how much students wished to “physically” speak to a live person in the library, the internet proved the only workaround and means of access. Campus phones remained down the remainder of the semester. Students, librarians, and teachers used webcams and WebEx to negotiate library database access, other media, and track success. Those who managed to circumvent technology in the past were forced to confront and befriend wired mediated spaces for future communications. Accessing and accomplishing the simplest tasks required forming extra-human rhetorical relationships with new media—hypermediated spaces involving digitized videos with voice recordings and Internet networked communication spaces where information could be downloaded for remote access. Since the necessity to create access changed the vision and direction of the college, some administrators became casualties of change, being replaced with innovative faculty savvy with technology.

The lack of space also created a crisis packed situation for Dr. Katherine Persson, Kingwood’s president. She maintained control of the situation for faculty and staff by creating access through email correspondences. Encouraging faculty and staff with subject lines that read “Good Day” followed by a number such as “#11.” By

November 6, faculty and staff had received at least 50 update emails with various information regarding action and progress of recovery. We believed in us and our resiliency, and as a result, we did not give up on our students and helping them believe in their own resiliency and ability to succeed despite the absence of a physical campus. Emails appropriated physical space into the virtual. They became evocative, I believe, because they provided visual evidence of the nonexistent, the campus. Through association and affect employees felt a sense of belonging—what physical buildings create for students and faculty. As faculty, we needed to create the same evocation through and from thingness with our students without the help of physical structures.

To ensure educational access in a virtual environment, we continue to update and add to our bank of resources so that if disaster happens again both faculty and students have continued access and opportunity for success. The goal is to keep the learning environment intact even in the absence of physical structures, to prevent disruption of the learning environment. Physical structures can be damaged and/or disappear at any time.

Furthermore, having course shells ensures access regardless of faculty level of experience with technology. Immediately available quality lesson plans allow general education courses to go fully online, if the need arises, with significantly less trauma. Technological capabilities to improve delivery existed prior to the flood but the critical awareness to recognize opportunities for improved layout and delivery lay dormant. Simply put, we did not understand the need or benefit of making materials available virtually and in self-sufficient formats before the after effects of Harvey.

Sustainability happens only with easily replicable actions. Replicating actions requires team effort making information available virtually and in multimodal formats. Faculty with skill creating and delivering lessons using audio and visuals to enhance lesson plans experienced less trauma from the transition to online teaching because of their familiarity and comfort level using technology. Some faculty members already used software such as Jing—a screen capturing program that allows for audio and visual enhancement—in their lesson delivery. Some faculty also used SoftChalk to improve the organization of lesson delivery through D2L. Those familiar with multimodal formats volunteered to help train faculty less proficient using multimodal approaches. Kingwood faculty readily took advantage of training and learning opportunities, because, unlike before Harvey, they realized lacking skill to teach online using multimodal formats hampered student success. Kingwood's goal—as with all colleges and universities regardless of level—is to ensure students the greatest opportunities for access and success.



Before Harvey's fetid waters taught us lessons of access, the immediate tension to transition to fully online teaching, advising, registration, and counseling did not exist. Flooded neighborhoods and homes made registration and advising almost impossible except through online. Naturally, home computers suffered damage from the flooding. Surprisingly, we learned that many students did not have laptops, which would allow them to take advantage of wireless access to campus. Lone Star offered extensive support to students to ensure access to learning and success. One example is how the college found funding for free laptops and issued 40 laptops to students who lacked the resources to purchase their own. However, the concern of dealing ethically with students remained.

Providing laptops might have ensured access capabilities, but true access means achieving a level of success. Having laptops did not solve the problem of reading comprehension or the lack of technological literacy. Harvey revealed these exigencies and created discourses to address the tensions and facilitate the direction of change. Simply put, students needed extra help to understand lesson requirements because presenting material in a fully online format required an overwhelming amount of reading. To deal ethically with struggling students, faculty and technology staff made themselves available at different community centers throughout the area to provide one on one instruction, free of charge and in addition to regular duties, for those who needed it. Faculty also exemplified extreme flexibility and care by modifying assignments and extending due dates to help students achieve desired goals and meet standards. Without fetid waters acting "vibrantly" and wielding what Jane Bennett calls "thing power," we may very well have closed some achievement gaps with technology literacies among faculty and students.

Faculty and technology staff ran labs at two sites—New Caney East Montgomery County Improvement District (EMCID), located six and a half miles north of main campus that flooded, and the Lone Star College-Atascocita Center, located 13 miles east of main campus—to help with software, D2L features, and course formatting. Tasks as simple as chatting with the Virtual Teaching Assistance Center (VTAC) help desk felt daunting and created anxiety for teachers and students under duress. First, chatting requires typing and expressing clear thoughts through written communication; second, using D2L and other software sufficiently requires understanding hyperlinks and other embedded features within the program. Many students gave up. For example, both sections of my English 0309 (developmental writing) capped at 20 but ended with only 7-8 students—more than 50% attrition rate. High attrition characterized the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters. Prior to Harvey, instructors might have lost 2-3 students per section, but never over 50%.



English 1301 (Composition and Rhetoric I) and 1302 (Composition and Rhetoric II) students fared a little better than developmental students, but those who had never taken classes online struggled because of the sheer overwhelming demand of work in the condensed 12-week format. Faculty faced the crisis of maintaining standards using ethical measures while shaving assignments to make them manageable for student success. Maintaining standards still required each student to write 4-5 essays in the condensed 12-week period. And of course, having so many essays due within the condensed time period created labor issues for faculty due to the short turnaround for grading. The condensed time also required a high level of flexibility to ensure student success. I struggled along with my students, and to compromise, I engaged more one on one with their writing and providing feedback and required less whole class discussion on the readings. Engaging one on one helped ensure student success at the next level, whether moving to ENGL 1301 or 1302.

In addition, I also counted the extensive writing required in discussions as writing assignments. For example, instead of having a week dedicated to teaching thesis writing, I required students to craft subject lines for their discussion posts that foreshadowed the main point of their post, indirectly teaching thesis writing through adaptation of subject lines. Similarly, I taught paragraph development by requiring paragraphs for discussion replies. I found this worked very well as writing pedagogy.

Again, the conditions described characterized Kingwood's recovery. Dealing ethically with marginalized students presented a real and embodied challenge during the recovery process. We created continued technological access through mobile training, which helped students transition from face to face learning to fully online learning. I do not think the transition would have been successful without alternate training sites available to work around the written communication barriers hindering many students. Because of available training and support, most faculty and students sufficiently engaged the technology and continue to pass the learning on to new students by taking full advantage of the features of D2L, such as using voice recordings and uploading video lectures within the modules and requiring use of these features for class instruction.

Invoking OOO helped me realize critical access issues affecting Kingwood. OOO also provides the critical discourse to discuss and reflect metacognitively on how water, fetid waters, and the objects it damaged acted evocatively with the power to gather people around shared concerns and interests. These objects created a need for new literacies and discourses to deal effectively and ethically to successively counter the fetid water's agency (Barnett and Boyle 4). I propose revisiting the Harvey narrative and invoking OOO as a form of critical pedagogy—a way of helping students think

critically about their own lives and what they have access to and those things to which access has been denied based on their social and economic statuses. Lone Star College-Kingwood serves both urban and rural populations. For example, some students in areas like Tarkington, Splendora, and Shephard experienced internet connection problems; these students prefer face to face classes because they do not have reliable internet access because of a lack of or limited fiber optic cabling and towers in these remote areas. Gaining such access is costly for both providers and consumers.

Using OOO as a lens to understand the politics of access associated with these things helps students gain a better understanding of how networks limit access for the economically depressed classes and areas. What do things such as laptops, wireless internet, and modem speed—much of which requires money to access—mean to them personally? What does lack of access say about their lived experiences? What do these objects reveal about bureaucracies and equality? Through their lived experiences with Harvey, students realized their limitations on different levels. Some students quit logging in to their online courses. Life issues such as flooded cars or not having a car created barriers to access available at community centers and libraries, which were supposed to augment access.

In the next section, I discuss possible curricular adaptations to promote critical thinking in composition courses at all levels. I propose invoking Sherry Turkle's theorizing by turning objects and things, inspecting them, gazing and thinking critically on them for evidence of survival and resilience to re-envision ourselves, our histories, and our lives.

### **Future Pedagogical Possibilities for Writing Instruction in Response to Natural Disasters**

When an object or thing, like water, wields power to make us (humans) act or react, as described in the previous sections, that object takes on agency acting evocatively—suasively, calling attention to itself as a vibrant agent of new knowledge. Turkle writes, “Objects help us make our minds, reaching out to us to help us form active partnerships” (308). She explains that “[t]hinking about the uncanny, about thresholds and boundaries helps us understand objects with their universal powers of evocation” (307). If we accept Turkle's theorizing, then encouraging students to think about things surrounding them daily and inviting wandering and wondering on how objects and things act suasively to guide action and either grant or deny access enriches the composing process. Kevin Rutherford and Jason Palmeri trace ontological investigations in composition studies back to the 70s and 80s with the work of

foundational theorists such as Ann Berthoff, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike (96). In “The Things They Left Behind: Toward an Object-Oriented History of Composition,” Rutherford and Palmeri explain that,

Young, Becker, and Pike encouraged students to resist the stereotypical assumptions they may have about objects (whether they are oak trees or abstract concepts such as “civil disobedience”). Instead of focusing on asking simply “what is the object in itself?” or “what is this object for me?,” Young, Becker, and Pike provoke students to recursively investigate the question, “how does this object relate to other objects in a network over time?” In this way, they position the rhetoric classroom as a space in which students can employ heuristics as a method for developing more nuanced and complex understandings of the existence of things in the world. (104)

I propose invoking OOO in the invention phase of the writing process to examine how objects make meaning and promote critical thinking about exigencies associated with objects.<sup>6</sup> In the previous section, I invoked laptops, wireless internet, and modems as objects that grant and deny access based on social and economic status because of costs associated with these items. Here, I propose using narration and visual analysis as modes to kindle critical thinking toward an ontological analysis by situating the “object” in the writer’s world as a vibrant actor. Granting the object agency to act promotes hypothesizing from the object’s point of view.

Granting an object rhetorical agency is not to be confused with cause and effect thinking. Instead, using narration or visual analysis to invoke ontology invites personal, descriptive analysis from the point of view of the subject while looking deeply at the object; because narration sometimes engages deeply personal reflection, narrative writing provides a low stakes entrance to rhetorical ontology by making an object immediately accessible by thinking critically about what the thing or object has allowed or prevented in the writer’s life. Looking at trajectories and powers of objects offers almost limitless possibilities for critical pedagogies where students can re-envision the rhetorical situation—the text, reader, author, constraints, and exigence—and where they fit into the scheme of things. They themselves become close-up critical evaluators of the social, political, and economic structures that control their movements. How does a lack of reliable internet, for example, restrict their movement? Or, how does having reliable internet grant access? How do both factors, restrictions and access, impact success? What possible workarounds can be implemented to ensure future access without impediments?

Furthermore, rhetorical and visual analysis are common writing assignments in lower-division composition courses. Inviting students to gaze at objects and how objects work to block the will of subjects—much like Robert Moses’s overpasses—offers rich possibilities. What other things in the environment work to control human movement and access? How do these things limit economic possibilities because of access? Buildings are necessary, tangible structures that will continue to exist long after the architectural designer is gone. But buildings limit where humans go and what they can do within the confines of the building. Buildings have fluid boundaries in that they house, protect, and connect people and things by providing intimate and safe spaces to work and take shelter. Ironically, these buildings show us what is missing in online spaces and learning environments: protection and tangible creative spaces that invoke imagination and wonder. Also, electrical wirings and outlets within buildings determine the orderly workings of computers and other functions requiring sufficient electrical output. Engaging rhetorical and visual analysis on buildings as evocative objects helps connect people intimately to objects and what Heidegger calls “thing power”—the power to create the rhetorical situation through their capacity to block the will and desire of humans. In short, objects have the power to reveal.

Looking from the outside in to physical structures for curricular purposes, starting with Kingwood’s Administration Building, the Administration and Performing Arts Center (APA), before Harvey known as the Performing Arts Center (PAC), offers defining possibilities. Before Harvey, the 30,000 square foot multi-story structure housed most of the English department faculty, a writing lab, the (just one) Dean’s suite and supporting staff, and the Art and Drama departments, along with several classrooms. The building also served as a polling location for the greater community during election times. The newly designed building, after Harvey, houses all the previously mentioned but with an added presidential suite and an interdisciplinary Dean’s suite (housing all the Deans on campus) modeled after WeWork. The goal of the redesign was to replicate the environment after Harvey in which the Dean’s collaborated to meet challenges brought on by Harvey, including building a new course schedule to accommodate the 12-week semester and redesign building interiors. As a central hub of campus activity, creativity, and control, the APA provokes wonder because it invites and repels at the same time (See figure 3 for a campus map).

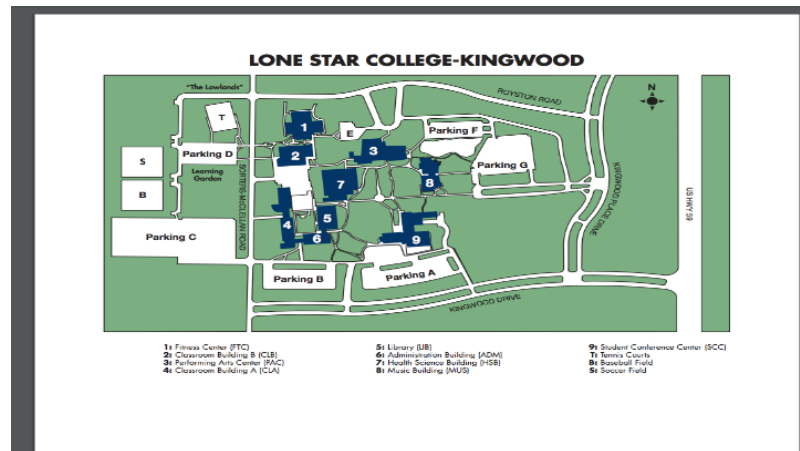


Figure 3. Campus map

To me, buildings like the APA provide a structure and purpose to contextualize the learning environment for students. In so doing, these buildings promote success by providing tangible avenues to areas that promote self-help and success, i.e., the writing lab—a tangible way of controlling student movement not available online. Having students think metacognitively about their own movements within these structures and spaces necessarily helps them realize their own agency and motivations.

How does the object reveal freedom or resistance and to what capacity? Students take on a duality whereby they become both text and reader of text. What does the object in its condition reveal about the culture and the people: those who created it and those who use it? For example, after catastrophic storms like Harvey and Katrina, extending the rhetoric of disaster to an ontological investigation of campus structures, homes, neighborhoods, and stores situates the student in the heart of their own self—their intimate surroundings.

Students also need an avenue to heal and make sense of the tragedy and the trauma. In “An American Tragedy: Reading the Rhetoric of Disaster in Hurricane Katrina Literature and Popular Culture,” Lisa Kirby explains that “Katrina is still an integral part of the New Orleans consciousness” (197), and the “impact... is still ever-present” (198). She posits a rhetoric of disaster that allows for “anger, catharsis, healing, and even humor, all of which are important parts of dealing with tragedy” (198). Tacking into Kirby’s theorizing, I posit allowing students to explore their own stories and their own agency through the rhetoricity of objects and things, whatever those things may be. Doing so serves two pedagogical purposes. First, as explained

earlier, exploring narratives allows students to think critically about their own lives; and second, narration provides an avenue for healing—a way of grappling with the trauma of a catastrophic event. Kirby also acknowledges that “language and writing can never truly capture the enormity of this [traumatic] experience” (198). Kirby has done an important work extending the rhetoric of disaster to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. Complicating humanistic inquiries requires not only examining politics, culture, race and gender, but also analyzing the agency of objects as suggested by Bennet, Barnett, and Harman. And here lies the value to students. Inquiring from the outside in lends merit to critical pedagogies.

Causing students to think about their resources or lack of resources and why they can or cannot improve their social and economic situations offers limitless possibilities to think about change. Thinking about what it means to be within their social and economic spaces helps reveal networks and how networks limit or grant access. We must acknowledge that things and objects have politics. When things such as water, wind, buildings, and technology collide, they congeal to produce unique exigencies such as those faced by Kingwood faculty and students after Harvey. Things have narratives. Helping students discover these narratives promotes critical thinking on many levels.

Essentially, this article attempts to answer Kirby’s question of “Rhetorically, what are we to make of this [disaster rhetoric and disasters such as Katrina]?” Kirby poses this question two years before Harvey. Natural disasters continue to happen, and society continues to discuss the poor and disenfranchised and what they have and do not have access to and why? In academe, we grapple with this exigence with the hope of cultivating students who have the agency and access to effect change within their environment—the type of change that liberates an oppressed individual or group.

Privileging water—particularly floodwater—rhetoric and buildings as evocative objects, I explore rhetoric from the outside in—outside the mind, attuning to the suasiveness of the water. As composition and rhetoric teachers, we invite students to think critically about the rhetorical situation and agency. Looking outward provides another dimensionality to the rhetorical situation. Stagnant floodwaters affecting campus wielded a power independent of the human mind. Humans were in no way in charge of this power. Humans could not influence or control it; they could only respond. Water became the center of rhetorical activity, creating a rhetorical situation independent of human influence. The value lies in helping students recognize the rhetorical activity occurring outside themselves. Rhetorical and visual analysis are common writing assignments in lower-level composition courses. I propose implementing assignments that require students to think critically on “things” and

what those allow or prevent—much like Robert Moses’s overpasses. What other objects and things in the environment wield power to control human movement and access? How do these things limit economic possibilities because of access? Tapping into OOO expands our possibilities for critical pedagogies. For example, when the water settled around architectural structures composed of brick and mortar, the water related to the buildings primarily by its ability to contaminate, rendering the buildings unusable for their original purpose(s). This relationship became the catalyst that brought about the rhetorical situation and knowledge making resulting from an asymmetrical relationship between water and buildings. What happens if we teach students to theorize the democracy of networked things in their immediate environments and analyze how those things—things such as Internet access and speeds, wireless capabilities, routers, laptops, and other equipment available—have politics to grant or deny access to people and groups based on location? For instance, some students in rural areas lack sufficient internet speed to effectively access courses remotely. What engineered physical structures created these barriers? Lines, poles, and cables control human behavior whether we acknowledge it or not. Gazing on these things and objects and allowing these things agency to speak, places students in the driver’s seat and promotes critical thinking about the environment.

Buildings and technological structures are necessary and will continue to exist long after the inhabitants who frequent and use them in various ways are gone. Kingwood’s campus buildings, like water, too are evocative objects: they have fluid boundaries in that they house, protect, and connect people and things by providing intimate and safe spaces. Ironically, these building show us what is missing in online spaces: protection and tangible creative spaces that invoke imagination and wonder. In discussing buildings as evocative objects I hope to illustrate and connect these objects to what Heidegger calls “thing power”—the power to create the rhetorical situation through their capacity to block the will and desire of humans, the power to reveal.

## **Conclusion**

Just as Katrina lives on in Louisiana, Harvey lives on at LSC. Catharsis and healing can play a major role in curriculum building as a way of granting agency through critical pedagogy—a critical consideration of reality and problem solving through reflection (Freire 55). I believe a critical pedagogy informed by OOO provides an even more vibrant rhetoric allowing students to theorize from the outside in. Theorizing from the object helps students think objectively about politics of access—spaces and



technological media that require special knowledge and literacies to reap the benefits thereof. Using narration and visual analysis to theorize objects and things, offers rich opportunities for catharsis and to reveal social and economic realities plaguing individuals and communities. Imagining and understanding their own position based on their relationship with objects, invites investigating how relationships work—networks. Thing theory also has the potential to help students gain greater appreciation for the environment by exploring how agential elements (such as wind, water, buildings, technology and other matter) collide or congeal to produce unique exigencies. Humanist inquiries examine politics and culture, but significant value lies in looking beyond race and gender, as suggested in the work of Bennet, Barnett, and Harman, and inquiring critically from alternate rhetorical perspectives of things and objects. And here lies the value to students.

Critical thinking and reading are main goals of rhetorical pedagogies. New technological advancements invite new methods of inquiry gazing on things as evocative objects and demand rhetoric theorists give quality attention to objects and things as actors. Marilyn Cooper foreshadowed the possibility of theorizing with things as early as 1989. A decade later Jane Bennett captured the exigence with a guiding question: “How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” (viii). Bennett clarifies “vitality” to mean “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals— [. . .] to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Bennett’s hypothesizing captures accurately my argument on how theorizing with things opens possibilities to problem solving. Consider how cell phone technology morphed from flip phone to iPhone to iPad. Apple later added voice command technology, turn by turn navigation, and iCloud capabilities that mesmerize and capture the attention of millennials for hours. Technologies, objects, and things demand serious attention because wielding “thing” power grants, limits, or denies access to individuals and groups. Technologies shape decision making and overall how we do business.

Water and buildings are vital objects in a hurricane narrative of trauma; as water causes structures to fail or people to respond, institutional politics often reveal themselves and we learn our limitations and ways to improve skill levels and pedagogies. Flooding from Harvey forced Lone Star College-Kingwood’s faculty and staff to work together to find solutions and problem solve to remain in operation to meet the demands of student success. Looking to Harvey and the water, I posit we gained a more enlightened understanding of student and faculty wiring needs—areas

to foster creativity to promote technological literacies for access. Water persuaded us to work together for our students in a time of crisis.

I propose OOO opens new ways of knowing in the classroom, informing composition scholarship in critical ways not yet been explored. Providing objects agency values a different orientation on rhetoric—a move away from linguistic and social epistemologies that privilege human understanding; OOO values humans and things equally, respecting the power of each to act and reveal exigencies.

## Notes

1. Nathaniel Rivers attributes the thingness of objects as their capacity to be “wild.” An object is wild because it can “resist . . . and do its own thing” (430). He delves into a deeper comparison of Harman’s and Bennett’s ideas. Human and object are assemblages, according to Bennett whereas Harman sees these two as more separate. He also defines deep ambivalence (ontological equivalence) and summarizes Tim Morton’s work. What he (Rivers) calls wild objects Tim Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, calls “strange stranger”.
2. See Graham Harman’s *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 2005, for further reading on the agency of objects.
3. New materialism moves us beyond the realm of language toward thinking about nonhuman social realms and historiography. Feminist scholarship that examines material rhetoric such as Jenny Rice’s *Distant Publics: Development Rhetoric and the Subject of Crisis* and Nedra Reynolds’s *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* have also been important achievements in making it possible to theorize with and about objects.
4. In the introduction to *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle summarize and explain how Actor Network Theory (ANC) breaks from OOO (7-8). Latour does not see his work as asymmetrical but believes things to be in a symmetric relationship, a relationship between human and thing. For further reading on how ANC differs from OOO, see *The Prince and the Wolf: LaTour and Harman at the LSE* (2011).
5. Drawing from both Harman and Bennett, Rivers says it is through relations “assemblages” that things have agency (429). He explains that Bennett and Harman’s research appears contradictory in that OOO and new materialism have not been merged in an acceptable way to date. Rivers differentiates between OOO

and new materialism: “OOO attends to the strangeness of objects while new materialism increases the viscosity of their relations” (429).

6. See the foreword, “The Truth is Out There,” to Christian R. Weisser’s and Sydney I. Dobrin’s *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* (2001). Marilyn Cooper explains that process writing was nothing more than an extension of the current traditional model; to Cooper, a “postprocess” pedagogy must focus on systems and/or system thinking because “[a]nalysis destroys relationships, which must be understood as wholes, and even more so as dynamic, changing patterns, rather than as discrete objects (or subjects and objects) acting on each other” (xii). This seems contradictory to OOO philosophy, which grants individual agency to objects, but such theorizing using Actor Network Theory (ANT) provided the foundation for the type of theorizing about objects done by Sherry Turkle, Jane Bennett, and Graham Harman.

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### Service-Learning in the Community College Composition Classroom: Lessons Learned from Sustainable Projects at One Community College

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#### ABSTRACT

Service-learning is one way to address the needs of at-risk students who may be both un-engaged and under-prepared for the rigors necessary in the college classroom. Since many states are now placing developmental students into college credit classrooms to improve the attrition rates of under-prepared students, employing strategies such as service-learning may be one way to engage these students. This paper addresses how Lone Star College-Kingwood has incorporated service-learning into the campus curriculum since its inception in 1985. The best practices at Lone Star College-Kingwood over the last 20 years may help inform instructors on the best practices and challenges for creating a successful, sustainable service-learning curriculum for the under-prepared, under-engaged student.

#### Introduction

Answering the question of how to incorporate service-learning into the composition classroom of a community college has been a difficult puzzle to solve. The concept of service-learning changed from its original inception in 1985 at Georgetown University. College students have also changed and now include many at-risk students or students lacking traditional college preparatory skills. In many states, including Texas where we

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teach composition at Lone Star College-Kingwood, students testing as not college ready are placed into freshman composition classes with co-requisite classes in the hope of improving attrition rates. Many studies validate service-learning as one way to connect to an at-risk population of students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Giving students a leg up, 2016; Greenwood, 2015; Kisker, Theis, & Olivas, 2016; Zahn, 2016; and Becker & Paul, 2015). Therefore, considering what service-learning projects have been successful and sustainable at Lone Star College-Kingwood may assist composition instructors in developing sustainable service-learning programs. The definition of service-learning has also changed from the idea of wealthy, privileged students reaching out to an underprivileged community with service projects to an at-risk population of students learning to become agents of positive change in their communities. Understanding the changing definition of service-learning's role in a larger growing civic engagement department in colleges and universities can assist composition instructors in helping students to understand the need for clear writing to research problems in their communities and express solutions.

### **Background of Service-Learning at Lone Star College**

In 2000, Lone Star College (LSC), seeking to retain the at-risk population of students common at community college campuses, joined other Texas colleges to become part of the national service-learning movement begun by Campus Compact in 1985. The Campus Compact, involving Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities, was created to connect with a community that had become disdainful and suspicious of academic life, seeking to counter a belief that university students were “materialistic and self-absorbed, more interested in making money than in helping their neighbors” (Campus Compact). Campus Compact aimed to help students who were already involved in service to the community by giving them better support structures and encouragement. More than 1,100 colleges and universities over the years have joined this project to “pursue community-based teaching and scholarship in the service of positive change” (Campus Compact).

The concept of combining service with the classroom evolved into an intersection of three important concepts: civic engagement, practical experience, and academic study. A program that began to transform students from being merely career-oriented to being engaged morally and civically in their communities (Stanton & Erasmus, 2013) has become a charge for many educators to teach students “what ordinary people can do to improve their communities” (Kisker, Theis, & Olivas, 2016). Those instructors who use service-learning in community colleges wish to inspire

students to be “knowledge seekers” and also “action leaders in local communities” (Zahn, 2016). Thirty years of national study of the service-learning phenomenon has underscored benefits of the program to students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000), especially the at-risk student body common at community colleges (Greenwood, 2015). Despite the evidence of a connection between student success and service-learning programs, creating a consistent service-learning program at Lone Star College has been difficult. The roadblocks to the program at LSC include challenges in maintaining faculty interest, a lack of reliable community partners, faculty fatigue for difficult projects, and an inconsistency in the upkeep of the website (resulting from a loss of administrative support for service-learning programs), and a lack of reliable community partners.

Despite these challenges, many faculty members have created viable, effective, and ongoing service-learning projects at Lone Star College-Kingwood (LSCCK). The purpose of this paper is to examine two successful service-learning programs at LSCCK and evaluate both the difficulties and the successes to determine how service-learning programs can continue to thrive on this campus and on other campuses that also struggle with sustaining service-learning programs. Understanding how to implement a strong, sustainable service-learning program, including integration into composition classes, may be one way to augment student success for the at-risk student population at community colleges across the country.

### **Challenges at Lone Star College-Kingwood**

The challenges faculty face when implementing student-learning at Lone Star College-Kingwood (LSCCK) mirror the challenges faced by faculty at other community colleges since the student demographics at LSCCK are like the demographics of students in community colleges across the nation.

### **Student Demographics**

A complex of six full campuses, ten satellite centers, two university centers, and six program specific locations, Lone Star College in Houston, Texas, enrolls diverse students who struggle financially, and many of the students attend part-time. The demographics vary between campuses, but overall, the system serves students with a wide range of ethnicity: 31.7% White, 15.1% Black, 38.5 % Hispanic, 8.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.2% Asian, .3% American Indian, 3.2% multiple and 2.6% unknown. The population is mostly female (60.2%). The demographics of Lone Star

College-Kingwood nearly mirrors the same statistics of the overall LSC system. Most of the students across the Lone Star College system and in Kingwood attend part time, around 70.5%. The majority of the students at the LSCK campus are from the Humble School District (38.5%) and the New Caney School District (10.5%), which have an income per capita of \$20,098 to \$20,899 and a median household income of \$42,129 to \$44,552. 69.5% of students at the LSCK campus are under 24 years of age.

These demographics show that the LSCK campus fits the nationwide community college student profile: students whose family and work obligations, as well as long commutes and financial constraints, restrict them from many extracurricular activities enjoyed by full-time college students living on campuses; these students often are strained to attend class obligations, without time for additional service-learning activities (Kisker, Theis, & Olivas, 2016, pp. 220-221). Time constraints on both students and faculty in the community college setting are reasons some instructors have tried to exchange the successful outcomes of service-learning with other alternatives that may be less time consuming, such as extracurricular visits to an art museum (Diaz, 2016), or civic engagement activities conducted on campus, such as deliberative dialogues (Kisker, Theis, & Olivas, 2016, pp. 222-223), both of which hold value to students for engaging active learning and civic agency.

Service-learning scholarship has measured other varied positive outcomes of service-learning from an ability to change students' perspectives and understanding of social issues to increasing students' motivation to learn and apply that learning to helping their communities (Becker & Paul, 2015, p. 185). Faculty must balance student needs and community opportunities for service-learning to meet the course learning outcomes. The following review of different approaches in implementing service learning at LSCK can help other community colleges gauge what may work in their campuses and communities.

### **Communication with Faculty**

To make service-learning viable for the Lone Star College System, facilitators need to reassess faculty needs and to examine what has and has not worked for service-learning programs throughout the system. The first roadblock to a successful program is a well-maintained service-learning website or another means of communicating to faculty the requirements and community partners willing to participate. Community partners and needs change, as do the faculty who are willing and able to participate in current community needs. The original website created for the Lone Star College system ambitiously set out a program for instructors to use with forms, timelines, and a

handbook with 50 plus pages of helpful advice on how to establish a service-learning program for the classroom, including specific suggestions for reflection on the service. Two committees diligently compiled the handbook in 2001 and 2002 (Friesen, K., Friesen, C., & Longnion, B., 2002). Since the college's initial rigorous investment in the program seventeen years ago, administrative support for service-learning has declined: the new website only lists the contact names of faculty on each campus.

Recent scholarship outlining successful service-learning programs demonstrates the need for administrative support for both sustainability of existing service-learning courses and the development of new programs (Alexander, 2017; CCCC, 2016; Cary, 2016; Getto, Leon, & Getto-Rivait, 2014; Juárez, 2017; and Wells, 2016). This scholarship shows that the recent and successful service-learning courses underscore the necessity that faculty new to service-learning have time to create courses with the support from seasoned faculty, sharing and developing programs with community partners, and evaluating and improving courses over time. LSC provides several yearlong professional development programs in leadership and development for cohorts of newly hired faculty or faculty transitioning to new positions. Adding year-long professional development programs for faculty to create service-learning courses, such as the program outlined by J. M. Wells (2016), would help to improve current service-learning knowledge gaps at LSC.

Furthermore, a well-maintained service-learning website may work more effectively if faculty could modify and update it with willing community partners to make the information more current. Many instructors do not use service-learning in the classroom because they do not have knowledge of good community partners with service needs that fit the learning outcomes for a diverse set of classrooms (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002, p. 14). When interviewing faculty with good and sustainable service-learning projects, we have found that they often operate in anonymity, and some were unaware that they had been conducting service-learning projects, which in turn means that students were not receiving service-learning credit on their transcripts. For instance, in Spring of 2018, Lone Star College-Kingwood Cosmetology and Esthetics programs were asked to style the hair and apply the make up for 100 models, ages ranging from 4 to 16 years old, for the Creative Works "Atlantis The Lost City" Fashion Show held at the Humble Civic Center, all benefiting programs for victims of human trafficking. This opportunity arose, the students participated, but the instructors never considered how this community outreach constituted a service-learning project (C. Mullins, personal communication, April 10, 2018). Improving the website and then cultivating a continuing discussion on campus can help to invigorate a weak service-learning program.

### **The Case for Civic Education in the Writing Classroom**

In “Semiology, Ideology, Praxis: Responsive Authority in the Composition Classroom,” J. Laditka (1990) spoke to the challenges and necessities of equipping writers for citizenship. He explained that his “paradigm of composition is changing to one of critical literacy, a literacy of political consciousness and social action” (p. 366). Separating the world of the classroom from the world outside is difficult: “as responsive teachers we must recognize that classroom discourse is ideologically charged regardless of individual teaching practices” (p. 357). Teachers should not be afraid of reaching beyond the scope of writing, he argued. We agree. We should embrace our role and influence on society as a whole: “I believe composition classrooms should enrich the affective component of morality, enhancing the likelihood of our survival on this planet” (p. 368).

A few years later, E. Ervin (1997) took up the topic of civic engagement in writing classrooms. She asserted that “we should actively accompany [students] in the transition from virtual-public discourse to real-public discourse, from class participation to civic participation” (p. 389). We educate for citizenship because, as she pointed out, “like it or not, teachers represent to students—not to mention the nonacademic public—how intellectuals behave, what they do with their knowledge and convictions” (p. 384). Classroom practice, in other words, has an impact on the outside world, and instructors can respond to this reality proactively.

Perhaps the most powerful argument in favor of citizenship education in composition classrooms springs from the 2009 National Council of Teachers of English report entitled “Writing in the 21st Century.” K. B. Yancey (2009), a former NCTE president, discussed the new reality of writing that has emerged in our technologically-advanced world. Thanks to smartphones, tablets, and social media platforms, people from all walks of life “want to compose and do” and are both the “recipients and creators of our news” (pp. 4-5). Writing can be accomplished quickly and shared instantly, often shaping our identities within society: “through writing we participate—as students, employees, citizens, human beings. Through writing, we are” (Yancey, p. 7). Because writing provides a voice, and that voice can now be amplified and shared in myriad ways, composition teachers have both the opportunity and the responsibility to “help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, *become* the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, the writers of our future” (p. 1; emphasis in original). Along with teaching the fundamentals of sound writing, Yancey implied that the writing teacher can help

students think critically about competing ideologies and equip them with the skills that make their voices heard in ways that will change the world for the better.

### Considerations for the Writing Teacher

Instructors who agree with Yancey, Ervin, and Laditka that civic engagement does, indeed, belong in college composition classrooms must determine how best to implement critical pedagogy in a way that presents clear objectives for student learning and avoids potential pitfalls. Scholars have provided some valuable suggestions for implementation. One important consideration is the topic of citizenship itself. A. J. Wan (2011) argued “the terms and boundaries we use to define citizenship are vague at best and often go uninterrogated” (p. 29)—we use the word *citizen* as a catch-all term without really defining it, in other words, in what Wan calls “ambient awareness” (p. 32) of the term. Assuming citizenship goes beyond a designation of legal status, what aspects does the teacher emphasize in the classroom? If citizenship is defined by participation in society, Wan asked, “What counts? What is most effective? Voting? Critical reading? Letters to the editor? Public writing on blogs and wikis? Social change? What kind of citizenship is being produced and promoted? Most important, do all students have access to the same types of citizenship?” (p. 36). That last question is particularly pointed. If composition teachers do not spend time thinking about the definition of citizenship, then overlooking the reality that not everyone has an equal opportunity for full participation in it can become problematic. Writing instructors should “acknowledge the limitations of what citizenships can do for students” and “create a space where our own citizen-making through the teaching of literacy is a more deliberate activity” (p. 46).

Even as writing teachers deliberate on what aspects of citizenship to emphasize, discussions about civic engagement often veer into the political. Politics are personal, often extremely controversial, and the resulting disagreements can obscure the objectives of the class and derail productive conversations. Ervin (2006) suggested some considerations that would help remove the political partisanship from citizenship education in the writing classroom. She identified four rhetorical strategies—branding, framing, coalition-building, and agitation—that can be employed to introduce students to public issues carefully and deliberately, and, most importantly, without “counterproductive partisan connotations” (p. 419) that might alienate students with differing political ideologies, and, by doing so, take the emphasis off the goal of developing students into citizen writers.



Other recent scholars have emphasized the importance of reciprocity among student learners, community partners, and members of groups for whom service may be provided in the community. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (2016) outlined six criteria for peer evaluation of service-learning or “community-engaged projects.” Reciprocity, first on the list, emphasizes how community-engaged projects need to benefit and be evaluated by all stakeholders—students, teachers, community partners, and community members.

### **In the Classroom: Potential Models for Implementation**

Even if the writing instructor heeds the advice of Ervin and Wan and takes a deliberative approach to implementing service learning, every teacher is unique in his/her approach. However, patterns have emerged. Some courses use contemporary and historical non-fiction writing as a foundation for rhetorical analysis and a springboard for student compositions (Bizzell & Fish, 2009; Juárez, 2017; Hatcher & Studer, 2015). Others go further, providing opportunities for civic engagement through written activism in the classroom and even hands-on participation in service-learning programs (Ervin, 1997; Herzberg, 1994; Alexander, 2017; Cary, 2016; Guzmán, 2019; Kayser, 2017; Lietz & Tunney, 2015; McLeod, 2017; O’Connor, 2017; Wells, 2016). Textbooks, such as D. Lazere’s textbook (2015), offer a text-based approach to critical pedagogy implementation. The book takes traditional fundamentals of rhetorical study, such as argumentative structure and logical fallacies, and presents model texts on current, contentious issues, such as income inequality, corporate subsidies, racism, patriotism, from a variety of perspectives. Through the process of rhetorical analysis, students are exposed to important contemporary, social, provocative issues, making it possible for students to see the real-world impact of composition.

A text-based approach to civic engagement can also draw from historical examples of rhetoric related to major social movements. P. Bizzell (2009), responding to a critic of critical pedagogy, discussed an anthology that she co-authored with B. Herzberg: “Our book *Negotiating Differences* focuses on controversies that have already been decided: for example, slavery has been abolished...students focus on the rhetorical strategies employed by the various players battling for power to influence the nation’s course regarding slavery” (p. 96). Since the issue has already been settled, political minefields can be avoided, and students can see the historical impact of texts in the shaping of our democracy. Whether rooted in history or current events, these



text-based approaches provide sound instruction on rhetorical methods, while also engaging students in important issues of the public good.

Early adopters who combined rhetorical analysis with real world participation included E. Ervin (1997), who suggested a “conceptual framework” for civic participation in the writing classroom. While she initially used a text-based approach like those mentioned above, she found that student interest in such topics did not necessarily manifest itself in real-world action. She concluded that students required “structured opportunities” for community service (p. 384). She guided her class in projects responding to local community needs. Other early adopters connected the writing class to a service opportunity from the beginning and used community service as a springboard for writing instruction, such as B. Herzberg (1994), who acknowledged potential pitfalls in connecting community service to a writing class, pointing out that simply engaging in written reflection after a service project “is not sufficient to raise critical or cultural consciousness” (p. 309). Instead, his students used class time to examine the underlying issues that make the service project necessary. Because his students were participating in a community literacy initiative, they read about literacy and education issues and inequalities in the US. Reflecting on his students’ final papers, Herzberg observed that they showed a personal understanding that community service “carries beyond personal acts of charity” (p. 317). Students were able “to question and analyze the world” and “also to imagine transforming it” (p. 317). These students, coming to terms with a new awareness of their own roles in the common good, exemplify Yancey’s “citizen writer,” demonstrating the positive impact that service-learning can have on individual students and on society.

Critical pedagogy is not without naysayers, who worry about professors being candid about their ideologies and values, which, in turn, might not align with those of their students. They are concerned with whether quality writing instruction is taking place in these composition classrooms. S. Fish (Bizzell & Fish, 2009), a particularly outspoken critic, responded to Bizzell by arguing that teachers should separate their professional identities from those personal ideologies and beliefs, leaving them out of the classroom. Ultimately, Fish pointed out, writing teachers are paid to teach writing. When they attempt to connect writing with citizenship by bringing social issues into the classroom, they are veering outside of their areas of expertise and failing to do their jobs. Another early critic M. Hairston (1992) shared similar concerns when she criticized “a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student” (p. 180). Hairston concluded that a better way for freshman writing courses to deal with issues of diversity and community would be to allow them to write

about their own unique and diverse experiences. As a result, these courses would help young writers emerge “with confidence in their ability to think, to generate ideas, and to present themselves effectively to the university and the community” (192).

Contrary to these early critics, recent scholarship shows the effectiveness of service-learning combined with first-year composition courses, such as the model suggested by S. H. O'Connor (2017), and with even upper-level writing courses (Alexander, 2017) and literature courses (Guzmán, 2019; Halady, 2016; Kayser, 2017). O'Connor's course, *Writing in the Community*, combines textual analysis by or about leaders of social change, 20 hours of community service, weekly short writing assignments, a writing project for a community partner, and a final personal narrative written by students to make sense of the course materials. Using her students' own reflections, which combine narrative with service-learning changes, she highlights the “valuable tools in fostering critical consciousness in a service-learning classroom” (109). The upper-level writing and literature courses combined literature with the unique opportunities available in their local communities—Guzmán with farmworker families in California, Halady with Native American traditions in North Carolina, and Kayser with oral history of southern women in Louisiana.

The recent scholarship on sustainable service-learning programs in writing classrooms include several common characteristics: reciprocity between the students and the community partners (Guzmán, 2019; Kayser, 2017; Lietz & Tunney, 2015; Cary, 2016; Alexander, 2017; and Wells, 2016), student engagement in the choice of projects (O'Connor, 2017; McLeod, 2017; Alexander, 2017), and written texts to support the learning outcomes of the course, both those texts studied by the students and written by the students (Cary, 2016; Guzmán, 2019; Halady, 2016; Hatcher & Studer, 2015; Kayser, 2017; O'Connor, 2017).

### **Highlights of Service-Learning Projects at LSCK**

Taking advantage of service needs in the college's community can be one way to begin service-learning in the classroom. Reviewing the successful service-learning on the LSCK campus reveals that the best service-learning project is student driven, where students diagnose a community need, create, and undertake a service plan to address the community need. However, accomplishing this objective for service-learning, all while completing the learning outcomes of the course, may seem to be an impossible task for busy faculty, especially those at community colleges. Juárez (2017) criticizes Ashley Holmes' *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies* (2016) for only including case studies from elite and well-funded institutions. Juárez argues that Holmes' deletion of

case studies from community colleges does not help these institutions that struggle with funding constraints, heavier faculty workloads, and students with shorter time to degree completion. Yet, many students and instructors at LSCK have accomplished this fine balance to create sustainable programs for service-learning in their coursework.

### **Sustainable Projects**

Two examples of sustainable service-learning classes at LSCK are M. Griffith, a business professor, and B. Shmaefsky, a biology professor, who require service-learning of all students. Both professors have had great success with this program, especially for at-risk learners. Shmaefsky claimed the most significant success of service-learning is the ability to engage at-risk students since service-learning empowers students by engaging them in real world problems and having them apply solutions learned from academic study. Both Griffith and Shmaefsky share a belief in volunteering and specifically, in the intersection of civic engagement, volunteerism, and academic study for the service-learning program to empower and engage their students.

### ***Business and service-learning***

Griffith's decade long history of integrating service-learning projects in his project management class has led to the development of a semester long assignment that requires students to self-select a project that will benefit "a business, a community group, LSC-Kingwood, a church, or an individual client" (M. Griffith, personal communication, November 10, 2016). Griffith explained that he had limited success with student engagement the first semester he assigned a project. Allowing students to choose their projects has led to greater student engagement and success with project completion. Griffith has developed a 10-page assignment guide that provides the timeline to complete the project, including four required presentations and the overall parameters of the assignment. Normally students find their own community partners in their randomly assigned groups of five to seven students, but in spring 2014 and 2015, he guided the class toward an online project, the American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers (AFPM) Recruitment Challenge (AFPM: American Fuel and Petroleum Manufacturers, 2015). The petrochemical industry challenged universities to help them problem-solve an industry need: 10,000 baby boomers a day retire, and this industry finds that not enough millennials are filling employment

positions in this industry. In this competition, Griffith's assignment and project design for the teams in his class led to great success for his students. Although Griffith emphasized that the importance is the learning that occurs in the management of the service project and not the outcomes, these projects have contributed to successful outcomes over the years.

In Spring 2019, Griffith's students presented on their group projects, which included both the students' confessions of the difficulty of the program while balancing school, family, and work obligations as well as the transformative nature of the community-based projects. Part of the project involved evaluations of the projects' failures and successes and the reciprocity of benefits to students and community partners. Even projects that did not work as planned were mutually beneficial to all stakeholders. Students' descriptions of the failures can be valued as transformational threshold learning moments, defined by J. M. Wells (2016), as opportunities for reflecting and improving the sustainability of service-learning work for both students, faculty, and community partners. The Spring 2019 class presentations were marked with nostalgia as Griffith has retired from teaching. The successes for his courses' learning outcomes and the students' personal comments on the transformational experience for them inspired the department to have Griffith mentor his replacement in order to continue service-learning in these courses.

### ***Environmental science and service-learning***

Like Griffith, Shmaefsky has developed several successful projects for students in his environmental science class. He generated one of the projects in collaboration with the art gallery. The project was born as Shmaefsky and K. Larson, LSC-Kingwood art gallery director, were discussing the need for the arts in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in order to create STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics). Larson had contact with the photographer W. Nicole, who had taken some photographs of the displacement of the Batwa people in Uganda. Nicole explained that "these indigenous hunter-gatherers lost their forest homelands when Uganda created Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in 1991 to protect critically endangered mountain gorillas, and like many disenfranchised indigenous peoples around the globe, [these people] struggle to survive and thrive in a strange new world" (Nicole, 2016). The artist took photographs to illustrate the Batwa people's distress but was unable to take the time to organize and interpret the material from her photographs. Because environmental science seeks to balance the needs of protecting the environment with those of the human populations,

Shmaekfsky capitalized on the opportunities in Nicole's photographs by having students assist in analyzing this dilemma between the gorillas and the Batwa people. His students used the principles learned in the class to perform the following service for the non-profit organization: they "selected artwork provided by the photojournalist, developed a video for the exhibit, and designed reduced-scale models representing Batwa culture and current living conditions" (B. Shmaefsky, personal communication, November 13, 2016). This project was completed over several semesters with different groups of students. The value of this type of collaboration across disciplines is outlined by Wells in "Transforming Failures into Threshold Moments: Supporting Faculty through the Challenges of Service-Learning" (2016), which documents the importance of pairing novice faculty, new to service-learning, with seasoned faculty to develop new service-learning courses and work across disciplines.

Shmaekfsky's students have also identified and completed many relevant and timely community needs dealing with environmental science. Six students in his 2016 class researched and wrote a multi-media news story about "the people affected by the Flint, Michigan water contamination crisis," examining the causes and problems that led to the crisis in hopes of preventing future crises (Maxson, et al., 2016). After the Hurricane Harvey related campus flooding at LSCK in 2017, another group designed "strategies for reducing rainwater runoff that causes flooding on campus." Their analysis is based upon "the principles of a nationwide philosophy of urban development called Low Impact Development (LID), [a program] being promoted by a regional policy group called the Houston-Galveston Area Council" (Shmaefsky). These students are extending their research and ideas beyond the classroom by writing a proposal to share with the Director of Maintenance at LSCK and entering their projects in a contest sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency. Another group of students identified local environmental issues, and by using a plotter printer, these students created posters, which they will distribute on campus and will loan out to local schools and libraries to educate the public about local environmental issues. The third group of students also "provided research data on a pollution project in Bangladesh being pursued by the Environmental Defender Law Center in Washington, DC: part of program called On-Call Scientists run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science." These students assisted "with a project for reducing pollution from tanneries in Hazaribagh, Bangladesh." The fourth group of his students is "serving as facilitators for the Lone Star College-Kingwood STEM Day. They are demonstrating a biology activity and will be sharing their college experiences with the visitors." These projects underscore Shmaekfsky's investment in

developing projects that apply ideas learned in his classroom to service not only on campus, but also for local and international communities. Service-learning projects are required of all students in his environmental science classes, and although some enter the projects reluctantly, Shmaefsky believes the greatest impact is on at-risk learners who tell him that the service-learning component of the projects affected them significantly.

### **Lessons Learned for the Composition Classroom**

Recent scholarship that mirror the success of Griffith's and Schmaefsky's service-learning classes in the composition classroom include the following: Hatcher and Studer (2015), who combine scholarship on non-profits with students volunteering and critiquing non-profits in the community; O'Connor (2017), who uses rhetorical analysis of community activists and students' own reflections on community service; and Wells (2016), who documents the value of reciprocity in reflecting and acting on the reflection of community-based programs. All three articles use feasible models for making service-learning the center of the course, using guidelines for reciprocity of learning and conversation between students and community members, ensuring students' choice remains a central component, focusing on student learning outcomes, and requiring community engagement and service as part of the course. We could see any one of these programs or models based upon them working well on the community college campus.

We personally tried to mitigate the problems of requiring students to participate in service-learning outside of the classroom. Rather, service-learning remains an extra option that students may choose to complete in place of another assignment on the syllabus. But like Shmaefsky, we found that only the best students would choose to participate in these service-learning options. By making service-learning optional, at-risk students have not received the full benefits.

To integrate the optional assignments into a more effective service-learning experience that would mirror successes of other courses on our campus and draw on the current pedagogy on service-learning in the composition classroom, we recommend the following:

1. Have students identify and write an initial narrative about a need or problem in the community.
2. Have students research independently the causes associated with that need and possible solutions.

3. Require students to volunteer for a well-established organization of their choice to address the need or problem in the community.
4. Have students reflect on how well that organization deals with the need or how it falls short depending upon the student's research.
5. Have students present their findings and reflections to the class and to the community partner.

The course would focus on helping students both research the problem and the proposed solutions, reflecting critically about the ways their community is currently addressing that problem. This type of course addresses the problems of sustainability and reciprocity, the need for students to choose their own projects, and the problems of having the instructor not being sensitive to the students' personal political ideas. The instructor's role reverts to one of addressing the skills of competent researching and writing by helping students become better communicators, while at the same time providing students with the opportunity to become participants in and critical thinkers about their communities, learning to address the needs and problems within their communities.

## Conclusions

At-risk students can benefit from community-based projects in first-year writing classes. Recent scholarship has shown that combining service with narrative reflection and rhetorical analysis can be transformative for students. A key factor for the success of community-based projects in the classroom is administrative support, allowing new instructors time to work in tandem with seasoned instructors and to have conversations across the curriculum about viable and sustainable service-learning classrooms. One suggestion for Lone Star College is to create year-long cohorts for professional development programs and have dedicated staff update a service-learning website for faculty and community partners. Drawbacks to integrating service-learning include the time needed for busy faculty and students to invest in the projects, as time is often at a premium. However, experienced faculty at LSCK with successful programs and current scholarship on service-learning programs attest to the transformational power of these programs when students, especially at-risk or underprepared students, recognize their own agency to make change through action in their communities.



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### Literature Circles: Access to Texts

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#### ABSTRACT

In our classrooms and in the scholarship, we understand our students' inabilities and struggles to read the way we expect because for many, the reading process is elusive. This article examines the effectiveness of Harvey Daniels's literature circles, a student-centered and collaborative approach used primarily in the lower grades, as a tool for accessing the reading process and accessing texts. Levy reviews how this pedagogical model with its structured, scaffolded role sheets, which frame the literature circle discussions provides useful approaches for entering and navigating challenging textual material. Levy demonstrates how this methodology provides the infrastructure and guides students through the practices of annotation, reflection, discussion, and supports reading as a process paralleling the writing process.

#### What's Yoga Got to Do with Reading?

Over a decade ago, I tried a beginning yoga class. The instructor started; the class followed. The instructor began, saying something about “sits bones” (I had no idea what she was talking about), then contorted her body through a sun salutation, and fluidly moved through a series of poses. I tried my best to follow, intently watching the instructor's body, listening to the names of the poses, while at the same time trying to watch my arms and legs, which felt disconnected from my body, defining their own movements. I missed most of the poses. I was confused and lost, but I tried to keep up with the other students. Happily, for me, the instructor repeated her process, moving gracefully, naming poses. At one point, she walked around the room, gently repositioning an arm, a leg, correcting and praising. Ultimately, I could not follow and figure out how to move. What was most frustrating was that I could not do simple

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poses. What was most embarrassing was my inability to keep up with the class. After the class, I spoke to the teacher about my difficulties and insecurities. She told me to keep at it; I would eventually figure it out. I kept at it for approximately five weeks. However, my frustration and a feeling of low esteem were too great; I threw in the yoga mat and never went back.

At the outset, I was proud of myself for trying yoga, doing something new and beneficial, and looking forward to being able to practice yoga on my own, anytime, anywhere. However, all those positive feelings waned the longer I remained in class. I did what my teacher said; I kept at it; however, I was never able to figure out the poses on my own. I needed a pathway into yoga, a deliberate break down of poses so that I could eventually repeat the practice on my own, enjoy different yoga classes, and feel accomplished.

I think about my students in my urban community college many of whom are under-prepared for the challenges of the college classroom, particularly when comes to reading texts. When they cannot access a text, they may experience the same frustration as I did with yoga, eventually giving up and disappearing. My yoga instructor did not offer me help or a deliberate break down of poses. She assumed that with tenacious practice, I would eventually get it. And, indeed, I may well have at some point “gotten it.” However, our students struggle to “get it.” They lack the confidence and strategies to push through a text. And eventually they stop trying.

Alice Horning who has written prolifically about students’ struggles with college-level reading offers this definition of college reading: “College level academic reading can be defined as a complex, recursive process in which readers actively and critically understand and create meaning through connections to texts” (7). I contend that before students can become active readers and critically understand and create meaning, they need to enter a text. This article illustrates how Harvey Daniels’s literature circle methodology is a framework whose features offer students a variety of strategies for entering and navigating a text. More specifically, the literature circle role sheets access a road map for annotation and reflection; a vehicle for promoting conversations; and a model that supports reading as a process, paralleling the writing process.

### **Literature Circles: What Are They?**

Literature circles, grounded in collaborative learning, reader-response criticism, and independent reading offer a reading methodology, which provides access to useful strategies and approaches as students tackle challenging textual material in the

classroom. This methodology provides a flexible model of peer-led literature discussion groups evolved out of the elementary school classrooms in the 1980s, pioneered by Becky Abraham Searle and Karen Smith and expanded by Jeremy Harste, Kathy Short and Carolyn Burke. According to Harvey Daniels, “Literature circles embody the idea that kids learn to read mainly by reading and to write mainly by writing and by doing so in a supportive, literate community” (24).

The literature circles methodology is predicated on fostering textual interaction and thoughtful discussion. Instilling a sense of control over learning, the role sheets, which Daniels likens to training wheels, provide temporary support to help students interact with a text and to intentionally frame their textual discussions. The roles sheets are a series of structured, scaffolded exercises designed to encourage a transactional reading experience, by cultivating a variety of positions in relation to texts and providing an efficient plan for narrowing goals into manageable parts. The task of completing these role sheets gives students an immediate purpose and focus for reading beyond information gathering or being correct. Completing the role sheets also fosters students’ comprehension, encourages critical reading, and lessens students’ frustration and disappointment when tackling challenging material.

This methodology can also introduce students to the process of reading as an ongoing activity that continues to develop through all levels of education. This methodology can help bring confidence to students as they begin to see themselves as readers, in addition to writers. And finally, this methodology can encourage self-reflection. As students engage in the role sheet reading tasks, they are engaging in metacognition. Shepherded through an active and conscious reading, students become more mindful, more aware of their process, more aware of what they know, do not know, want to know, and need to know.

## **The Classroom**

My students tend to be non-traditional, the first in their families to attend college, the returning adults, the GED graduates, the immigrants, and the products of local high schools. They are proud to attend college, hopeful that an education will change their futures. But many arrive at college already carrying negative academic experiences and a host of affective, cultural, social, economic, and behavioral issues. Furthermore, they lack an understanding of the discourse and expectations of the academy, particularly for reading texts. They lack the skills for approaching and negotiating a text and reflecting on their process. There is a growing body of literature, focusing on these struggles and students’ lack of preparedness for college level reading, particularly their



difficulty with reading deeply and critically to achieve a more nuanced level of comprehension.

About two decades ago, I was frustrated with how my University-labeled “academically underprepared” community college students read (or did not read), their poor comprehension, and their lack of class discussion. I followed the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) routine where teacher Initiates a question; student Responds, teacher Evaluates. I asked the product question, eliciting a factual response. I did not know how to ask the process question, eliciting interpretation and opinion. Initially, my classroom technique was encouraging students to remain in what Rosenblatt calls the efferent stance, that end of the continuum where the reader searches for information, something to extract from the text as opposed to the aesthetic stance, the other end of the continuum where the reader is experiencing feelings, moods, and impressions (22-30). Literature circles methodology helped me change.

“Literature circles have the potential to make kids both more responsible for and more in control of their own education,” claims Harvey Daniels (31). When students perceive a lack of control over their learning, when classroom occurrences are tainted with negative experiences and failure, and students do not know how to approach the work, we lose them. Literature circles provides a methodology to give students access to texts, assignments, and discussions, and is a step toward helping students take responsibility and be in control of their learning.

### **Reading Practices**

If we consider historically how students have been inculcated to read a text, we can begin to understand a bit about why our students struggle to read, as we would like. For well over a century, typical classroom practices for reading instruction have situated students in an efferent stance, hunting for information to extract from the reading. Ellen C. Carillo offers a brief look at the evolution of reading in colleges. Dating back to the nineteenth century, reading was recitation, where articulation, elocution, and inflection were stressed. “Because the performance, or ‘art of reading,’ as it was called by many textbooks, trumped an understanding of the content, the materials printed in the readers were often redacted or taken out of context since their primary purpose had little to do with meaning” (48). In the late 1930s, there was the static view of the reader purported by the New Critical approach, placing the text in the foreground, where the history, author’s intent, and reader’s interpretations are immaterial; all meaning lives in the text. In the 1970s, Durkin observed classroom interactions and discovered that teachers engaged in what she termed “comprehension

assessment” where the teacher simply asked questions or created a writing assignment to assess students’ reading, confusing “comprehension instruction” with “comprehension assessment” (490-524). As a result, students were being programmed to mine a text for answers to be deposited on worksheets or assessments, particularly multiple-choice assessments, continuing the belief that all meaning resided in the text. Ensuing class discussions were often a matter of going over the worksheets and/or assessments. Classroom talk was often teacher centered: constructed, initiated, and sometimes even answered by the teacher; questions were designed to elicit literal, memorized, or yes or no responses, thus students’ responses were brief and students rarely initiated questions or questioned the teacher. In the early 1980s, Smith and Feathers set out to determine the necessity and function of reading in four middle school social studies classes, finding a lack of focus on reading instruction for comprehension. Rather reading involved the acquisition of information to be deposited on worksheets and tests. Moreover, they found that students could gather the needed information without reading entire assignments (264-266). The 1985 NEAP report attributed poor critical reading skills to inadequate class discussions about assigned reading and revealed the need for greater student participation in the construction of meaning. These NEAP findings prompted Alvermann and Hayes to observe the classroom discussion practices in five high school classrooms, both English and traditional content classes in rural Georgia. Not surprisingly, they discovered that classroom discussions resembled the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate where the teacher asked detail questions eliciting factual and brief answers, maintaining a teacher-centered environment. Teachers seldom invited interpretive responses, discouraging students’ individual points of view; and students seldom questioned their peers or the teacher, keeping the teacher as the authority (305-331). If this has been the reading experience for students in their schooling, then, of course, there will be a disconnect between the reading expectations in public schools and the reading expectations in college.

This disconnect of reading expectations between secondary educators and college educators is well documented. The 2009 *ACT National Curriculum Survey* notes: “Across content areas, about two thirds of high school teachers reported that more than half of their students were ready to read college-level material in their content area” (25). On the other hand, “Approximately one third of postsecondary instructors responded that most students arrive ready to read in their content area” (25). Five years later, the 2016 *ACT National Curriculum Survey* shared similar results. College instructors found entering students were lacking in the preparation of the reading skills needed. The lack of preparation and difference in expectations plays out in our

classrooms when our students struggle.

The middle and secondary school classrooms are not the only places that have contributed to students' belief that the purpose of reading is to glean information for assessment purposes only. More than two decades after Durkin's findings, Medina's 2001 research of adult literacy courses found that the teachers were still employing this comprehension assessment method through classroom practices of IRE, skill and drill worksheets (2). Echoing a point made by Smith and Feathers (1980s) who observed that reading the texts was not always necessary to be successful, we find that not much has changed. In 2008, Jolliffe and Harl investigated students' reading habits using questionnaires, journals, and interviews. Their general observations about the state of student reading include: "Professors admit that students can actually pass exams if they come to lectures and take (or buy) good notes, whether or not they have read the assigned material. In short, careful reading seems have [sic] become a smaller blip on the higher educational radar screen or dropped off it altogether" (600). Similarly, Del Principe and Ihara conducted a longitudinal study, examining the reading experiences of five students at a public urban community college. Their findings revealed that some classes did not require any reading in a text; even when classes did require a text, much of the class material was covered via lecture or power point, making the text ultimately superfluous; and sometimes professors did not seem to even care if students read the assigned material. So, if students' classroom reading experiences range from reading for answers in a teacher-centered classroom, reading for assessment, or not reading at all, then, of course, they will struggle to read as we expect.

### **Reading: The Struggles**

Reading struggles are not new. Monica Wyatt offers an historical context for students' complex relationship to reading and the need to create programs and courses that assist the underprepared student with reading, dating back to the early 1800s. In the early 1900s, William Gray highlighted studies that identified the underlying causes of college students' reading struggles as related to vocabulary, reading speed, and cognitive abilities, in addition to the students' level of maturity and their "inappropriate attitudes, ineffective habits of thinking while reading" (358). Nancy Wood described her mid-1950s students' struggles with reading speed and comprehension. Today's literature reflects similar observations, studies, and details of students' struggles with college reading, their attitudes toward reading, their lack of motivation, the necessity (or lack) of reading in order to succeed in a class, in addition to examinations of how reading as a process and outcome are addressed in the college classroom. Each

discipline, course, and teacher require different types, quantities, and tasks with respect to reading. But, whatever the requirements for different professors, classes, and areas of study, the refrain persists. Students cannot read as we expect they should be able to when they reach our college classrooms.

In the introduction to *What Is College Reading?* Alice Horning, who has written extensively about student reading, explains that students do not read the type of expository reading expected in college; they will not read unless there is some reward attached; they cannot read the way we expect them to read in our college classrooms. (8). She calls for a variety of ways to address this reading issue, including the creation of reading across the curriculum programs, that reading be taught in every class, that assignments challenge students to engage with texts, and that students are guided into becoming more mindful readers.

If reading and writing work together as modes of learning, then, naturally, students' weaknesses in reading surface in their writing. They struggle to write because they struggle to read. I have read many essays where students plagiarize, and I do not mean they buy an essay on the internet and give me a polished piece of writing. Rather, they cobble together sentences from different pages, or they string together words from different sentences, or they do what Rebecca Howard calls "patchwriting," defined as "reproducing source language with some words deleted or added, some grammatical structures altered, or synonyms used" (181). Students resort to this fractured writing because they are stranded at the sentence level. Their reading is slow and uncertain, lacking a sense of fluency and the necessary mental representations in order to understand the text as a whole. Consequently, their relationship to a text is in bits and pieces. When their reading comprehension remains at the sentence level of a text, then students search only for sentences to incorporate into their writing. The well-known Citation Project has documented students' struggles in summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting sources in their writing, demonstrating their lack of comprehension, critical thinking, and ability to synthesize. Furthermore, because students remain tangled in their sentences, they are not able to move deeply into the text, which means their textual references are derived from the first few pages of a text. Mary Lou Odom's study of WAC faculty's experiences with assignments that depended on students' reading yielded disappointing results: "students' lack of 'in-depth' reading," to students who "struggle" to carry out 'critical assessment' pertaining to course readings," to students who "lacked 'the ability to read a paper critically'" (260). Chris Anson investigates students reading for the mundane assessment to reading for thoughtfully and creatively designed writing to read assignments that contain clearly articulated goals and purposes for reading. If we consider this history

of reading practices and reading struggles, we should consider the literature circle model to be incorporated into the college classroom as a method to address students' reading struggles.

### **Literature Circles: Access**

I go back to my yoga experience. The yoga classes were my opportunity to engage in the practice and become part of the yoga community, to be competent enough to join my peers at yoga retreats, and to feel comfortable to join in a yoga class anywhere I traveled. But, as I described earlier, I struggled, having no tangible access to the poses, nothing to anchor me. I became frustrated and humiliated, losing all hope that I would ever be capable enough to participate in the practice and community, and I quit. I needed the instructor to move my body, positioning me while she looked on, so I could know what my body felt like, reflect upon what my body was doing, and look to her when I needed a guide. Authentic assistance may have given me access to confidence. And with confidence, I may have trusted myself to keep trying even if I stumbled. But I had nothing substantial to support me. My self-esteem sank. I did not trust my skills. I did not have confidence, the confidence to persist.

Many students lack confidence and trust in themselves as readers. They consider reading a linear, passive experience, not a recursive, active process that requires them to read and reread, critically engage with a text, evaluate ideas, press through complexities, synthesize, make connections, and identify relationships within the context of a whole. Additionally, they lack the tools and the experience of sustained practice that can help them stumble through uncertainty and allow a text to unfold. As a result, their familiar stance is to give up, say they are confused, and wait for the teacher to "tell" them what the reading is about and what they should think. Literature circles can arrange the infrastructure, cultivate students as active readers, provide access to texts, and begin to build the confidence necessary for them to keep going.

Employing literature circles and role sheets can offer the first step in transporting students inside the text where they are comfortable moving around. The role sheets guide students to focus on one role while reading and give students entry into significant textual experiences they might, otherwise, not be able to access. The literature circle discussions access meaning making among the students; invite them to question one another, ask for clarification, explanation or evidence from the text; and encourage students to support and defend their ideas and interpretations. The discussions offer students opportunities to synthesize material from a variety of perspectives. Consequently, students' listening, speaking, and reading proficiencies are

encouraged in their groups as they have the time to elaborate, express, and negotiate their points of view through questioning, clarifying, explaining, defending, elaborating, expressing ideas and interpretations before an audience of peers, as opposed the typical teacher to student exchange that excludes other students.

In literature circles, there are no quizzes, tests, answers, nothing to memorize, no right or wrong. Students are given the freedom to read without assessment pressure. They are given permission and encouraged to question, to be confused, and to get lost. They are inspired to collaborate with their peers to construct deeper meanings of texts.

Sustained practice, employing these roles and subsequent circle discussions, offer students the access for comprehension. If we regularly repeat *comprehension assessment* via multiple-choice exercises, quizzes, tests, Q and A worksheets and not *comprehension instruction*, and if our usual classroom model is to assign pages for homework, go over the assigned pages in the following class, and move on, then we cannot expect students to comprehend a text as we would like.

Furthermore, sustained practice of this methodology promotes the development of the habits of mind, the foundations of academic success. Habits of mind are behaviors and attitudes toward just about everything we do, particularly when we encounter obstacles. Fostering habits of mind will provide students with self-assurance as they navigate their coursework and the academy. Arthur Costa's *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success* and *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project detail mindful learning behaviors that are vital for success, behaviors which can be attributed to reading. Costa offers these behaviors as learning outcomes, not in the traditional sense of what students should know upon completing a course. Rather he posits the habits of mind are behaviors students exhibit when they are having trouble completing a course. Students need these behaviors to access and support their learning. Many of the habits listed in the both documents overlap and intersect so that it is difficult to illustrate in a one-to-one comparison how a role sheet encourages a particular habit of mind. Here are a few examples: Responding to texts using the low-stakes role sheets encourages *creativity, risk-taking, openness, and applying past knowledge to new situations*. Sharing their thoughts with peers in the literature circle conversation challenges students to *communicate with clarity, listen and understand with empathy, be open, think flexibly and interdependently*. Considering the responses from their peers gives students the opportunity *to reflect and think about their thinking*. The experience of

completing role sheets and having circle discussions exposes existing ineffective behaviors and nurtures habits of mind that will better serve the students.

Literature circle roles offer students a pathway in to developing a “rhetorical reading” of a text. Building on the belief that reading is a transaction, Christina Haas and Linda Flower identify the construction of meaning through “‘rhetorical reading,’ an active attempt at constructing a rhetorical context for the text as a way of making sense of it” (168). Novice readers engage in a one-dimensional rhetorical process, building a simple mental representation of the content, decoding words, reading to collect information. By contrast, more experienced readers engage in a complex rhetorical relationship with a text, building a variety of intersecting “private mental representation[s]” (168). These mental representations include not only the content, but also representations that readers build in order to make sense of texts. Readers’ representations may include a consideration of structure and different parts of a text, the author’s point of view, intentions, and purpose; their own personal thoughts, beliefs, and opinions; internal and external connections; mental images; emotional responses, values, and connotations; social implications. As Haas and Flower suggest, students struggle to read critically not because of the representations they build, but because of the representations “they fail to construct” (170). The literature circle roles encourage students to access the construction of a range of mental representations in the service of a deeper and more critical understanding of a text. As we take our cues from a text, our minds are involved in creating many representations at the same time. Moreover, because these roles are flexible, they can be designed so that students are challenged to respond simultaneously to multiple roles, employing multiple representations, and identify relationships within the context of a whole.

Employing literature circles over the years, I have creatively altered these role sheets, varied the ways I group students, abandoned this method, and picked it up again. I have experienced the awkwardness of students when they bring, for the first time, their completed role sheets to their literature circle discussions. While I circulate the room, they wait for me to approve their responses, and I have to gently nudge them to share responses with their peers, not just me. No matter how the literature circles evolve, one element remains essential: Sustained practice using this method is necessary to cultivate the moves of a practiced reader and create discussions that are more authentic. With sustained use of this practice, a community forms when students are actively reading and collaborating in the construction of knowledge in a low-pressure, democratic, open forum. There were times in my class when the routine to complete the role sheets became familiar and organic, to the point where I was able to



ask students to read their text and complete the role sheets without giving them actual worksheets.

### **Literature Circles: Annotation**

Annotation helps to reify for students the relationship between reading and writing and how knowledge is constructed. This section unpacks how role sheets are a template for annotation and reflection. In a highly structured fashion, the role sheets demonstrate various writing to read activities to complete during a reading of a text.

Students' default method of annotation is a yellow highlighter with a page yellowed with many, if not all, sentences underlined. I often ask students *why* they have highlighted or underlined a particular sentence and the response is invariably the same: "It's important. It's the main idea. I need to know that." When I press further: Why is that sentence important? Why do you need to know that? Students reflexively offer that any given sentence is important and most likely something they need to know for some sort of accountability or assessment.

To move students beyond yellow, the literature circle role sheets usher students through various aspects of annotating: asking questions about the text in general or for the author; contemplating beyond I agree/disagree; identifying passages that are challenging, interesting, and worth rereading; finding and defining new and/or difficult words; accessing prior knowledge, making connections to their own lives and/or other readings; visualizing content and text structure through pictures, maps, charts, or any pictorial that helps to clarify content and structure; and reflecting about what they are thinking and doing as they read, and how they read. I have seen students who barely write anything in the margins; who rewrite the text; who make artwork out of the text, using various highlighter colors and draw circles, arrows, and lines. Writing on the role sheets moves students away from these unproductive practices and guides them toward deeper, engaged reading.

Helping reading teachers teach annotation, Carol Porter-O'Donnell's uses her students' written reflections to demonstrate how annotations helped them understand the text they were reading. One student commented how annotations slowed down his reading, making it "harder to fake read if you have to annotate" (87). This student understood the difference between the kind of "real" reading he should be doing and the kind of "fake" he was doing. I think, however, for many of our students the "fake" reading is their "real" reading. They remain unaware and/or resist another way to read.

Writing on the role sheets slows down the reading process, allows students to use writing as a means to learn, and positions students not only as active readers, but

also mindful readers. A slower reading process allows students to “hear the ‘speaking out loud voice’ in their heads while reading” (Skeans 69). The students’ inner monologues and their role sheets as written dialogues with the author support students as active, thinking, and reflective readers.

The role sheets and literature circle discussions, which encourage multiple interactions with a text encourage reflection. Completing the role sheets, students are expressing their first thoughts about a reading and they are able to reflect on and reconsider those first thoughts through the subsequent literature circle discussions, which resembles a peer review exercise. In a peer-review of their essays, students share their drafts, receive comments, reflect, and revise. In this case with reading a text, the first drafts of the students’ reading are the completed role sheets. The responses on the role sheets are shared with their peers, who, in turn, offer feedback. Students then have opportunity to reflect upon their first thoughts and reread for a deeper understanding, revising their thoughts/drafts with knowledge gained from their peers. The literature circle discussion brings the reflective and reading processes to life. Examining this reflective process, Mills and Jennings videotaped their students’ literature circle discussions so that viewing themselves in action, students could reflect on their learning through their discussions. Their objective: “Students reflected (looked back) and then became reflexive (studied themselves to outgrow themselves)” (59).

Providing guidance for reflection, I ask my students to complete a “Reflection Sheet.” Before I collect the role sheets and reflections for my review, the groups break up, and the class ends, I ask my students to share their reflections with their group, and then we engage in a whole class discussion about their reflections and what it was like sharing their reflections: the act of reflecting on reflection.

### **Literature Circles: Talk**

As we have learned from Dewey’s investigation of traditional and progressive education, the traditional education practice does not encourage students to become active learners and “is unfaithful to the fact that all human experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication” (38). Whereas, engaging in an authentic social experience such as discussion stimulates thinking and reflection, the ingredients for deep reading. Langer’s research points to discussion as an essential element of instruction. Studying students when engaged in small group discussions, Sweigert found positive results with comprehension and writing. Peterson and Eeds saw dialogue as a way for students to negotiate and clarify ideas, in addition to a way

to encourage patience and respect. In her observations of elementary school students as they discussed texts, Ann Ketch notes, “Without conversation, we are limited to our own insights. With conversation, we can explore and expand our developing thoughts. We construct our own meaning, influenced by the knowledge and experience of others” (12). The social nature and influence of others is at the heart of the literature circle talk.

### **Literature Circles: The Reading Process and the Writing Process Connected**

Students have had so many years of reading and writing practice in primary and secondary school. Yet, for some reason, we do not abandon writing instruction as we abandon reading instruction. We encourage writing through low-stakes writing activities such as journals, freewrites, double-entry notebooks, and so forth to help students think through ideas and construct knowledge. They draft and revise. They engage in the writing process. What has happened to teaching and encouraging the reading process?

Unlike the drafted essay produced for class, reading yields no tangible product. Consequently, students do not recognize that reading involves a process similar to the writing process. The literature tells us that reading and writing are connected, overlap, depend upon, and share many cognitive processes for constructing meaning. Throughout their report “Toward a Composing Model of Reading,” Tierney and Pearson describe how the reading and writing processes are similar, as both are means of composing. Students acknowledge the writing process, as they are active in planning, drafting, peer reviewing, conferencing, revising, and producing a product. What they do not acknowledge is that the reader, like the writer engages in the process of making meaning through the acts of planning, drafting, aligning, revising, and monitoring. They miss the fact that readers construct knowledge as they read the same way writers construct knowledge as they write. For the novice reader, the reading process is elusive and often a high stakes enterprise, particularly if the only moves the students make are to hunt for correct answers.

Literature circles serve a middle ground, accessing the growing and integrating both reading and writing as a means for interaction with a text and the construction of meaning. Loosely following the composing process, the role sheets represent low-stake responses, the students’ first drafts/first reads of a text, where they are writing to learn by asking questions and expressing thoughts and feelings. The literature circle conversation promotes the constructing, negotiating, and renegotiating of meaning; the clarifying, supporting, and defending of interpretations; and developing of an

awareness of new perspectives.

### **Literature Circles: Access to Multicultural and Culturally Relevant Texts**

Our classrooms are diverse culturally and linguistically, and students and teachers need to be sensitive to diversity. Multicultural and culturally relevant literature can be inspiring and can broaden students' knowledge of worlds inhabited by different people, languages, customs, traditions, and political situations. Multicultural and culturally relevant literature also offers students a chance to reflect on their own situations. Additionally, students develop an appreciation for more than the community they inhabit, as they are, indeed, members of a global society. Thus, we have a responsibility to help students possess a deeper knowledge, and empathy for those unlike themselves.

This section highlights how discussing multicultural and culturally relevant literature in literature circles offers students opportunities to access and explore new and different worlds, fostering new perspectives. The various roles activate and acknowledge students' individual circumstances; provide a context as students build upon their knowledge with new information; and promote comprehension by encouraging students to become personally involved with the text. Moreover, exposing students to the diverse lenses of their peers through which a text is viewed not only adds to students' understanding, but also challenges them to reflect, reconsider, re-evaluate what they know and to respect what they do not know.

Research shows that literature circles with multicultural and culturally relevant literature work best when students have a genuine interest and purpose for reading a text or when supplemental scaffolding is employed. The adult readers studied were mature and experienced and the choice to read multicultural and culturally relevant texts using the literature circles was a deliberate choice with a clearly defined purpose. Vaughn et al. used literature circles discussion as a framework and an "entry point for critical discussions" (30) using young adult multicultural texts as a way for rural pre-service teachers to access critical conversations about people, cultures, races, languages, and situations unlike their own. The researchers found that when discussing these texts, pre-service teachers looked at social issues of power and class, and textual discussions were followed with conversations about potential classroom situations when difficult topics might arise and how best to support students. Amy Heineke investigated the value of literature circles as a collaborative mechanism for discussing culturally relevant picture books with teachers and teaching candidates, whose classes are populated with English learners. She discovered that success of the literature circle

discussion depended on the structure that the reader response (role sheets) provided, and how participants were grouped together. Ultimately, the literature circle discussions with culturally relevant texts provided participants with the means to understand the students' lives, to personally connect with texts, and to address students' individual circumstances. Lori Fredricks used the term Critical Literature Circles for her discussion circles with adult EFL learners in Tajikistan. Her students desired to read texts culturally relevant to their own lives. Their subsequent literature circle discussions centered around connections they made with characters and their social and political situations, in addition to reflecting on the knowledge they gained about how other people handled particular situations; their own prejudices and beliefs; and life lessons. Elizabeth Noll's seventh graders experienced success as they, too, desired to read texts about social issues, including child abuse, censorship, nursing homes, the Vietnam War. Before the literature circle discussions, Noll immersed students in a variety of supplemental activities such as class discussions on particular topics, dialogue journals with Noll, weekly letters to each other. Heather Bruce used literature circles with culturally relevant texts to expose Native American stereotypes and to better understand the culture and contributions. Like Noll, Bruce immersed her students in a series of pre-literature circle discussion activities, including directed research, journaling, and supplemental scaffolding. Thein, Guise, and Sloan found that without supplemental scaffolding, a group of tenth graders who read *Bastard Out of Carolina*, remained on topic and discussed their texts; however, their talk lacked critical examinations of social issues presented and any observations of characters and issues remained on the surface. The traditional role sheets did not cultivate critical stances to larger social and political themes, nor did they encourage changes in students' thinking about any issues. Researchers suggested a redesign of roles to challenge students' ways of thinking about multicultural, social, and political issues raised in texts. Sometimes, in their most rudimentary form, literature circles will not provide the desired access to discussions and analysis. Supplemental activities and a redesign of the role sheets will be needed.

### **Literature Circles: The Classroom**

I return to my yoga analogy. I was expected to breathe a certain way, clear my mind, and pose. When I expressed despair, my instructor advised me to stick with it, and I would eventually figure it out. I stuck with it for a while, and I did not ever figure it out. In the college class, students are expected to read a variety of texts, to actively and deeply engage with the complexities of a text, to analyze, interpret, evaluate, synthesize,

and apply knowledge. When they express despair, we pretty much know they will not figure it out on their own. I needed access to yoga; students need access to texts. Before students can comfortably and deeply engage with texts, they need the process to be slowed, have reading moves broken down, offered scaffolding to make the moves, and be allowed to practice each move before being expected to analyze, interpret, evaluate, synthesize, apply knowledge and perform the complete reading routine. The framework and underlying objectives and goals of literature circles can offer our students that entrée into texts through annotation, repetition, conversation, reflection, and appreciation that reading is a process like writing.

However, literature circles do not provide a panacea. Instructors need to know that this practice takes time and persistence, and at times creativity. Sometimes, the lack of assessment and the informal low-stakes nature of the literature circle model is unfamiliar to students, and they may resist taking control of their learning and being pushed into an uncomfortable place where they must be active participants in the construction of knowledge and not merely passive recipients. Literature circles are not always democratic. As with any group, there will be disruptions: A student may emerge as a leader and take over the conversations. Students may be embarrassed about their responses or be too shy to speak up. There will be students who do not complete the assignment or students who are absent. Talk in the group may stray from the text and disintegrate in conversations about the party on Friday night. Of course, there simply may be no time in a class to indulge in this modality on a regular basis.

With all that said, Harvey Daniels's literature circles methodology is a classroom practice that will equip students with the tools for access to a text, promote independent practice when approaching a text, foster conversation about a text, and support the view that reading is a recursive process similar to the writing process.

Students need access on many levels. Literature circles and role sheets offer access.

## Appendix A: Role Sheets

Role	Description
<i>Discussion Director</i>	questions as we read
<i>Literary Luminary</i>	identifies challenges and/or memorable passages, passages we read, analyze, or share with someone.
<i>Content Connector</i>	accesses prior knowledge as we make associations and connect a text with our experiences, our communities and other texts.
<i>Character Coordinator</i>	considers a character through dialogue, behavior, and what others say.
<i>Word Wizard</i>	identifies and defines new words or phrases.
<i>Illustrator</i>	creates a mental representation of texts through diagrams, maps, organizing ideas, theories, arguments and/or structure of the text.
<i>Message Maker</i>	identifies the overarching message of a text.
<i>Summarizer</i>	recaps the reading.
<i>Group Sheet</i>	A sheet created for the collective findings of each group.
<i>Reflection Sheet</i>	A sheet created to capture the students' reflections about their reading processes and experiences.

\*\*It is important to note that the traditional roles sheets can be tailored as needed.



## Appendix B: Reflection Sheet

- *Describe your experience reading the assigned chapters with a specific task to complete.*
- *How did performing your assigned task change the way you read the book?*
- *How did reading this way help/ not help your reading?*
- *Explain why this task was/ was not difficult.*
- *Describe your experience discussing your responses with your group.*
- *How did your classmates respond?*
- *Describe your experience listening to other members discuss their responses.*

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### **Learning is an All-Black Thing: Literacy, Pedagogy, and Black Educational Institutions after *Brown v. Board of Education***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the literacy practices cultivated in African American alternative educational institutions during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Using New Literacy Studies (NLS) as a methodological frame, I argue that African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s founded their own schools and fashioned their own curricula to challenge White supremacy in public education after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling. These schools valued the knowledge-making abilities of Black youth and encouraged Black students to use their literacy skills to improve their local communities. By exploring the educational and rhetorical values of the Mississippi Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Schools in East Palo Alto, California, I illustrate how these alternative educational institutions enforced culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies that highlighted the languages, histories, and identities of African American students. The students who attended these schools developed racial pride, self-reliance, and political consciousness, and were introduced to a tradition of social engagement and community organizing. I conclude this article by detailing how rhetoric and writing teachers might draw from the rhetorical work of the Freedom Schools and Nairobi Schools to address sociopolitical issues in the composition classroom.

To be literate is to be honorable and intelligent. Tag some group illiterate,  
and you've gone beyond letters; you've judged their morals and their minds.

—Mike Rose, “The Language of Exclusion”

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To impact the education of our people, we needed to be connected to the community, speak the languages of that community, and mirror back to the people their possibilities when their world and previous schooling had not.

—Carmen Kynard, *Vernacular Insurrections*

## Introduction

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws enforcing separate public schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional. The case—*Brown v. Board of Education*—overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that normalized the rhetoric of “separate but equal” and allowed state-sponsored segregation in public schools. Because *Brown v. Board* made educational segregation illegal, many scholars suggest that the ruling initiated what is now remembered as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, since African Americans allegedly received legal access to the same educational opportunities, facilities, and resources as White Americans. However, responses to the *Brown* decision were not universal. Southern states passed over 450 laws to stall school desegregation efforts, and ninety percent of southern White people opposed the *Brown* mandate (Berrey 142; 187). Because most Black schools were underfunded and filled with underpaid staff, some African Americans aggressively advocated for school integration (128), while others protested the *Brown* judgment because they believed it would negatively affect the lives of African American educators and students (Holmes 80). Although some African Americans demanded access into White educational spaces and even integrated into predominantly White public schools and institutions of higher learning after 1954, others found it necessary to construct their own learning spaces (Epps-Robertson 2) and developed new alternative schools and educational institutions for Black students after *Brown v. Board*.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I examine the range of these alternative schools and educational institutions, the multiple literacy practices associated with these spaces, and how these institutions implemented culturally relevant literacy practices that intersected with the

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<sup>1</sup> In *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (2016), Russell Rickford notes how these schools hoped to “decolonize minds, nurture the next generation of activists, and to embody the principles of self-determination and African identity” (2). Catherine Prendergast’s *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education* (2003) details the myriad ways Black educators were negatively impacted by *Brown v. Board*, including the dismissal of over 30,000 Black principals, administrators, and teachers over a span of eleven years. As part of her argument that access to literacy is a major civil rights and racial justice issue, Prendergast suggests that despite understandings of the *Brown* ruling as an indicator of American educational equality, literacy acquisition is often still viewed through a “Whites-only” lens.



needs and interests of local African American communities.<sup>2</sup> The African Americans responsible for the creation and maintenance of these institutions challenged traditional notions of knowledge production by using literacy practices ingrained in African American histories, language variations, and cultural and artistic expressions. These literacy practices provided Black students with knowledge not based solely on the acquisition of certain skills (like those found in predominantly White schools), but on principles that involved racial pride, self-reliance, social engagement, and political consciousness. Because of the belief that these principles could be lost once Black students assimilated into White schools, Black alternative educational institutions—often run by African American educators, community leaders, parents, and activists—offered Black students curricula that demonstrated an effective model for a participatory and rhetorical education.<sup>3</sup> By specifically examining the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the mid-1960s and the Nairobi Schools established in East Palo Alto, California, in 1966, I explain how the multiple literacy practices fostered in Black alternative educational spaces after *Brown* strengthened Black lives and communities by cultivating the knowledge(s) being suppressed in White-controlled schools. Furthermore, I illustrate how Black students were introduced to an organizing tradition in these spaces that merged educational concerns with political activism.<sup>4</sup> I conclude this article by briefly detailing how this history intersects with a vision that rhetoric and writing teachers might have for their own composition classrooms in our current sociopolitical moment.

### African American Literacy Methodologies

Due to the educational difficulties and inequalities in predominantly White schools during the mid-1960s, many African Americans turned to their own communities to receive a satisfactory education.<sup>5</sup> This education, though, did not simply mimic the

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<sup>2</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32.3 (1995).

<sup>3</sup> According to Rickford, "The shuttering of beloved Black schools or the stripping of their cultural significance and identity through the loss of cherished traditions, emblems, colors, mascots, and names deepened the ordeal" for how school desegregation negatively impacted Black students (39).

<sup>4</sup> In the words of Prendergast, "The assumption of literacy as White property in crucial contexts has meant that a burden has been placed upon people of color to create and sustain alternative literacy institutions and programs" (9).

<sup>5</sup> When the *Brown* decision was made alongside the rhetoric of "with all deliberate speed," it was anticipated that the law would resolve the educational disparities experienced by Black students across the country. Instead, Black students faced difficulty in their pursuits to integrate White schools, especially institutions of higher learning in the South. For instance, it was not until 1961 and 1962 that

educational or literacy practices found in White schools. When Black students entered White schools, White educators, administrators, and Eurocentric curricula defined their educational journeys, successes, and failures. White-controlled school systems praised Black students for engaging with literacy practices that valued the histories, languages, and cultures of White America, and condemned Black students for retaining the histories, languages, and cultures of their home communities. Literacy scholars might consider this type of literacy engagement to be an example of an “autonomous” model of literacy, which means that upon acquisition, students are equipped with the tools needed to secure opportunities for professional success, social mobility, and economic freedom. However, several writing studies scholars have critiqued the idea that being literate only means retaining certain knowledge(s) that demonstrate universal proficiencies in reading and writing comprehension. Instead, these scholars support a New Literacy Studies (NLS) model, which acknowledges that literacy is “something that people do, rather than something that they have or do not have” and “represents social and cultural practices, rather than a set of skills to be acquired according to given hierarchies of understanding and social organization” (Kynard 32).<sup>6</sup>

Building on previous monographs that examine African American literacy and rhetorical practices (Moss 2003; Richardson 2003; Fisher 2009; Nunley 2011; Kynard 2013; Lathan 2015; Pritchard 2016; Gilyard and Banks 2018; ~~and~~ Epps-Robertson 2018), I explore the various ways that African Americans have engaged with language and vernacular forms to educate themselves in non-White learning spaces.<sup>7</sup> African Americans created educational institutions and maintained culturally responsive literacy practices to refute autonomous models of literacy and promote reading, writing, and speaking practices that connected to the linguistic resources and sociopolitical situations of African American students and their communities. Like other hush harbor spaces that “privilege African American knowledges, worldviews, and rhetorical forms, not just Black bodies” (Nunley 27), the Black educational institutions that I describe in this article cherished the identities and competencies of Black students. Instructors at these institutions reassured students that they were skilled and talented beings and did not chastise Black students for what they did not know. In these spaces, learning was more about knowledge *creation* than knowledge

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the University of Georgia and University of Mississippi admitted their first Black students, and the students on both campuses were welcomed with protests and hanging effigies. Many White institutions in the South continued to prevent Black enrollment until the mid-1970s (Kynard 50).

<sup>6</sup> For more on NLS, see Brian Street’s *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education* (1995).

<sup>7</sup> In *On African American Rhetoric* (2018), Gilyard and Banks argue that Black composing practices in nontraditional school settings deserve more scholarly attention (122).

*evaluation.* The Black individuals governing the schools believed that the entire student body (and Black community as a whole) was capable of learning and entitled to an invigorating educational experience (as opposed to ideologies that framed education as a privilege for a select few). Since Black educational institutions rejected literacy practices that only presented White hegemonic mores, the Black students that enrolled in these institutions repossessed their educations by engaging with literacies that provided them with a sense of self-determination and empowerment.

### The Mississippi Freedom Schools

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was an important U.S. Civil Rights organization that pushed for African American students to receive a rhetorical education. It also believed in the instruction of diverse literacy practices. In 1963, SNCC activist Charles Cobb proposed that the organization create the Freedom Schools, a network of alternative schools that used student-driven, community-centered, and culturally relevant literacies to educate African American students. Because public schools in Mississippi inadequately prepared African American youth to be critical thinkers and knowledge producers, Freedom Schools students were asked to “challenge the myths of [their] society, perceive more clearly its realities, find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for actions” (Carson, as qtd. in Schneider 49).<sup>8</sup>

Approximately forty schools were established in Black communities throughout the Magnolia State, coexisting alongside or influencing the direction of similar Black-run educational institutions, such as the Highlander Folk School, the Citizenship Schools, and the Child Development Group of Mississippi’s (CDGM) Head Start program.<sup>9</sup> Responsible for educating over 3,000 Black students, the Freedom Schools relied partly on the labor of affluent, well-connected, and northern-born White college student volunteers. Many of them lacked teaching experience.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In *Collaborative Imagination: Earning Activism through Literacy Education* (2015), Paul Feigenbaum observes that students were told to “imagine alternative worlds” for themselves and the entire citizenry (5-6).

<sup>9</sup> For more on these institutions, see Katherine M. Charron’s *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (2009); Rhea Estelle Lathan’s *Freedom Writing: African American Civil Rights Literacy Activism, 1955-1967* (2015); and Crystal R. Sanders’s *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi’s Black Freedom Struggle* (2016).

<sup>10</sup> The majority of Black SNCC activists opposed the decision to allow northern White college students to teach Freedom Schools classes, arguing that their presence would overlook the identities and voices of everyday Black people. On the other hand, some believed that including White Americans would guarantee justice and change because their presence, not their knowledge, would bring scrutiny to the state. Writing scholar Lindsey Ives explains: “The story of Freedom Summer

The curriculum consisted of strategies that encouraged students to be socially active in their local communities and focused on pedagogies that valued collaborative discussions and inquiry-based learning over rote learning and lecturing. Furthermore, literacy acquisition and student compositions purposely reflected a commitment to political engagement and action. For example, consider the following poem written by a Freedom Schools student about Hartman Turnbow, a Mississippi civil rights activist known for practicing self-defense (Freedom Schools participants often wrote poems about Black individuals that they admired in their community):

*Turnbow*

I know a man who has no foe  
His name is Mr. Turnbow  
He is about five feet six  
Every time you see him he has a gun or a brick  
If you want to keep your head  
Then you'd better not come tripping around his bed  
When he talks to you  
His fingers talk too  
Some people might not understand  
But Mr. Turnbow is a good old man.  
(Wesley, as qtd. in Umoja 104-105)

With its emphasis on accentuating the educational promise of African American communities and students, the curriculum of the Freedom Schools differed from the White-controlled public schools that Black students typically attended. Many public schools offered a racist curriculum that silenced students' voices and ignored their intellect. Academic materials and textbooks heavily relied on Black stereotypes and caricatures because White segregationists underfunded the educational budget and restricted what Black students learned. Freedom Schools students, however, wrote their own stories and produced their own textbooks to counter anti-Black narratives about them. Questions like "Why did Harriet Tubman go back into the South after she had gotten herself free in the North—and why so many times?" flooded the Freedom Schools curriculum and stressed the relationship between Black history, school instruction, and activism. In the words of SNCC activist Jane Stenbridge, "Some [students were] cynical. Some [were] distrustful. All of them [had] a serious lack

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shows that acknowledging and leveraging White privilege is an effective move in the fight for racial justice in the U.S." (236).

of preparation both with regard to academic subjects and contemporary issues—but all of them [had] knowledge far beyond their years” (qtd. in Dittmer, Kolnick, McLemore 100). While some classes were held in churches or other community-based centers, others were organized in public parks and in the basements or backyards of private homes. In addition to learning traditional subjects like writing and mathematics, students enrolled in “elective” courses like art, dance, or a foreign language. All students took classes on the history and philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement and “Negro Studies.” Freedom Schools teachers were expected to challenge racist beliefs about Black students before instructing them. They were also advised to learn from their students and stay keep up to date on the interests and needs of their students’ families and communities.<sup>11</sup>

SNCC workers claimed that an educational system grounded in political and communal activism was central for African American liberation. While the autonomous model of literacy proposes that the acquisition of skills provides liberation, Freedom Schools teachers argued that liberation was experienced once literacy became *available* and *accessible* to everyone in the community. Furthermore, it was not enough for the voices, languages, and identities of people from marginalized groups to be heard and seen; they also had to be respected and included in the educational curriculum as valuable markers of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

### The Nairobi Schools

Following in the tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Schools, the Nairobi Schools of East Palo Alto, California, insisted that African American students engage with culturally responsive literacies that reflected the needs and interests of their communities. As a response to the inequities in the U.S. public educational system—

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<sup>11</sup> This type of teacher-student relationship is billed as an important pedagogical strategy in Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005).

<sup>12</sup> According to Feigenbaum, “Achievement, in SNCC’s perspective, was pursued explicitly as a means both to access literacy *and* to ensure that it yielded individual and community benefits in the face of systemic oppression. . . Values of hard work and self-reliance were thus promoted alongside values of mutualism and communal welfare” (79-80). Moreover, one of the most well-known classes of the Mississippi Freedom Schools was future Black Power advocate and SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael’s “Speech Class,” held at the Waveland Work-Study Institute in the spring of 1965. Carmichael’s class interrogated the relationship between Standard American English (SAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and underscored how Black language and culture could be used to transform the conditions and meet the needs of local Black communities. Carmichael’s goal—as well as the goal of the Freedom Schools in general—was to create an organic classroom that focused on political awareness and organized action (65). See Stephen Schneider’s “Freedom Schooling: Stokely Carmichael and Critical Rhetorical Education” (2006).

even after *Brown v. Board*--many Black individuals decided to take matters into their own hands and formed Black independent schools based in African American communities. As I detail below, these Black independent schools valued literacies that were not being introduced to Black students in predominately White schools. Additionally, emphasis was not placed on mastery or competency of autonomous skills, but on the “development of new political views and values” (Hoover 202) and “a community oriented, culturally appropriate learning atmosphere” (Lewis 189).

In a community that was 88% Black with a 50% unemployment rate (Hoover 208), and just minutes from Palo Alto, the home of Stanford University, numerous residents of East Palo Alto felt that something needed to be done to create a better environment for the members of their community. Fully immersed in the mid-1960s rhetoric of the Black Power Movement, these community members adopted the beliefs most notably expressed by Black Nationalists like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, such as “gaining control over public institutions located in Black communities; reclaiming and revaluing Black people’s African heritage; identifying with global anticolonial struggles; and throwing off the psychological shackles of self-hatred and internalized racism” (Biondi 269). After discovering that White classmates were calling her daughter a racial slur and her son had graduated from high school without learning how to read, Gertrude Wilks, a community activist in East Palo Alto, founded the Nairobi Schools in 1966 to provide Black children with a safe, nurturing, and culturally responsive educational space. Although initially conceived as a weekend program, the Nairobi Schools developed into a daily elementary school, high school, and junior college by 1969.

To establish the ethos of the schools, Wilks, with the assistance of other community members, boycotted the local public high school and encouraged students to not only boycott but also attend the Nairobi Schools (Hoover 203). Once operational, the schools depended on community volunteers to become the teachers (although a paid staff was institutionalized in subsequent years) and paralleled the student-centered ideologies of the Freedom Schools. In the words of Wilks: “The college students taught high school students, and the high school students taught the little ones in the park” (qtd. in Biondi 222). Because of this process, traditional conceptions of knowledge production shifted, since volunteers and students, and not just credentialed teachers or trained scholars, provided an education to others. According to Robert Hoover, the principal of the schools and founder of Nairobi College, the “curriculum was a collective effort” and the “students really r[a]n the school” (qtd. in Biondi 222-23).



Throughout the early 1970s, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines featured the Nairobi Schools to provide cogent profiles of Gertrude Wilks and her reasoning for forming the schools. In a July 30, 1970 article, Wilks was depicted as a “mid-40-year-old East Palo Alto, Calif., housewife who founded a Black private school and who describe[d] her curriculum focus as ‘niggerology’” (*Jet* 45). According to Wilks, the goal of the curriculum was to “produce Black problem solvers and young Black community scholars who recognize[d] [their] slave condition and the necessity of breaking these chains on [their] minds” (*Jet* 45). Similarly, in an April 1, 1971 *Jet* article, “Public Schools ‘Not Working,’ Creates Own,” Wilks explained that the Nairobi Schools were needed because White schools were not aware, nor interested in the needs, concerns, and problems of Black students and communities (*Jet* 47). In his explanation for why Nairobi College was needed, Don Smothers, a former president of the college, suggested that the other local colleges of the area were “not accessible to the community and not doing anything for the community” (*Jet* 47).

A few months later, *Ebony*’s September 1971 issue included an extensive write-up of the Nairobi Schools by Associate Editor Jack Slater. Entitled “Learning is an All-Black Thing: California Community Creates its Own School System,” the write-up claimed that Wilks’s faith and hard work resulted in the community-oriented schools for Black students (89). Slater reported that the Nairobi Schools created “an educational atmosphere which expunge[d] racial grief,” and cited an instructor as stating that the schools taught Black students how to “find their identities, discover the potential of their minds and eventually invest that potential in [their] own community” (Slater 89). Another teacher articulated similar words: “We try to make a child believe in himself. We also explain to them, or demonstrate to them, that what they’re doing now in school will someday yield some value to the community” (Slater 91). For Nairobi students, becoming literate was a communal activity; their educational successes benefited their local communities in tangible ways.

Although many of the teachers and tutors at the Nairobi Schools were not professionally trained as educators, they participated in preparation workshops before interacting with their Black students. During these workshops, teachers and tutors were told to challenge students and their thinking without patronizing them. According to Robert Hoover, the goal was not to “decide what a child’s mental capacity [was], [but to] expand it,” and teachers were expected to “teach, not diagnose” (qtd. in Hoover 204). Once teachers had a firm grasp of their roles as educators, they followed a curriculum that presented students with an understanding of how their individual identities were part of a beautiful and profound African lineage. According to Mary Eleanor Rhodes Hoover, a language specialist, director of the Nairobi Schools’



English Department, and wife of Robert Hoover, “The study of Black history and culture was an integral part of the Nairobi Day School’s pedagogy [.] students and teachers at the school celebrated Black History and culture in the form of politically oriented music, rhymes, and short stories” (205). Rituals such as the singing of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (popularly referred to as the Black National Anthem) before classes started each morning and the recognition of holidays like Malcolm X’s birthday on May 19 and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense on October 15 were institutionalized (Biondi 222). Notable Black community leaders and organizers such as the Black Panthers, Stokely Carmichael, and St. Clair Drake frequently visited Nairobi classes to discuss the benefits of having an “Afrocentric” educational curriculum that implemented diverse literacy practices often disregarded in predominately White schools.

For the younger students of the Nairobi Schools, activities with literacy regularly mirrored the literacy practices of the Freedom Schools and connected Black history with poetry, rhyming techniques, and syllable patterns. This approach strengthened students’ reading skills and re/enforced racial and political pride. As seen with the following poems, students were not simply taught the literacy skills covered in predominantly White schools, such as how to spell or recognize rhyme schemes. At the Nairobi Schools, Black students engaged with literacy in ways that taught self-love and the importance of giving back to one’s community:

*Malcolm X*

Malcolm X, Malcolm X,  
Read so much he needed specs.  
Malcolm X, Malcolm X,  
Loved his people, loved the Blacks.  
Taught us how to speak up loud,  
Taught us how to stand up proud  
(Hoover 205)

*Harriet Tubman*

Harriet Tubman  
had a plan  
to help Blacks get to  
the promised land  
(Hoover 206)

While these poems—and others like them—provided students with short historical anecdotes about renowned African American activists and leaders, they were methodically merged into participatory activities and discourses that consisted of group singing, storytelling, and call-and-response to create an energetic, collaborative, and enjoyable learning environment.

Even in writing-oriented classes for older students, emphasis was placed on familiarizing students with the rhetorical styles of Black writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Amiri Baraka (Lewis 190). In terms of the language variations that students used

in the classroom, the Nairobi Schools reflected an attitude that was identical to the one that Stokely Carmichael held in his Freedom Schools speech class. Although White schools enrolled Black English speakers in special education courses, writing classes at the Nairobi Schools used materials that “counteract[ed] negative stereotyping by showing that Black language [was] logical, intellectual, rich, and capable of expressing any kind of idea” (Lewis 190). Like how younger students learned spelling and poetry schemes by participating in collaborative group settings, older students also actively engaged in groups while writing. Students often read and analyzed rough and final drafts of papers aloud in class (this activity was called a “class performance”). Furthermore, students became the teachers of other students and altered traditional understandings of who was capable of channeling knowledge in the learning space. As Lewis articulates, “Learning through the group participational method [produced] a number of confident, good writers who [were] writing and encouraging others to write successfully in the schools, on the job, and on behalf of the local community” (195).<sup>13</sup>

As president of Nairobi College, Robert Hoover stated that “if [Nairobi] was going to meet the needs of people of color, [it would] have to educate leaders who want[ed] to work within the community—doctors, lawyers, engineers” (Miner 3). Nairobi College advocated for students to not leave their local communities but work to positively change them. The college mandated a demanding community service requirement that expected students to complete four hours of community service daily. In addition to aiding others, this requirement helped students learn important information about Black life that was excluded from mainstream textbooks and other scholarly documents. In the words of one female student, the communities that she served were “rich in knowledge and culture—but they [were] not researched. You [could not] read about them in White libraries” (Miner 10). Although community service was frequently completed in health centers, welfare offices, or with a Northern California prison, the Nairobi Schools introduced the Teen Project in 1967, which gave teenage students the opportunity to teach reading to preschoolers in the backyard of their homes (Hoover 207). The teaching strategies by the teenagers echoed those of the Freedom Schools and included culturally inspired academic activities, and the preschoolers formed relationships with promising teachers that came from their own communities. Although funding issues forced the Nairobi Schools to shut down in

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<sup>13</sup> In December 2005, *College Composition and Communication* published an essay detailing the results of a five-year study on college writing at Stanford University. The authors of the essay argued that at the time of their research, “student writing [was] increasingly linked to theories and practices of performance” and “performance encourage[d] active participation and collaboration.” See Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye’s “Performing Writing, Performing Literacy.”

1984 (the college closed in 1979), the schools never abandoned their commitment to providing a culturally relevant and community driven education to Black students of different ages and instruction levels. The schools understood the significance of combining literacy acquisition and effective pedagogy with social engagement.

### **Implications for Rhetoric and Composition Scholars**

The Freedom Schools in Mississippi and Nairobi Schools in California challenged and redefined traditional notions of where and when academic knowledge is produced and shared. By investigating the individuals responsible for the creation and maintenance of these institutions and how they implemented multiple literacy practices ingrained in Black histories, languages, and cultures, I underscore how literacy engagement and knowledge acquisition for Black students in the 1960s and 1970s were not based solely on the attainment of skills but on principles of racial pride, political consciousness, and community activism.

Such African American literacy practices enable access to a meaningful education. A student's literacy journey is incomplete if it only includes the texts that a student reads for academic classes or the standardized fluency that a student reproduces in traditional school settings. On their way to becoming literate beings, today's students must also learn how to use their words to incite meaningful and ethical action and affirm their own identities and standings in the world (Fisher 86; 116). Additionally, the educational training that students receive should welcome their non-academic lives and languages in the classroom and not silence or push them aside for something that is deemed "better." The literacy practices that we teach and encourage students to use should have just as much power outside our classrooms as they do inside them. If we expect our students to become rhetorical agents who engage with literacy in multiple ways and for different purposes, then we must view the learning environment in a way that supports situational approaches to literacy use and proficiency.

Although 2019 marks the sixty-fifth anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, several public schools and communities across the country are now in a state of resegregation. Survey results from the U.S. Department of Education reveal that over the last decade, Black students are suspended from school or arrested on school property at disproportionately higher rates than White students, and many Black students do not have access to compassionate teachers, advanced courses, and funded resources like several of their White peers (Klein). While our public schools are currently struggling to maintain the ideals of equality that our country proclaims, this

does not have to be the reality of our composition classrooms. Like the educators of the Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Schools, writing instructors also have a responsibility to create multicultural classrooms that critically examine our societal ills and validate the backgrounds, experiences, and voices of all of our students (including Black students and students from other marginalized and underrepresented groups).<sup>14</sup> If the aim of composition studies is to produce “a more perfect, deeper democracy” (99), as Keith Gilyard (2008) suggests, then we must be steadfast in showing students that we welcome who they are and are committed to helping them develop rhetorical agency, savviness, and awareness inside and outside academia.

Composition pedagogy is never politically neutral. How we teach, where we teach, who we teach, and what we teach reflect particular worldviews that we value as educators, scholars, and citizens.<sup>15</sup> As we navigate our writing classes, let’s remember how the Freedom Schools contested White supremacy and anti-Black rhetoric in public education, or how the Nairobi Schools trained students to become problem-solvers in their home communities. We possess the power to determine how social issues are handled in our classrooms and can encourage students to apply their literate selves in ways that are community-oriented and activist-driven. Given our present sociopolitical climate, I hope that we use our power to embrace and support the diverse identities and rhetorical agendas of our students, and build inclusive and just communities in our classrooms, institutions, and society at-large.

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<sup>14</sup> For more on multicultural classrooms, see Severino, Guerra, and Butler’s *Writing in Multicultural Settings* (1997) and Daniel Barlow’s “Composing Post-Multiculturalism” (2016).

<sup>15</sup> See John Rouse’s “The Politics of Composition” (1979) and Kristie Fleckenstein’s *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom* (2010) for examples of how the writing classroom is a political space.

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### Recognizing Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Students: First-Year Writing Placement and Success at a Small Community Four-Year HSI

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#### ABSTRACT

As the number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) increases, Latinx students still lag behind peers in degree completion. This essay focuses on the role of writing programs at HSIs in supporting Latinx students toward graduation, starting with first-year writing (FYW). The purpose of this study is to examine how developmental writing placement and curricula impacts student success at a private, nonprofit HSI. I examine eight years of FYW placement data, disaggregated by race (Latinx and White), Pell grant eligibility, and first-generation college student status. I also examine FYW pass rate data over the same period, as an area of measurable success. My findings show that deficit narratives surrounding low-income, first-generation Latinx students are baseless, as Latinx students have the lowest placement into developmental writing at the study site. My findings also show that a data-driven, assets-based approach to placement and curriculum results in fewer students, from all racial and economic backgrounds, placing into developmental writing. Likewise, more students complete FYW within one year, a positive step toward degree completion. Research on writing programs at diverse HSIs is needed to understand the various student populations that these campuses serve, and what helps them persist and succeed through FYW, and until graduation.

#### When Access Means More than Enrolling Students

For faculty and administrative staff who coordinate first-year college programs, talk about “access” often refers to a *lack* of access for students of color and students of

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lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Typically, we want to change this underrepresentation by enrolling more underserved students and offering them the opportunities afforded by a college education. The increasing enrollment of Latinx<sup>1</sup> students at U.S. colleges and universities illustrates these efforts. Although Latinx students represent 25% of K-12 students nationwide, they represent only 16% of college students (Excelencia in Education “Pathway Programs” 1). Yet more and more colleges and universities are qualifying for federal recognition as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).<sup>2</sup> The number of HSIs has doubled in the past decade to 523 schools, with several hundred others being identified as “emerging” HSIs throughout the United States (Excelencia in Education “Latinos in Higher Education”). Increased Latinx enrollment in higher education is good news. But access means more than just getting students through the front door. Latinx students also need curricular and faculty support that reflect their diverse identities and experiences. In order to recognize diverse Latinx identities and experiences, we must also recognize the diversity of HSIs that enroll and educate Latinx undergraduates, including private, nonprofit four-year universities.

Of course, all students need support and resources to complete their undergraduate degrees. However, Latinx students face a challenge particular to historically underserved groups: low graduation rates in comparison to their peers. Lately, the focus has shifted from access to the lagging undergraduate completion rates nationwide, for all students. According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education,<sup>3</sup> Latinx students have a 30% completion rate at public two-year institutions, where many begin their degrees. At public four-year institutions nationwide, the six-year completion rate for Latinx students is 54%, lower than the 59% completion rate for all students. At private nonprofit four-year institutions, 62% of Latinx students complete their degrees within six years, lower than the 66%

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<sup>1</sup> On the usage of Hispanic, Latino/a, and Latinx in this essay: The term Hispanic, as used in Hispanic-Serving Institution, is a designation used by the U.S. federal government. The term Latino/a is the designation used by the study site’s Office of Institutional Research; usage of this term reflects corresponding statistics published by this office in their Fact Book. The term Latinx is used by the author of this study as a gender-inclusive term, reflecting its adoption in higher education institutions, organizations, and publications (Cuellar).

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of Education grants federal designation as Hispanic-Serving Institution to institutions with at least 25% of full-time students identifying as Hispanic (Excelencia in Education).

<sup>3</sup> National data on post-secondary institutions is collected by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which is maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

completion rate overall (National Center for Education Statistics). These gaps in degree completion between Latinx students and their peers at both public and private colleges and universities indicate that although more under-represented students now readily have access to higher education, many students do not complete their undergraduate degrees within six years, let alone within the normal timeline of four years.

Though there are many reasons for why students drop out of college, this essay focuses on the role of placement and developmental education in English composition, or first-year writing (FYW), in student retention and success. The study that I present in this essay focuses on a private, nonprofit four-year HSI and its efforts to support students' degree completion by revising FYW. I contextualize the study within current movements to reform FYW placement and curricula, based on research illustrating the harmful impact of deficit narratives on Latinx students. I then discuss how deficit narratives have been shaped by traditional models of developmental writing placement and curriculum, which are currently being revised in California public higher education to improve access and retention. My findings show that at the study site, an HSI, deficit narratives surrounding low-income, first-generation Latinx students are baseless, as institutional data collected over an eight-year period show that Latinx students have the lowest placement into developmental writing. My findings also show that a data-driven, assets-based approach to placement and curriculum results in fewer students, from all racial backgrounds, placing into developmental writing. Furthermore, revised placement and curriculum resulted in more students of all socioeconomic backgrounds completing FYW within one year – a positive step for students toward completing their degrees on time. Research on writing programs at HSIs increases access *and* success for the many diverse communities of Latinx students.

### **Countering Deficit Narratives with Data Collection**

While HSIs represent the wide spectrum of colleges and universities, faculty at HSIs often describe prevalent deficit narratives that homogenize Latinx students on their campuses, despite the various and distinct home communities, languages, and backgrounds they represent (Araiza, Cárdenas Jr., & Garza; Kirklighter, Murphy, & Cárdenas; McCracken and Ortiz). A more complete, research-driven—that is, evidence-based—portrait of students helps to redefine success beyond monolingual and monocultural measures, so that success is informed by what works in the diverse settings of HSIs, and by the lived experiences and cultural capital that Latinx students

bring with them. The dominant “underprepared” or deficit narratives that might influence faculty perceptions of Latinx students negatively impact student success (Bunch and Kibler 23; Cuellar, “Latina/o Student Characteristics” 104; Razfar and Simon 600). To counter harmful deficit narratives, researchers at HSIs call for faculty and administrative staff to “know” students through data collection, particularly paying attention to data about reading, writing, and multilingual literacies. They contend that data-based information about students challenges prevalent stereotypes, including of Latinx students as at-risk, resistant to education, and overwhelmed with ESL difficulties (Araiza, Cárdenas Jr., & Garza; Kirklighter, Murphy, & Cárdenas). Data collection also revises negative deficit narratives with an assets-based mindset, recognizing that low-income students and students of color enter college rich in cultural assets that they draw upon from their communities and experiences in order to transcend socioeconomic challenges and oppressions (Cuellar 104; Rendon, et al. 5). By emphasizing these assets, faculty can help students see themselves positively, a contributing factor to persistence through college. An assets-based mindset helps faculty and administrators to support diverse student populations through many different pathways to academic success, beginning with placement into FYW courses.

### **Revising FYW Placement and Curriculum to Increase Degree Completion**

In California, state lawmakers have taken up concerns about mediocre completion rates by passing Assembly Bill (AB) 705, signed into effect by the governor in 2017. Intended to reform developmental education in English and Mathematics, AB 705 is prompting much discussion about the role of college-level English composition, or FYW courses, in helping students access the support and resources they need to take them beyond the first year of college. Likewise, the California State University (CSU) system also recently initiated placement and curricular reforms for FYW across the system’s twenty-three campuses. Community college districts and CSU campuses are now required to maximize the statewide goal for all students to complete FYW within one year, a goal that is facilitated by eliminating reliance on computer-based scores (such as those generated by Accuplacer, the SAT, the ACT, and the CSU’s own English Placement Test) to place students into FYW. These computer-based testing measures are used to identify students for remedial writing placement, using a skills deficiency model that focuses on error identification within a standardized usage of English. Such assessments have been critiqued as inconsistent and unfair measures for FYW placement, as they do not directly evaluate student writing, and thus do not provide an accurate picture of how well a student will do in a FYW course (Elliot,

Deess, Rudniy, & Joshi; Isaacs and Keohane; Isaacs and Molloy). As a result, many students are unnecessarily placed into developmental writing courses, which in turn delays their progress towards their degree completion. To revise these unfair placement practices, the state's community colleges and CSU campuses are now required to implement a multiple measures approach to placement, which uses one or more data points--such as high school coursework, high school grades, and high school grade point average--to indicate a student's readiness for college-level writing (AB 705; "Executive Order 1110").

The CSU has also eliminated developmental writing prerequisites, while community colleges have greatly reduced these courses so that more students have better chances of completing their FYW requirement within one year. Accelerated learning options, such as mainstreaming, offer alternatives to multi-course developmental writing prerequisites, reducing the time students need to complete developmental coursework, usually with co-curricular support (Bunch and Kibler 23 - 25; Hern and Snell 31). One accelerated model enrolls students into a co-curricular writing studio, typically a one-unit course for students who place into developmental writing, but who are mainstreamed into FYW. Rather than focusing on "fixing" perceived academic deficiencies, writing studios use an assets-based mindset to aid in college transition, offer college-level courses for faster degree completion, and promote positive self-efficacy toward academic success.

Writing assessment researchers have long proposed fairer, more meaningful assessment for placement by considering how practices serve the best interests of student populations within local contexts (Huot; O'Neill). Recent assessment scholarship extends this argument by considering the impact of assessment on access, retention, and degree completion of historically underserved student populations, specifically low-income students and students of color (Inoue; Inoue and Poe; Kelly-Riley). For example, some propose that a more accurate and fairer approach to FYW placement involves the use of multiple measures, such as combining holistic evaluation of timed essays to state-mandated test scores. A multiple measures approach, some contend, results in more accurate placement for under-represented students (Brunk-Chavez and Frederickson; Matzen and Hoyt). This direction of writing assessment scholarship has deepened efforts in the field to examine the relationship among race, class, and writing assessment in FYW programs, encouraging more focused research on specific types of institutions, and on how those programs can best support students' degree completion.

These reforms pay attention to the connection between student success in FYW courses and graduation rates, particularly among under-represented minority

students. Research shows how students who take multiple semesters of developmental writing are more likely to drop out, in comparison to students with fewer required developmental writing courses. Students who took fewer developmental writing courses increased their overall GPA and successfully completed their required writing courses at higher rates (Hern and Snell 31; Razfar and Simon 620). At the time of writing, the CSU released preliminary data that show positive results from the first semester: 82% of students passed the FYW requirement during fall 2018, the first semester after reforms (California State University).<sup>4</sup> In summary, the state system's skills deficiency model of FYW placement was replaced with a multiple measures approach, one that acknowledges students' high school achievements as the basis of their knowledge and placement into FYW. California community colleges and the CSU use data collection to apply an assets-based mindset to placement, shifting notions of access from enrolling more students, to making available to all students a viable pathway to degree completion. Such developments in FYW placement and curricula in public higher education systems echo similar developments and discussions taking place, at a much smaller scale, at some private universities, including this essay's study site.

### **Recognizing HSI Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Student Success**

Writing program administrators need more research describing institutional characteristics, resources, and activities within the diversity of HSIs in order to understand the role of writing programs in increasing graduation rates for Latinx students, and for all students served by HSIs. Student populations at HSIs differ linguistically and culturally from one geographic location to another. As such, Latinx students represent a diverse range of instructional needs (Kirklighter, Cárdenas, and Wolff Murphy 9). Yet, much of the research on writing programs at HSIs focuses on community colleges, which in 2016 - 2017 represented almost half of all HSIs across the nation. In the same year, 135 private nonprofit four-year universities and 120 public four-year universities were also classified as HSIs (Excelencia in Education "Latinos in Higher Education"). Studies of community colleges are informative and valuable yet writing program administrators at small private universities or at larger public Research One or comprehensive universities are likely to have other institutional factors influencing the revision of placement and curricula. Likewise,

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<sup>4</sup> Placement and curricular reforms at the community college level are scheduled for fall 2019, so the impact is yet unknown.

more studies are needed that recognize the diversity of writing programs across the range of HSIs. Research that elucidates the distinctive diversity of HSIs is important to understanding the various student populations that these campuses serve, and what works in helping them persist and succeed through FYW and beyond.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of different placement practices, in combination with different curricular structures, on students in FYW courses at a private, nonprofit four-year HSI. I evaluate “impact” by examining eight years of FYW placement data gathered in this study, disaggregated by race and income level, to determine which groups are placed into developmental writing. I determine how placement practices impact students by examining completion rates of FYW as an area of measurable success. FYW courses are core general education requirements that are also prerequisites for upper-division courses in the major for most four-year colleges. Therefore, FYW completion rates are important indicators of successful completion of an undergraduate degree. This study presents one writing program’s efforts to revise assessment for placement and corresponding FYW curricula to provide first-year students with access to viable pathways toward degree completion. Furthermore, I disaggregate the collected data by race and income level in order to evaluate the impact of revised placement and curricula on specific student populations to determine needed resources and support.

## **Study Site and Population**

The study site is the main campus of a four-year, private comprehensive university, enrolling 2,798 undergraduates. This university is located within a small suburban city (population of 31,000) of Los Angeles County (City of La Verne). The university’s enrollment size and suburban location fit the description that Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo offer as a “small communities” four-year HSI (77). Unlike the more common urban community college HSIs and the “big systems” four-year HSIs, such as several of the CSU campuses, small communities four-year HSIs are typically private nonprofit institutions. According to institutional data, 44% of first-year students at the study site are first-generation college goers. In 2013, a year for which data was collected for this study, 51.9% of first-year students identified as “Hispanic/Latino,” while 27.2% identified as White. Throughout the eight years for which data was collected, the study site qualified as an HSI. The six-year graduation rate is 67% (Moore).



Notably, this graduation rate is 8% higher than the California State University graduation rate. Additionally, a 2016 Department of Education report identified the study site as one of 13 private nonprofit four-year institutions that “appear to excel in both the enrollment and completion of Pell grant recipients,” Pell recipients accounting for 46% of students enrolled in the 2013-2014 academic year (U.S. Department of Education 8).

Participants are cohorts of first-year students enrolled in developmental writing courses for every fall semester of the eight years that I collected data. The prerequisite courses, now discontinued, were described in the catalog as “*pre-college*” courses for students with “*deficient*” or “*mildly deficient*” skills in writing, reading, and language use (emphases added). Students were required to pass these prerequisites in order to move on to a two-semester sequence of FYW courses, requiring some students to take four semesters (two years) of writing courses in order to satisfy their general education written communication requirements. At the time, the writing program used a single measure--a computer-based, multiple choice exam--for FYW placement, before being revised into a multiple measures process. During the last year that the exam was used, 60% of all incoming first-year students placed into a developmental writing course, providing the exigence for this study (see “Year Four” on Figure 2).

The third course is a one-unit Writing studio course that emphasizes small group and individual tutoring for students concurrently enrolled in the first semester of the two-course FYW sequence. Writing studio is capped at seven students and taught by writing faculty who also teach the FYW course. Students meet in small groups once a week to discuss reading, note-taking, and writing strategies common to their FYW course. Every other week, they alternate between meeting with the instructor and with a peer tutor in the writing center to discuss individual drafts and focus on language conventions or revision. Other course goals include spoken language practice, active collaboration with peers, and metacognitive reflection on literacy, as well as learning essential resources such as the writing center, faculty office hours, and peer networks. Grades are Credit/No Credit and are based on attendance and active class participation. Beginning the fall semester of the seventh year of data collection, writing studio replaces the prerequisite developmental writing courses, without the deficit language from previous years.

## Method

This study compares pass rate data of students placed into FYW courses, examining the impact of placement assessment and the related curriculum on the completion of FYW by Latino/a and White students across income levels, some of whom identify as first-generation students. Students in the first four years placed into prerequisite developmental writing courses one or two levels below FYW after taking a computer-based, multiple choice placement exam. Students in the subsequent two years of the study placed into developmental writing using a multiple measures approach. For this cohort, students placed in developmental writing were required to take only one prerequisite course before FYW. Lastly, a third group of students that placed in developmental writing in the last two years of the study was mainstreamed into FYW courses. Students in this latter group were also required to take a corequisite one-unit writing studio course in order to complete FYW.

During all eight years of the study, I disaggregate data by race (American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or African American, White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Other, Two or more races, International/Non-Resident Alien).<sup>5</sup> However, with the exception of White and Latinx students, all groups yield data that cannot be analyzed for statistical significance. Therefore, this study focuses on data reported for only Latinx and White students, who comprise the majority of students enrolled in developmental writing for the eight years that I collected data. I also disaggregate data by first generation status and low-income status, as determined by Pell grant eligibility (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Lastly, I analyze de-identified course evaluations of the writing studio, coding for recurring patterns in participant responses to understand the impact of the writing studio model at this study site.

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<sup>5</sup> Categories described in the 2009-2013 Fact Book, Office of Institutional Research, of the study site.

<sup>6</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low income undergraduate students to “promote access to post-secondary education” (“Federal Pell Grant Program”).

## Findings

### Students Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds Placed in Developmental Writing

Figure 1 provides a demographic of the students enrolled in developmental writing at the study site. Data show that students across socioeconomic backgrounds placed into developmental writing, before and after we revised FYW placement to a multiple measures approach during the fifth year of data collection. After all students were mainstreamed into FYW, students across socioeconomic backgrounds continued to place into developmental writing and reading. After we revised the placement, Pell grant eligible students accounted for just slightly more than half of all students enrolled in developmental writing. Approximately an equal number of students who were not from low-income families also placed into developmental writing.

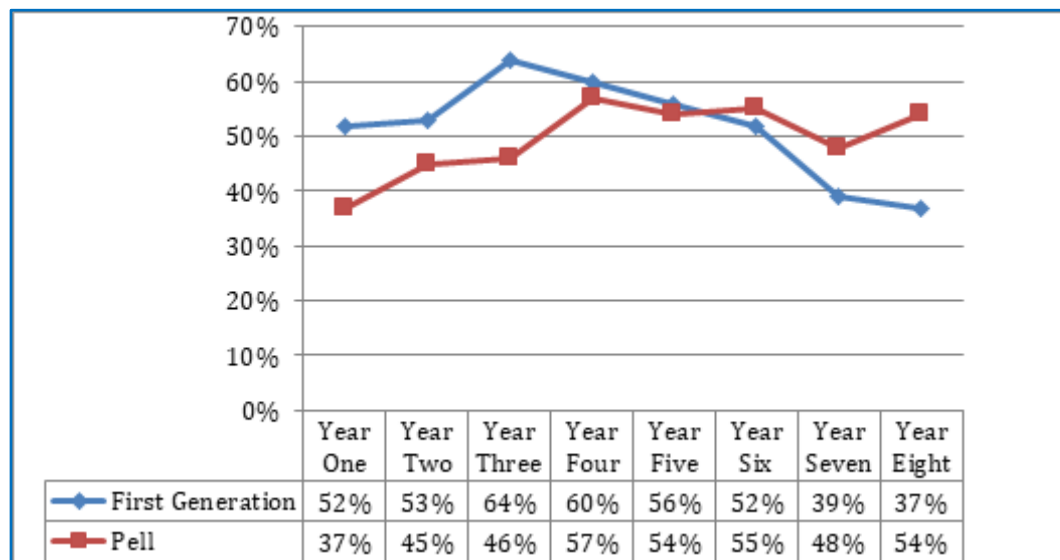


Fig. 1. First-Generation Status and Low-Income (Pell Grant) Eligibility of First-Year Students Enrolled in Developmental Writing Year 1 - 8.

The data also show that after we revised the placement method to include multiple measures, and after we mainstreamed all students into FYW, the percentage of developmental writing students who identified as first-generation college students dropped significantly by the last year of the study (Fig. 1). Although first generation students comprised the slight majority of students in developmental writing for the

first six years of the study, this percentage drops to below 40% in the last two years, indicating that most students placed into developmental writing at the study site came from college-educated parents (Fig. 1). Students from at least middle-income families also placed into developmental writing at near-equal rates as low-income students.

### **Multiple Measures Placement Results in Fewer Developmental Writing Students**

Another important finding shows that the revised FYW assessment resulted in fewer Latinx and White students, and fewer first-year students overall, placing into developmental writing (Fig. 2). For the first four years of the study, when students placed into FYW using the computer-based single measure, enrollment in developmental writing for Latinx students, White students, and all first-year students overall climbed until peaking in the last year that we used the single measure for placement. At the height of developmental writing placement, 58% of all Latinx students, 78% of all White students, and 60% of all first-year students placed into developmental writing (Fig. 2). Beginning in the sixth year of data collection, when we began to use multiple measures for FYW placement, developmental writing placement dropped significantly for both Latinx and White students, and for all first-year students overall. In the third year of the multiple measures' placement, only 24% of White students were placed into developmental writing, lower than the previous six years. For Latinx students, this downward trend continued until the last year of the study, when only 16% of all Latinx students were placed in developmental writing.

In summary, after placement revision, low-income Pell grant-eligible students continued to represent approximately half of students placed in developmental writing. However, fewer first-generation college students placed into developmental writing after placement revision (Fig. 1). In addition, fewer Latinx and White students, and fewer first-year students of all racial backgrounds, placed into developmental writing. Notably, after placement revision, Latinx students had the lowest placement into developmental writing (Fig. 2).

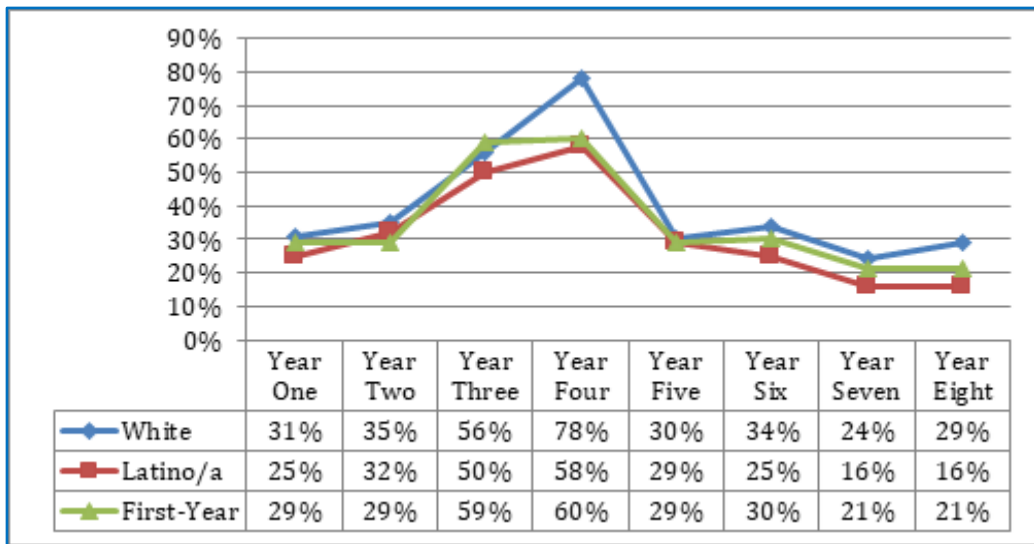


Fig. 2. Developmental Writing Enrollment for Whites, Latinos/as, and all First-Year Students (Percentage of Total Number Enrolled from Each Group)

\*Years 1 - 4: Placement by Single Measure (Computer-Based Test)

\*\*Years 5 - 8: Placement by Multiple Measures

### Writing Studio: Assets-Based Resource for FYW Success

I analyzed anonymous course evaluations for 42 sections of writing studio, using open coding of qualitative remarks to identify several themes from student responses. The majority of students value how writing studio aligns with the learning outcomes of their FYW course. Students especially value the writing studio as an additional resource for learning strategies for grammar, revision, thesis, idea development, and organization. Many students also report positive experiences collaborating with peers, as one student shares: “The most satisfactory aspects were speaking to our peers about our writing and how it can be improved. It gave us a different perspective and made me feel comfortable [...]”

Additionally, students overwhelmingly describe individual meetings with their instructor as the most useful resource, particularly for discussing drafts and receiving feedback. One student wrote: “I personally enjoyed one on one meetings. Receiving feedback on my essay was really helpful for my Writing 110 class.” A third student describes his/her positive interaction with the studio instructor: “[The instructor] wouldn’t just write on my papers, he would verbally show me and walk me through the areas I strongly needed help in.” When asked to identify the most satisfactory

teaching attribute of the studio instructor, students most frequently cited “patience.” Students use other descriptors such as “encouraging,” “helpful,” “caring,” and “respectful” to describe the studio instructor. These positive affective characteristics of the instructor create an environment in which students feel like their voices are encouraged and respected, as one student reports: “I could just be relaxed and have a conversation with [the instructor].”

When the instructor creates a positive and encouraging environment, the studio helps students see themselves and their academic capabilities in a positive way, employing an assets-based mindset. The students concur. Their descriptions of the most valued outcomes for the course include: improvement in their writing, followed by improved grades, and increased comprehension of their assignments. Students also describe metacognitive benefits, including an increased sense of ownership and self-efficacy, as illustrated by a student who identifies the most satisfying outcome as “being able to criticize my own essays and understand how to correct my problems.” Students commonly described gaining confidence, as illustrated by one student who wrote that the instructor helped them “become a very confident and better writer.” Another student reports: “I learned how to write more effectively and strongly. [Writing studio] also helped me get organized for college life.” These representative comments illustrate students connecting their efforts in writing studio to an increased sense of effectiveness as writers and as students. Overall, students value focusing on FYW learning outcomes, getting help on their WRT 110 assignments, and receiving feedback on their writing during group meetings and individual meetings with the studio instructor.

### **Data-Driven Placement and Curricular Reform Best Supports FYW Retention and Completion**

The last set of findings for this study examine the completion of FYW as an area of measurable success. At the study site, students who complete the two-course sequence have fulfilled the general education requirements in written communication. I analyze the impact of placement and curriculum on each group of students by examining the pass rates of the exit course for the two-course FYW sequence. In my analysis, I focus on all students across racial formations, income, and first-generation college student status. I compare three sets of data, organized by placement process and developmental writing structure. I then analyze data sets using a T test to measure statistically significant difference. Only one comparison of data sets shows a significant difference: students placed into the two-semester sequence of developmental writing

based on a single measure (the computer-based exam), as compared with students mainstreamed into FYW with a co-curricular writing studio, based on multiple measures ( $p$  value = 0.007366). Neither revising *only* the placement process nor revising *only* the developmental curricular structure of FYW has a significant impact on FYW pass rates. The multiple measures placement revision *in combination* with the mainstreamed co-curricular writing studio revision results in the most significant increase of students passing the FYW requirement.

Overall, the writing studio model combined with multiple measures placement supports students across racial backgrounds, across income levels, and across family educational backgrounds in persisting and completing the FYW sequence within two semesters. As students at the study site must complete FYW as a prerequisite for upper-division courses in the major, increased FYW pass rates also support more students in their paths toward degree completion.

## Discussion

Several of the findings that I discuss in this case study correspond with characteristics of HSIs that fit the description of a small community's four-year university. Who places into developmental writing at this type of HSI? The data collected for this case study clarify the student population enrolled in the developmental writing courses over a recent eight-year period. One finding shows that regardless of placement method, many students placing in developmental writing were from college-educated families; by the last two years of the study, over 60% of students in the writing studios were *not* the first in their families to attend college. While the literature supports that generally, many students at HSIs have less academic preparation than their peers at non-HSIs, the findings from this case study challenge the unsupported assumptions about the academic preparation of students at *all* HSIs. Given the suburban location of the study site, small communities four-years tend to be "located in areas with the highest levels of educational attainment" (Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo 71). Furthermore, although Pell grant eligibility was a more consistent factor throughout the eight years of data collection, students from at least middle-income families--those that did not receive a Pell grant--also placed into developmental writing at near-equal rates as low-income students. These findings dispel assumptions of the socioeconomic background of students who place into developmental writing at this study site, specifically, and at HSIs overall. First-generation status or family income level do not reliably predict which students need supplemental support in FYW at this HSI.



Another key understanding of the developmental writing population at the study site, drawn from the data, is that throughout most of the eight years, the majority of first year Latinx students did not place into developmental writing. Data collected from the study site further challenges unsupported deficiency narratives surrounding Latinx students. The characteristics of a small communities four-year HSI helps to explain this. First, as previously discussed, these types of HSIs tend to be in suburban areas where more residents have degrees beyond high school. The study site's population reflects this trend, as more than half of all students (56%) come from college-educated families (as a reminder, more than half of all students at the study site also identify as Hispanic/Latino). These findings contrast with existing research of HSIs, that describes Latinx students at HSIs as "more likely to have parents with lower educational backgrounds" and to have "lower levels of academic capital than their peers who enroll elsewhere" (Cuellar 102). The findings of this study show that at this small communities four-year HSI, one that is a private nonprofit, Latinx students are just as likely as their peers to come from college-educated families and to have as much academic capital. Writing program administrators at small communities HSIs might further investigate placement and curricula that best meets the needs of the student population at their campus, as supported by data. For example, these findings may provide reasonable support for allocating more resources, including professional development, toward curricular development beyond FYW, such as courses in multidisciplinary research writing, writing for public advocacy, writing in the disciplines, or technical and professional writing. The data presented here show that first-year students at this study site are prepared for higher-level writing instruction at this HSI.

The findings also provide greater understanding of how White students, the second largest student racial group on campus, were affected by placement and curricular revisions. In the last year that a single measure was used for placement, 78% of all White students placed into developmental writing. White students' placement into developmental writing drops to 29% after the writing program revises placement and curriculum by mainstreaming students into FYW and writing studio (see Fig. 2.). Further studies at this site should disaggregate data by race and Pell grant eligibility to determine how low-income students of all racial backgrounds are placing into developmental writing. In the last year of data collection, which has the lowest enrollment into developmental writing, Latinx and White students combined comprise 45% of all first-year students in developmental writing, which begs the question: at what percentages do other races comprise the remaining 55% of students in developmental writing? Importantly, when disaggregated by race, the numbers for all

groups except for Latinx and White students were too low to analyze for statistical significance when comparing pass/completion rates for FYW. However, writing programs must identify the needs of all minority students at HSIs. A complete picture of how FYW placement and curricular revision impacts students at this site requires further investigation of the placement and pass/completion rates of students of American Indian/Alaska Native, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, two or more races, and international/non-resident backgrounds. The findings from this case study call attention to the diversity of students at HSIs, which enroll “28% of Asian American, 16% of Black, 14% of American Indian and 10% of White students nationally” (Núñez, Hurtado, and Galdeano 5). This study calls for more research examining the FYW success of other under-represented groups, including linguistically diverse students and Black and Latinx males, at private four-year HSIs.

Overall, the revised placement process and curricular structure of developmental writing impacts students positively at this study site. After the writing program introduced the multiple measures and mainstreaming processes, placement into developmental writing for all students across racial and socioeconomic identities dropped. This finding reflects previous research on indirect measures of writing, generally, and on computer-based exams, specifically, as unreliable predictors of student success in FYW. However, revising the placement process from a single measure to multiple measures, by itself, did not create a statistically significant increase in the number of students who passed the FYW requirement. The major finding of this study shows that the combination of a multiple measures placement process and a mainstreamed-plus-co-curricular-writing studio structure most significantly increases the FYW pass rates for Latinx and White students across socioeconomic levels. Students placed into writing studio were affected most positively by the revised placement and curricular structure, with the highest completion rates of FYW out of the eight years of data collection.

By revising developmental writing, the writing program at this institution shifted to data-driven and assets-based practices of placement and curricular development. Given that I have analyzed the pass rate findings as statistically valid, these practices are proven to have increased student success and completion of FYW within four years after the writing program-initiated revisions. Regarding the type of institution featured in this case study, it is important to point out that only 9% of all HSIs fall under the small communities’ four-year institutions description (Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo 71). However, the implications of this case study for those peer institutions may be valuable for increasing student success and completion of FYW

courses at those campuses and may also inform writing programs with similar goals at other types of HSIs.

## Conclusion

The majority of Latinx undergraduates enroll in public two- and four-year colleges and universities, and thus the bulk of research at HSIs reflects these institutions. However, private universities located in suburban cities with thriving Latinx communities are also committed to supporting Latinx students to degree completion. At this study site, students graduate at a higher rate, and in less time than those at public institutions with access to public funding. Furthermore, graduation rates at this site are also comparable to those of more elite private universities with large endowments and resources. It is also notable that data collection for this study was completed before AB705, the bill reforming placement and developmental writing (and math) curricula in California, was passed in 2017, and before similar reforms were mandated at the California State University in 2018. Despite institutional diversities, writing programs at HSIs may also share common interests, especially those sharing regional and community affiliations, and may benefit from developing networks through which to share research and practices.

Furthermore, the findings illustrate the important role of HSIs in enrolling and supporting low-income students and students of color. Even after placement was revised, low-income students continued to comprise at least half of all students in developmental writing at this study site. However, the number of students who identified as first-generation college students dropped. These findings suggest to me that we should be careful not to conflate low-income and first-generation status, and that writing programs can investigate ways to support low-income students in their first year. Additionally, writing programs at HSIs can further investigate how to support Latinx men and African American/Black students, groups with historically low rates of college completion, toward FYW success.

Lastly, writing programs at HSIs will benefit from getting to know their students through data collection, as data informs appropriate placement and curricular structure. Importantly, the revised multiple measures placement combined with the writing studio model supports students across racial backgrounds, income levels, and family educational backgrounds in completing FYW within two semesters. This study may help inform faculty and administrators as to how FYW programs support

pathways toward degree completion for Latinx students, and for all students, at private, nonprofit four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

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**Jolivette Mecenas** is Associate Professor of English and coordinates first-year writing at California Lutheran University. Her current research focuses on writing program curricula and assessment that supports the education and success of under-represented and linguistic minorities in undergraduate programs. She also writes about how minoritized publics organize and advocate through protest and other forms of civic discourse. She has published chapters in *Listening to Our Elders: Writing and Working for Change* (Utah State Press) and in *Building a Community, Having a Home: A History of the CCCC Asian/Asian American Caucus* (New City Community and Parlor Press). She lives in Los Angeles, her hometown, with her family.

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### El Parque de la Amistad – Friendship Park

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#### ABSTRACT

La Parque de la Amistad/Friendship Park, located next to the Pacific Ocean on the border between San Diego and Tijuana, is a powerful symbol of border access. This article presents a case study of this area using visuals and information gathered through interviews with different stakeholders who are connected to the park in some way, to show what access looks like in this space. The goal is to educate readers about the complicated nature of access at this site and to counter limited knowledge gained through media portrayals of the border.

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#### About the Authors

**Susan Garza** is Professor of English and Graduate Coordinator at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. She is the author of a number of articles in leading journals, such as *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, and

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*Reflections*, in the areas of visual rhetoric, new literacy studies, and service learning. Her current research focus utilizes the methodology of visual rhetoric to analyze victim presentations in memorial spaces. She has presented and published internationally on her research, and with a colleague, she is working on a book project that will extend the discussion presented here on the rhetorics of the US/Mexico border.

**Gabriel Ferreyra** has a M.A. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Texas at San Antonio and a Ph.D. in Justice Studies from Arizona State University. His research focuses on drug trafficking, US drug policy, judicial corruption, organized crime, and the US-Mexico border. His methodological approach is interdisciplinary and based on qualitative research. Ferreyra is currently conducting research along the US-Mexico border regarding the so-called 'border wall' to better understand how different stakeholders reconcile or not the contested space and narrative that this region presents to Mexico and the United State. He recently published the book *Drug Trafficking in Mexico and the United States*, and he teaches criminal justice classes at California State University, Los Angeles.

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**Review of *Persuasive Acts:***

***Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-First Century***

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*Persuasive Acts: Women's Rhetorics in the Twenty-First Century* stands as a testament to women and the power of their collective words and actions when faced with adversity in terms of their treatment living and working in a patriarchal society that, despite the progress that has been made on women's issues, continues to subjugate women and their lives to that of their male counterparts. Editors Shari J. Stenberg, a professor of English and gender studies at the University of Nebraska, and Charlotte Hogg, a professor of English at Texas Christian University, compiled an impactful, yet beautiful account of women's voices ranging from the highly recognizable and beloved Michelle Obama to women such as YouTuber Kat Blaque, whose voices would have likely remained in relative obscurity had this anthology not been assembled in such a meticulous manner. This compendium of strong, influential female voices will appeal to feminists and those interested in rhetoric pertaining to women's rights, activism, and social justice initiatives taking place in many different places around the world. This is a relevant and timely topic in our time because women are speaking out in larger numbers, in unison, and in multifaceted ways chronicling their experiences existing as females in patriarchal societies around the world.

In this poignant collection of voices, Stenberg and Hogg pay special attention to including a myriad of influential acts that cover many topics that affected women who came before and are still relevant today. Topics covered in this anthology range from politics, police brutality, LGBTQ issues to sexual harassment, immigration, education, and beyond, with each powerful act presented taking on the form of such varied media as speeches, magazine editorials, Twitter hashtags, and even

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photographs. Each piece chosen to not only underscore women's issues, but also to incite conversation, highlight injustice, and bring attention to the plight of women around the world. Prior to selection, Stenberg and Hogg present the reader with pertinent information about each woman to include why she is influential, what her many contributions to change have consisted of, and contextual information pertaining to the included persuasive act. For example, immediately before Iranian judge Shirin Ebadi's excerpt from *Until We Are Free*, the reader is told that Ebadi is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and that her addition to *Persuasive Acts* discusses the threats she and her fellow protestors endured from the Iranian government when attempting to protest laws that violated women's rights.

Stenberg and Hogg open their journey through women's voices with an astute introduction entitled "Gathering Women's Rhetorics for the Twenty-First Century," that guides the reader through their thought process for compiling this volume. They state that now is the time to "assemble and engage in women's rhetorics, as we are hearing the voices of more women, and in more ways, than ever before" (3). There is no better time than now to release this powerful collection of female voices because women are being represented in arenas in which they were never allowed entry before, speaking out about issues women face in increasingly multifaceted ways, and declaring that they are leading the charge to social change through words and actions. As such, Stenberg and Hogg assert that with the persuasive acts included in this compilation, women are "changing the shape and tenor of traditionally masculine public arenas" (3-4). Such strides are even more timely with the rise and popularity of social media platforms that allow said rhetoric to reach a larger audience than ever before.

The introduction also introduces the reader to concerns that Stenberg and Hogg faced when compiling *Persuasive Acts*, which are clearly spelled out and dealt with in a graceful manner. They expand upon the fact that it was difficult for them to decide whose voices would be selected for inclusion in this volume alluding to the plethora of impactful women speaking out multitudinously in a variety of ways about pertinent issues. This conundrum was further complicated by the fact they had to continuously cut the number of pages down because they were constrained by space. In regard to how these women were chosen for inclusion, the editors state that they did so according to what they call "rhetorical sway," which they define as "rhetorical impact demonstrated through creating or connecting to cultural flashpoints that forward or respond to gendered issues" (14). The pieces deemed to demonstrate "rhetorical sway" were selected based upon "traditional rhetorical theories and features...but more profoundly influenced by women's rhetorical theories that value inclusion and representation and that encompass expansive forms of argument, evidence, and ethos"

(14). As evidence of the way in which Stenberg and Hogg apply their definition of “rhetorical sway,” they operated under ideas of feminism, transfeminism, intersectionality, identity, humor, language play, political correctness, personal experience, embodiment, and positionality, all of which played a large role throughout the book manifested through the women’s voices featured therein. In terms of positionality, Stenberg and Hogg acknowledge this head on by stating that they realize that they are speaking from a position of privilege as being white women, and were quick to point out that this compendium provides “opportunities to better understand that rhetoric by white women has been the most visible but not the most viable” (16). Thus, the inclusion of women from across the race, ethnic, gender, experience, and identity spectrum.

Stenberg and Hogg divide their anthology into four sections, each of which covers various issues and topics in multiple ways. Section I, “Rhetorics of Civic Engagement,” contains fourteen entries that deal with issues related to the lack of women in public office positions and is comprised of women who are among the first to hold “judicial or political roles” (23). Among the selections included is a speech given by Hillary Rodham Clinton, “the first female major party nominee for president” at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, an excerpt from Shirin Ebadi’s (the first female judge in Iran) *Until We Are Free*, which relays the violence that women in Iran faced when they attempted to peacefully protest Iranian laws and how they oppressed women, and a strong voice from El Salvador, Jeannette Urquilla (social worker/activist), who writes about the criminalization of abortion in her country. Speaking from distinct perspectives and on varied issues, the common thread present in the rhetoric of these powerful women is a call for change, something that echoes through the following three sections.

Moving from the political arena to the “Rhetorics of Feminisms” in Section II, the eleven selections that make up this section discuss the dynamism of twenty-first century feminism in that it has evolved to be more inclusive of an assortment of identities, “transnational views,” and its “rhetorical reach through art, activism, and digital media” (107). As such, the women’s voices represented in this section include a piece, “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” written by attorney and civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw in which she discusses the intersectionality of discrimination and oppression on the basis of race and gender, an excerpt from “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in which Emi Koyama offers a definition of transfeminism as a means of confronting “gender norms,” widen the boundaries of feminism, and “imagine more inclusive futures,” and a commencement address given by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in which she discusses her notion of feminism as rooted

in her personal experience as being “a party full of different feminisms” (129; 135). What ties these selections together is not only a call for the expansion of the notions of identity and the importance of intersectionality when it comes to discrimination, but also the flexibility of the definition of feminism within the context of these ideas. The interesting part of this section is that some of the women featured have been openly critical of one another’s ideas (Adichie and Koyama), but that has not stopped the editors from featuring their voices as a collective, discussing interrelated issues.

Section III, entitled “Rhetorics of Protest and Resistance,” covers how the current American administration reflects “misogynistic and xenophobic” ideals, environmental concerns, racism, and even war. Among the many women featured in this section are the voices of Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, who discusses the importance of refraining from appropriating the movement for purposes that it was not meant for and why it must retain its focus on “black lives,” well-known author Edwidge Danticat, who uses her personal immigration narrative to discuss the Trump administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy and its impact on immigrant families because of separation, and lastly a piece written for *The New Yorker* by Sasha Weiss, “culture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*,” which serves as an example of the ways in which the #YesAllWomen movement has been covered by the media and how it has provided a forum for women to speak out about their experiences of sexual harassment and finding solidarity in such an act (222). The writing that the women in this section accomplished serve as counterpublics to what has been accepted as the status quo for far too long in this country when it comes to the treatment of those that exist at the edges of society, such as African-American communities, immigrants, and women as sexual objects, and how this fact is supposed to justify the poor treatment of these populations.

The last section of the book is dedicated to education, entitled “Rhetorics of Education,” this portion of the anthology discusses how the way that education systems are structured around the world “reinforce practices and values that obstruct girls’ and women’s educational opportunities,” focusing primarily on women and girls of color (251). The women whose rhetoric are included in this section are Malala Yousafzai’s address to the United Nations, in which she discusses the danger that children face in her country when seeking an education because they are part of a community that is dealing with issues of “poverty, war, and gender discrimination,” and the voices of women like Adrienne Keene and Capo Crucet, who highlight their personal experiences to shed light on the struggles that Native Americans and Latinx students face when it comes to pursuing an education. Tying the voices in this section together is the assertion that all people, no matter who they or where they come from,

are entitled to an education without having to fear what could happen to them in this pursuit.

Despite all the positives that this book has to offer, there are, of course, limitations. One of the most apparent limitations is the fact that even though Stenberg and Hogg discuss some of the issues they faced when compiling their book, they did not discuss them in sufficient detail. Issues that were glossed over were those related to the fact that “rhetorical sway” has routinely been “associated with well-established (meaning well-accomplished but also socially and financially secure; read: usually white) women” (15). While Stenberg and Hogg bring this discussion up, it ends just as abruptly as it began, with a statement that acknowledges this issue as a truth followed by an attempt to counteract it with the following: “For us, a rhetor with sway is sometimes well-known, but just as often is one we have deemed powerful because she represents a perspective and position not often heard,” adding that they deliberately included women from various backgrounds to counter the homogeneity that has traditionally characterized “rhetorical sway” as something reserved for white women of a particular kind. However, as an ongoing issue facing not just women’s rhetorics, but rhetorics produced and circulated by underrepresented populations, the topic deserved more than just a brief nod.

Another limitation to the book is the notion of expanding the definition of feminism to being more inclusive, which it does a fairly good job of doing, except for in one instance, and that is the attention given to transfeminism. While a profound treatment of the topic was provided by Emi Koyama with “Excerpts from ‘The Transfeminist Manifesto,’” this was only one voice and certainly not enough to lend credence to the goal of expanding the definition of feminism. It would have been beneficial had a few more voices discussing this point been included, not only for comparison, but to demonstrate the enthusiasm that the idea is garnering, per the assertion of the editors.

Overall, this compendium of strong female voices provides a plethora of examples of the power of “women’s rhetorics” in a mostly male dominated world by featuring women who have something vital to say and demonstrating that even though we have made progress on women’s issues, there is still a lot of work to be done. With their goal of including voices that will allow the reader to “trace how the rhetorics in this collection have circulated in ways that shape gendered narratives and social action,” Stenberg and Hogg have essentially done this and more by providing a forum that encourages women to speak, acknowledging women’s voices and experiences as essential to the fight for equality, and encouraging these “rhetorical acts” to move beyond the page into social action (13).



Diaz

### About the Author

**Kandice Diaz** is currently working on her PhD in English at the University of Texas at San Antonio with an emphasis on Rhetoric and Composition and Linguistics. She holds a Masters' Degree in Communication from the University of Texas at El Paso. She currently teaches Technical Writing courses in addition to having taught public speaking and organizational communication at Alamo Colleges and San Antonio Independent School District.

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