Many think of composition studies as animated by the question, How should we teach writing? Yet embedded within that question is the more fundamental one of what it means to teach college writing. Composition has circled back to that core issue of purpose at key moments in its history: in the 1970s, for example, when open admissions and questions of access challenged the field; in the 1980s when critical theory and liberatory pedagogies took hold; and in the 1990s when digital technologies began to accelerate at a furious pace. Provoked in part by the kinds of community-based pedagogies featured in this book, the field is once again asking, What does it mean to teach college writing?

The essays and excerpts in this collection respond to that question with expanded understandings of literacy, powerful theories of rhetoric, incisive analyses of the activity of writing, cautionary tales, experience-tested teaching practices, and inspiring program models. They present many manifestations of community engagement, variously linked to first-year composition, advanced rhetoric, creative writing, technical communication, writing centers, community publishing, advocacy projects, and neighborhood literacy networks. Collectively the authors are asking—not for the first time, but differently and more generously than in the past—how we can prepare students for both the traditional academic curriculum and the responsibilities of civic life. Collectively, they are asking—not for the first time, but differently and more critically than in the past—which ethical and ideological principles should guide our practices as writing teachers. Collectively, they are asking—not for the first time, but differently and more assertively than in the past—how we might live out those principles pragmatically in our choices of what and how to teach.

This work has piqued the curiosity of writing teachers, writing program administrators, writing center directors, and graduate students, many of whom are asking, What is all the fuss about? It has drawn keen interest among those on the brink of trying something new, who say, Someday I want to teach that kind of community-engaged course. Even for those with little interest in service-learning, the articles and excerpts gathered here expand the
scholarly conversation about the purposes of teaching, learning, and writing in—and beyond—the university. Rhetorics of engagement are emerging to complement and extend the rhetorics of critique that have long held sway in composition studies. Such rhetorics of engagement emphasize both personal and political agency; they welcome and grapple with difference; they hinge on collaborative inquiry and action. These approaches often cross customary divisions within English studies and forge alliances with diverse others, seizing the power of poetry, publication, performance, community organizing, or multimedia to take writing public and, in the process, transform public discourse.

When we speak of writing and community engagement we are tapping into the long intellectual traditions of rhetoric and ethics. In his contribution to this volume James Dubinsky enumerates those links, recalling how Greek and Roman rhetoricians imagined the relationship between persuasion and the public good and how students, when they write for community agencies, reanimate both the instrumental and civic dimensions of classical rhetoric. Several of the scholars in this collection frame their work in the rhetorical tradition because rhetoric, in both its classical and contemporary manifestations, has always been about both education and application, both theory and practice, both the teaching of language and persuasion in school and the uses of language and persuasion in the public sphere.

For most teachers, however, sea changes in American higher education provide a more immediate context for community writing. Although we can trace myriad antecedents for university outreach to communities, ranging from the land grant movement of the 1860s to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, most relevant to the current work of college writing teachers is the national push toward student volunteer service that emerged in the 1980s and the subsequent enthusiasm for academic service-learning during the 1990s.

The nineties were heady times for service-learning not only because faculty were experimenting with new courses but also because service-learning research emerged as its own distinct field, complete with journals, conferences, and professional organizations.

Ernest Boyer invited a reconsideration of scholarship, calling for the integration of research, service, and teaching and advocating a scholarship of application through which academics would partner with communities to address significant societal issues. Campus Compact, founded in 1985, emerged as a truly national network, and the American Association for Higher Education made community engagement a marquee priority, launching an entire book series to promote discipline-based academic service-learning. We saw the founding of AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Wingspread Principles for Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning codified best practices for the service-learning centers that seemed to pop up like daisies at colleges and universities across the United States (Honnet and Poulsen). Large empirical studies of service-learning trumpeted encouraging findings, including those demonstrating that students report greater personal and intellectual engagement in service-learning courses,
achieve cognitive gains such as mastering course content and analyzing problems as embedded in complex systems, and register personal development keyed to enhanced self-efficacy, appreciation of diversity, and participation in civic life. Books such as Jane Kendall’s *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service*, Barbara Jacoby’s *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, and Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles’s *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?* synthesized that research and argued for its wider application. The *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, an interdisciplinary journal with a social science emphasis, in concert with annual research conferences, helped to establish service-learning research as a distinct field of inquiry.

Building on the momentum of its “social turn,” composition studies saw a similar burst of activity in the 1990s as more and more teachers of first-year composition, technical communication, and advanced rhetoric experimented at the intersections of writing pedagogy and community action. Tom Deans’s “English Studies and Public Service,” included in this volume, traces how those teachers channeled the field’s enthusiasm for critical pedagogy, cultural studies, identity politics, and critical theory toward grounded community engagement. Some, including Cheryl Duffy, Bruce Herzberg, Brock Haussamen, Angelique Davi, Michelle Dunlap, and Ann Green featured in this collection, sought to motivate their students by putting outreach experiences at community sites—tutoring youth, staffing homeless shelters, exchanging perspectives with nursing homes residents—into conversation with the kinds of readings on social justice and public policy that typically populate composition readers. Some were eager to highlight practical applications by having students experience the challenges, complexities, and rewards of writing for local organizations and audiences beyond the classroom. Nora Bacon’s “The Trouble with Transfer,” Tom Deans’s “Shifting Locations,” and Jim Dubinsky’s “Service-Learning as a Path to Virtue,” included here, describe courses in which students produced agency newsletters, conducted research, and wrote grant applications and public relations materials for nonprofits. Other community-engaged teachers, represented in this volume by David Coogan, Glynda Hull, Michael James, Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower, explored strategies to jump-start dialogue on local problems, convening diverse constituencies to participate in public discourse. These curricular innovations were soon translated into papers at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and articles for the field’s academic journals. *Reflections* transformed from newsletter to peer-reviewed journal, providing a forum for scholars in the burgeoning field.

Out of all of this activity, the 1997 book *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition* delivered a synthesis and agenda. In their introduction to that important collection, Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters declared the arrival of service-learning in composition as a “micromovement” and outlined its potential to remedy institutional fragmentation. They adopted an underdog posture and were especially concerned with naming the logistical obstacles to service-learning’s growth, as
well as with gesturing toward what might result if academic institutions were
to reimagine teaching, research, and service as more deeply integrated. Some
of the articles and excerpts in this collection carry on in that spirit.

But there are real differences between where we were in 1997 and where
we are now, and more of our selections highlight those differences. Most sig-
ificantly, the field has realized that its agenda should be less about clearing
a path for service-learning’s advancement in the academy than about the rela-
tionships between universities and local communities—in all their promise
and in all their contradictions—that form the nexus of this work. The field is
not just asking, What do good course placements and projects look like? but
also asking, What kinds of relationships should we be developing? and What
ways of writing, knowing, teaching, public dialogue, and social change do
those relationships make possible? Rethinking such relationships and their
consequences is at the heart of rethinking what it means to teach writing, and
we can see these more recent priorities in the terms that have moved to the
foreground—community literacy, inquiry, network, community arts, public
writing, writing beyond the curriculum, street—as use of the word service-
learning has receded.

We can also see progress in the field’s ongoing inquiry into reciprocity not
so much as a problem to be solved as a process to be theorized. These deepen-
ing explorations of reciprocity, each highlighting the local and the particular,
have themselves taken diverse forms. Some scholars have argued for the ex-
planatory power of activity theory to unpack the multiple and often subtle
dimensions of any community-based writing project for faculty and students
alike (see Deans, “Shifting Locations”). In “Alinsky’s Reveille” (included here),
Eli Goldblatt adapts Saul Alinsky’s principles of community organizing to
develop a new, more deeply collaborative model for neighborhood literacy
projects in which community partners establish priorities and academics
facilitate access to resources. Steve Zimmer, Paula Mathieu (“Students in the
Streets,” in this volume), and others challenge the implicit assumption of
community deficits and university leadership embedded in earlier codifica-
tions of best practices, advocating instead that university participants assume
the more modest role of “ally” and aspire to more flexible and tactical, rather
than strategic, orientations toward collaboration. Numerous contributors to
this volume reflect on the reciprocal processes by which teachers, students,
courses, departments, and even institutions are transformed thanks to the
knowledge constructed in collaborations with community participants.

The field’s emphasis on rhetoric and inquiry rather than on particular
courses or institutional dilemmas was presaged in Linda Flower and her col-
leagues’ work at the Community Literacy Center. Her initial focus on rhetoric,
community problem solving, and intercultural inquiry, now more fully devel-
oped into a comprehensive rhetorical model for personal and public inquiry
(included here), inspired many of the scholars in this volume and has proved
to be particularly durable even as she has continued to develop the approach,
most recently weaving in theories of the public sphere.
In 1997 these theories of the public sphere were not on the radar of service learning’s early adopters, even though Susan Wells’s seminal article on that topic, “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” (reprinted here), was published in 1996. Nor were community-oriented composition teachers familiar with the often sophisticated client-based projects that their colleagues in professional communication were conducting with local nonprofits. By bringing together works that shaped the first wave of scholarship on community writing in composition with those from various subfields in English (technical communication, literacy studies, writing centers, composition theory, rhetoric, linguistics, writing across the curriculum), as well as with key voices from outside of English studies, this volume seeks not only to highlight the “best of” the research tradition but to redress a pattern of parallel play that has too long characterized the field of writing and community engagement. Few people read across the full spectrum of the scholarship, too often recapitulating the field’s evolution through their own development and ignoring lessons already learned. Therefore we draw from the cross-disciplinary Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning as well as from books within English studies; we reprint as many articles from College English and College Composition and Communication as we do from the Community Literacy Journal and Reflections, two journals devoted to community-engaged work. The result is a collection that revisits perennial concerns such as reciprocity, diversity, learning outcomes, and best teaching practices but also extends to emerging developments in community literacy.

**WHAT TEACHERS OF COMMUNITY WRITING NEED TO KNOW**

One key insight proffered by nearly every community-engaged scholar is that each university/community partnership is shaped by local opportunities and limitations, local people and priorities. At the same time, the last two decades of scholarship on writing and community engagement affirm central themes time and again. We want newcomers to be attuned what that cumulative research tradition tells us rather than muddling through by trial and error. The six sections of this collection offer an introduction to that tradition.

The first two sections are foundational, albeit in different ways. “Writing in Communities” has the most general title because it takes up the most general issues. If writing instructors are to open their typically controlled, teacher-centered, and text-driven classrooms to the press of local community life, they should be aware of how literacy is figured differently across various contexts. We know from several decades of literacy research that writing is a deeply context-dependent activity, that literacy learning happens both inside and outside schools, and that it is a social and ideological process rather than simply a textual transaction. All those findings encourage community-academic partnerships even as they alert teachers who experiment with them that they should not hold fast to one static definition of writing—whether academic, workplace, personal, or “real-world”—or assume that writing
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comprises a readily transferrable set of formal skills. Deborah Brandt, Ann
Ruggles Gere, Diana George, Glynda Hull, and Michael Angelo James offer
historical and contemporary perspectives to transcend the simple binary of
“classroom” and “community” as they take us into what Gere terms the
“extracurriculum,” exploring how reading, writing, and rhetoric work in civic
groups, families, schools, community centers, and the streets. Several short
pieces first published in Hospitality, the free newspaper of the Open Door
Community in Atlanta, and in the Journal of Ordinary Thought, a quarterly
publication that draws from writing workshops in Chicago’s low-income
neighborhoods, illustrate the commitments and varieties of self-sponsored
writing among ordinary people and demonstrate some of the many ways that
writing is used—and is useful—in everyday life.

“The Terms of Service-Learning” turns to the intersection of communities
with classroom pedagogy and includes what many would consider foundational
texts. The excerpt from Tom Deans’s Writing Partnerships introduces the
key terms writing about the community, writing for the community, and writing
with the community, a taxonomy that has shaped much of the discourse in the
field. Bruce Herzberg cautions that, unless structured deliberately, service-
learning can unintentionally reinforce the very inequalities it may seek to
redress, a lesson Keith Morton reminds us is not unique to English studies.
These essays are representative of a significant body of literature (see Ball and
Goodburn; Boyle-Baise; Butin; Franklin; Taylor) that teases out the assump-
tions embedded in such key terms as community and service. These texts can
be well used by both teachers and undergraduates hoping to be critical and
intentional about community work. Together, the sources in Part Two trace
the field’s varied intellectual genealogies, with influences as diverse as com-
munitarian politics, Marxist social theory, John Dewey’s democratic pragma-
tism, religious traditions, government programs, grassroots activism, noblesse
oblige, and the “can do” American ethos. They highlight the contested nature
of the terms and priorities for community writing, a phenomenon that may
frustrate those seeking a stable definition or a formula for teaching, but that
also fuels the field’s intellectual vitality.

The contributors to Part Three, “Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and the Public
Sphere,” marshal theories of rhetoric, politics, and the public sphere to ex-
plain their strategies for undertaking ambitious community writing pro-
jects. Rejecting as the archetype of public writing the hypothetical “letter to
the editor” (Ervin), each explores the ways in which publics can be under-
stood as constructed and local. Susan Wells and David Coogan step back
to apply theories of the public sphere and materialist rhetoric to their respec-
tive teaching experiences. In the article by Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long,
and Linda Flower we find innovative strategies for rhetorical invention and
community action, strategies born from the experience of the Community
Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh but applicable to many other contexts.
Excerpts from community publications on street violence and on learning dis-
abilities illustrate some of the methods that varied constituencies—youth,
parents, teachers, college students, police officers, businesspeople, social

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workers, academics, religious leaders—employ collaboratively as they engage in problem solving and inquiry. We encourage readers to consult the CLC and Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank online archives or Flower’s book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* to gain a more complete understanding of the context for the selections highlighted in this anthology.

Although issues of representation, reciprocity, privilege, and difference are considered throughout this collection, the articles in the fourth section, “The Ethics of Engagement,” specifically address key ethical dilemmas. College faculty are trained to think in terms of their own subject matter and their own learning objectives, and even though teachers enter into community-based pedagogies with good intentions, community perspectives are often eclipsed. The selections in Part Four challenge teachers to interrogate not just their students’ but their own roles as community actors, introducing such models as the public intellectual (Ellen Cushman) and the knowledge activist (Eli Goldblatt). These articles make visible the “lost subjects” of the service learning story (Tracey Carrick, Margaret Himley, and Tobi Jacob), recount the sometimes painfully ironic unintended consequences of institutionalized approaches to service-learning (Paula Mathieu) and highlight the perspectives of community organization participants. Together, these articles articulate a second, more nimble and responsive generation of best practices, focused less on institutional expertise and community “needs,” and more committed to welcoming diversity, enhancing community assets, and developing community leadership.

Over the past ten years, the field has thought more and more in terms of partnerships, relationships, and coalitions that extend beyond any single course, which is why the title to Part Five features “Writing Programs” rather than “Writing Courses.” Scholars in this section are asking how we might shake ourselves free from the normative sense of college writing programs and writing centers as delivery systems for college composition and academic literacy. Couldn’t they become networks that sustain various kinds of literacy and writing as Michelle Comstock, Michele Simmons, and Jeffrey Grabill suggest? For more than thirty years, writing across the curriculum (WAC) has given us a running start on this project by emphasizing the ways that writing can bridge disciplinary communities. Steve Parks, Eli Goldblatt, and Michelle Hall Kells take WAC the next logical step by sketching what writing across academic and nonacademic communities can look like, while Tiffany Rousculp offers an expansive and inviting conception of writing centers. Excerpts from *Espejos y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows* and *Soul Talk: Urban Youth Poetry*, anthologies distributed by the community publishing venture born of Parks and Goldblatt’s efforts, offer a glimpse into the fruits of these innovations. Individually and collectively, these scholars remind us that cultivating community connections is not about heaping more work on already burdened writing programs but about rethinking and reenergizing those programs to draw on, and prepare students to participate in, a fuller universe of discourse and knowledge.
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Even as the field thinks more and more in terms of programs, relationships, and networks, we know that most community-based pedagogies start with a course— with an individual teacher trying out a new way of teaching writing. The articles in Part Six, “Pedagogies in Action,” exemplify best practices in a variety of settings: basic writing, first-year composition in two- and four-year schools, advanced composition, professional writing, prison-university workshops. This final section may provide a compelling entry point for readers eager to familiarize themselves with a range and variety of pedagogical approaches. Each critically reflects on a particular course or set of courses, exploring the complex linkages and calibrations among pedagogic goals, types of projects, community priorities, and specific assignments. These articles simultaneously investigate key questions for the field as a whole, including the impact of service-learning on the quality of student writing (Adrian Wurr), the challenges students and faculty encounter when moving between academic and nonacademic practices (Nora Bacon), and the value of theories of racial identity formation to understand the interplay of race, class, and gender in community-engaged classrooms (Angeliq ue Davi, Michelle Dunlap, and Ann Green). In dialogue with Lori Pompa’s and Tobi Jacobi’s scholarship on literacy projects in correctional settings, several short pieces created in a workshop at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women provide a sampling of the ways that writers experiment with generic conventions to reflect on and transform experience.

AGENDAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY WRITING: PROCESS, PRODUCTS, AND PARTICIPANTS

The variety and quality of the selections in this volume affirm both the crackling energy and increasing theoretical sophistication of community writing initiatives during the past two decades. Practitioner-scholars have been generous in sharing their innovations, establishing a dynamic interplay among community action, reflection, and theory building. Much energy has, appropriately, been devoted to charting and navigating a new terrain and challenging oneself and others both to articulate and enact the ethical commitments integral to the work; community-engaged scholars are not a complacent bunch. A recent review of the literature we conducted with Nora Bacon and James Dubinsky (Bacon et al.) revealed that most of the published studies on community writing take the form of critical reflections on practice. Few studies, however, draw on empirical research methods such as ethnography or discourse analysis, and few take up assessment even though assessment has long been a concern of the larger service-learning research community (Bringle, Phillips, and Hudson; Furco; Gelmon et al.). In all, we know a good deal about what exemplary community partnerships look like and how to theorize about them in sophisticated ways but relatively little about the effects of literacy collaborations on university students or community participants. Even less is known about the writing itself.
Given the rapid growth of community-engaged pedagogies and the demands they put on teachers, perhaps it is not a surprise that more is not known about the impact of writing about, for, and with communities. We hope, though, that the wealth of experience shared in this collection will inspire readers to begin to build more intentionally on what is known, and to deepen and sharpen inquiry into the consequences of particular pedagogical and project choices. No doubt we will see an acceleration of writing for social justice in digital spaces, as Hull and James suggest, and as the example of the Cherokee Nation multimedia project on which Cushman’s students collaborated illustrates. No doubt we will see more work like Wurr’s done at the intersections of service-learning and second language writing as the demographics of both universities and the United States change. And no doubt many other innovative practices will emerge in response to academic trends and the press of community life. While the articles and excerpts in this volume effectively prepare teachers to design projects that respond creatively and critically to such challenges, researchers working at the intersection of composition and community action still need to adopt a more robust range of methods.

A research agenda that aims to be more expansive than applying theory to practice might begin with an inventory of community-engaged pedagogies: What kinds of university-community partnerships are most common and successful? What roles do teachers and community partners play in crafting assignments, determining genres, advising writers? What texts are read in these courses and to what ends? What do instructors typically de-emphasize or relinquish to support community collaborations? What is the longevity of these partnerships and how are they supported and sustained? Building on the critical analyses of exemplary projects that tend to be the focus of most current scholarship, the gathering of this data would put us on the road toward understanding how community writing is developing as a system.

Such research would extend to the print, digital, and multimodal texts that emerge from university-community partnerships, and especially to the production and circulation of those texts. What kinds of documents are most often produced? How are they put to use? This focus on writing and writing processes would return us to questions that have been the core of composition research since the process movement of the 1970s but that need to be reconsidered in the community writing contexts: How are invention, response, revision, and identity enacted in these new kinds of partnerships?

Especially difficult to determine are the effects of participation in community-engaged courses on students’ writing proficiency. For example, while Kendrick and Suarez found that service-learning did not have a positive impact on student writing quality, Astin et al., Feldman et al., and Wurr found that it did. How one defines “good writing” and the methods of analysis used to assess this may account for these differences: Kendrick and Suarez used holistic portfolio assessment and semester grades; Astin et al. used self-reports; Feldman et al., and Wurr triangulated primary trait scores with other
measures such as holistic essay scores and surveys. Because public writing
and community literacy initiatives aspire to a wide range of purposes, this
question of writing proficiency is as challenging as it is critical.

Even less well understood is the impact of university-community col-
laborations on the community members who participate. Like our students,
whose journals reflect on critical incidents, point to cross-cultural insights,
celebrate “aha” moments, and treasure expressions of mutuality, engaged
scholars critically reflect on practice using many of the same strategies. Rarely,
however, do we invite community participants to reflect on or document their
learning or transformation. Rarely do we use our finely tuned disciplinary
tools to systematically analyze the writing community members produce
over time. Even a mature program like the Pittsburgh Community Literacy
Center is hard-pressed to evaluate the longer-term effects of participation
in intercultural inquiry projects. And just as term papers piled outside a
professor’s door at semester’s end beg questions about response, the all-
too-common stories of reports never delivered and proposals never imple-
mented (including those recounted by Mathieu in this volume) challenge us
to ask in much more systematic ways about the value of university writing
initiatives—both the processes and the products—for the individuals and
organizations with whom we partner.

The public turn in composition, spreading quickly throughout the profes-
sion, has been cultivated by a visionary and dedicated group of scholar-
practitioners who have devised ways both to “walk the walk” and provide
mutual support for the growing number of teachers interested in community
literacy. As exemplars of Boyer’s fully engaged scholars, they have melded
research, service, and teaching to nurture the CCCC Special Interest Group on
service-learning and community literacy, served as editorial board members
of Reflections and the Community Literacy Journal, and developed the theories
that guide much of our work. The Community Literacy Conference hosted by
Temple University in the spring of 2008 offered us a forum to discuss with
others the question of a community writing “canon”; this book reflects not
just the choices of the three editors, but the wisdom of a coalition of expe-
rrienced scholars. We are especially grateful to those among these pioneering
groups who served as reviewers of this volume: Nora Bacon, University of
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University of Texas at Arlington; and two anonymous reviewers. These
thoughtful readers challenged us to more fully integrate the different strands
in the work of the past decade and helped to construct the “big tent” under
which we are gathered. We extend special thanks to Nora Bacon and Jim Du-
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served as the basis for this collection. We also appreciate the generosity of Ellen Cushman, Diana George, Linda Flower, and Steve Parks for contributing examples of the exciting writing that is being created in diverse communities. We have been fortunate, indeed, to have worked with Leasa Burton and Sarah Macomber of Bedford/St. Martin’s on this project. We are deeply grateful for their deft guidance and for their insightful and enthusiastic support not just of this collection, but of the hopeful vision of literacy it heralds.

WORKS CITED


