

Community Engagement in a Graduate-Level Community Literacy Course

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A case study of a graduate-level community literacy seminar that involved a tutoring project with adult digital literacy learners, this essay illustrates the value of community outreach and service-learning for graduate students in writing studies. Presenting multiple perspectives through critical reflection, student authors describe how their experiences contextualized, enhanced, and complicated their theoretical knowledge of public rhetoric and community literacy. Inspired by her students' reflections, the faculty co-author issues a call to graduate programs in writing, rhetoric, literacy studies, and technical communication to develop a conscious commitment to graduate students' civic engagement by supporting opportunities to learn, teach, and research with community partners.

Introduction (Lauren)

In the spring of 2014, my co-authors and I met for a Community Literacy seminar in the Rhetoric and Technical Communication graduate program (now retitled: "Rhetoric, Theory, and Culture") at Michigan Technological University. Part of the course required students to volunteer as tutors and ethnographic observers during the Breaking Digital Barriers project: a free digital literacy assistance program organized by university faculty and students for members of the local community. It didn't take long for us to encounter the uncomfortable contradictions inherent in community-based research and pedagogies. As Figure 1 below demonstrates, we concentrated on pulling at the tangled strands of civic engagement in higher education, wherein the goal of "critical consciousness" is entwined with the marketability ("\$\$") of a university and its graduates.

Our struggle was underscored by the realization that community literacy studies—despite its major growth in the past two decades—remains at the fringes of the academy. Students commented with some regularity that, even within a graduate program with strong commitments to off-campus partnerships and critical consciousness, they had not yet taken a graduate course that actually led them off campus or focused so explicitly on *action*. This observation describes a fundamental challenge in many graduate programs in writing studies and related fields: the incentive to recognize rhetoric and



Figure 1: Writing on the board from a student-led class discussion. Photo by Lauren Bowen.

literacy as situated, public, social, and political domains of activity is at odds with the persistent belief that academic success requires a focus on activities removed from civic life.

In this essay, my co-authors and I present a case study of our community literacy seminar so that we might articulate some of the outcomes of a deliberate integration of community outreach in graduate-level scholarship and research. In a sense, this essay contributes to a conversation begun in the pages of this journal in 2008, when Ellen Cushman, Jeffrey Grabill, and five graduate students reflected on their efforts to trace theories, methodologies, and pedagogies associated with community literacy studies (Fero, et al.). In planning for the community literacy course at Michigan Tech, I was particularly mindful of Cushman and Grabill's ultimate concern that, without a community outreach project, the graduate seminar seemed "too conceptual" and could not examine "the tension between our often elegant theories of what communities are, what literacy should be, and how we ought to design our activities and the less-than-ideal realities of literacy projects" (90).

In response to this concern, I looked to the Breaking Digital Barriers project (for which I was already a volunteer) as a site for action and critical reflection, reminiscent of Freire's *praxis*. Our weekly experiences with the community project led to productive examinations of the tensions between theory and practice in community literacy studies. Following a bit of context for the community literacy seminar and the Breaking Digital Barriers project, this essay presents my co-authors' critical reflections of their experiences as graduate students/teachers/researchers, in which they identify the outcomes of the community outreach experience in relation to their own goals as intellectuals, teachers, activists, and community members.

Background (Lauren)

Following Cushman's lead, I designed our course to treat community literacy as "a discipline, a methodology, an institutional location that involves teaching, [and] a scholarly or administrative mission" (Fero et al. 90). As such, course readings invited discussion about a broad range of issues, including the origins of community literacy studies (Howard; Long; Peck, Flower, & Higgins); the role of academics as activists (Bizzell; Cushman; Fish); the practices of critical pedagogy (Freire; hooks), service-learning (Deans; Morton), and public composition (Fleckenstein); the theoretical framework of pragmatism (Dewey; Goldblatt); and methodological considerations for literacy research in, on, and with a community (Flower; Grabill; Heller). We also spent a great deal of time thinking about the ethical hazards of using literacy as a point of contact between the university and the community (Herzberg; Joseph; Mathieu; Stuckey). Through brief written responses to the readings and often lively class discussions, we continued to explore and test the boundaries of community literacy work, trace internal debates, and identify commonly shared principles whenever possible.

Our thinking about these readings was filtered through our work with the Breaking Digital Barriers project (or BDB). Founded in 2011 by Dr. Charles Wallace, an associate professor in computer science at Michigan Tech, Breaking Digital Barriers is a volunteer-based outreach project that supports the development of digital literacies in the communities surrounding the university. A beautiful, historic area, Houghton County's particular living conditions present many challenges for residents. Breaking Digital Barriers responds to a need that is exacerbated by three particular conditions of life in Houghton:

- **It is remote.** Hundreds of miles from any major cities, Houghton sits on the rugged Keweenaw Peninsula on Lake Superior, whose "lake effect" brings more than 200 inches of snow each year. The lengthy, snowy winters make travel on the area's few major roadways a dangerous prospect for most of the year. Further, the population density of Houghton County is low, at about 36 people per square mile of dry land (U.S. Census Bureau, Gazetteer Files), which is comparable to the density of Kansas or Utah (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstracts). (In Keweenaw County, just a few miles up the road, the population drops to a mere four people per square mile.)
- **It is relatively poor.** Once a booming copper mining community, the area has faced a major economic shift since mining halted in the mid-20th century. During the BDB's first year of operation, Houghton County recorded a jobless rate of 9.6% (Michigan Department of Technology, Labor, and Budget). According to census estimates, nearly a quarter of its residents had incomes below the poverty level, while the per capita income in the city of Houghton hovered just over \$15,000—not quite half the per capita income of the United States as a whole (U.S. Census, American Community Survey). In contrast, the average salary of an individual Michigan Tech employee was \$51,000 (Michigan Technological University), and the average undergraduate

could expect to earn \$1,000 more during their first year on the job than the average Houghton County *household* would have earned in the same year (Michigan Tech Career Services; U.S. Census, American Community Survey).

- **It is aging.** Like the rest of the United States, the population of older adults in Michigan is increasing at a rapid rate (Day). Meanwhile, in 2012 more young, college-educated individuals migrated out of than into the State of Michigan (Gimarc). Again, like most of the country, older adults in Houghton County find younger relatives moving greater distances away.

This triple threat makes for an especially dire situation for elder adults in the Houghton area, who have been increasingly dependent upon digital networks to connect with the world from their isolated homes, and whose resources for accessing and learning to navigate technologies are set back by economic limitations and the exodus of younger relatives and friends.

The BDB project sought to intervene in the growing problem of elder isolation by supporting older adults' digital literacy development, including critical literacies (Banks; Selber). The project is primarily run by university volunteers who offer free, one-on-one computer tutorials for local adults, typically over age 50. Although the group has expanded its reach as additional needs are identified (e.g., in assisted living facilities and employment agencies), the core of the project involves weekly tutorial sessions held during the academic calendar year. For one hour each Friday morning at the local public library, volunteer faculty and students from Michigan Tech answer questions, provide moral support, and help learners walk through various tasks involving digital technologies. Questions from learners often focus on issues of function, such as how to write an email. Often these questions lead to critical discussions of technologies and the roles that they play, or do not play, in learners' lives.

As attendance at BDB sessions continues to climb, the project's central challenge is sustainability. In part to address the need for consistent volunteer participation, I required graduate students to work as participant-observers of BDB tutorial sessions that semester. Working in pairs, students split their time between assisting learners with their individual questions and taking field notes of the interactions between tutors and learners. The observations served as a form of community needs assessment, which would otherwise have been difficult to elicit directly from the rotating cast of community members with an enormous range of interests and experience. This observation-based needs assessment ultimately led to a pedagogical application, as the students developed and facilitated a series of free public workshops: a workshop on internet safety practices, such as spam recognition and password protection; a workshop on digital photo file management strategies; and a collaborative learning workshop for building women's knowledge and confidence in using digital technology.

In what follows, these master's and doctoral students discuss the learning outcomes of their experiences with the BDB project with particular attention to how those experiences have impacted their relationship with the field of community literacy studies¹. These students entered the classroom with various cultural and national

backgrounds; different disciplinary perspectives, including technical communication, literacy studies, writing center theory, philosophy, and gender studies; a wide range of personal and professional histories with teaching, community organizing, and activism; and a widely varied sense of how community literacy studies might (or might not) factor into their careers in academia and beyond.

Critical Reflections on Community Literacy and Breaking Digital Barriers

The Value of Reciprocity: Learning Through Hands-On Experience (Cindy)

As a part of the Community Literacy class, the Breaking Digital Barriers project reinforced for me the importance of moving students outside of academia and engaging with people in the community. The project gave each of us a chance to engage in a hands-on experience (an approach I'd never experienced before) and reinforced my understanding of the importance of reciprocity, a fair "give-and-take" (Cushman 16) relationship that benefits both the members of the academy and the community through "the long process of self disclosure and listening... [and] identify[ing] with each other" (18). Although I worked as an undergraduate student consultant at my college writing center for two years, I was nervous to work with older adults, and I was unsure of what they could gain from my limited understanding of the potential technologies and processes that they could bring to the library. As we worked through the course, my initial hesitation subsided as my classmates and I learned the importance of working as a support system for the session attendees and sharing in their discoveries. Instead of misunderstanding my role as a consultant as the teacher who bestows expertise upon the student, I would be sharing expertise and learning from the participants in a way that benefited us both.

By working with the Houghton community outside of Michigan Tech, the members of the class bridged the gap between the university and the session attendees by operating as a face-to-face support group, sharing their own knowledge and stories of working and experimenting with technologies, encouraging more technological curiosity by working through issues together, and bringing "technological training to those with limited access [and resources, including support systems]" (McKee and Blair 34). John, Isidore, and I continually worked with a couple named Fred and Elizabeth throughout our time with Breaking Digital Barriers. Based on our interactions with Fred² and Elizabeth, I began to note the importance of occasionally stepping out of tutoring to talk about life "offline," often sharing stories beyond the purpose of learning about new technologies. I believe that the couple continually returned to work with us because we would discuss our lives outside of the technology we were using or reflect on how it enhanced the world around us. For example, during one of our sessions, John and Fred held a longer discussion about Houghton, hunting, and how the iPad could enhance the experience of hunters in general. By sharing a mutual interest, John developed a way to bridge the age gap between himself and Fred and showed that,

while Fred's expertise at that moment existed outside of technology, John could learn something from Fred as well.

Our experience with Fred and Elizabeth demonstrated to us that, even though our work with the Breaking Digital Barriers sessions was "initiated [as a class project] within the institution and extend[ed] outward" (Mathieu 111), it contributed a genuine sense of reciprocity throughout the semester. While the session and workshop attendees were given the chance to engage their technological curiosities, build their knowledge about their devices, and receive one-on-one support from the class members, my classmates and I were given the chance to engage some of the principles and concepts discussed in class readings and see how they operated in action and outside of the academy. As the measure of the effectiveness of my group's support and assistance, we contributed to the technological literacies of a couple who began to feel more at ease with operating their iPad, what Fred called their new "toy," even as we tutors became increasingly comfortable in our own personal use of technologies.

Over time, Fred (the primary operator of the iPad) and I both became less afraid of experimenting with the device and realized that we could collaboratively resolve issues that would arise. He also began to realize the extent of the possibilities for communicating with his family members through other applications such as FaceTime, reminders, notes, the camera, and so on. During our final session together, Fred brought in a brand new iPhone (an anniversary gift from Elizabeth) and we began setting up his voicemail. When I noted their investment in another Apple product, Elizabeth commented that, after all of our sessions together, Fred felt so comfortable with the iPad that they decided to buy the phone. Moreover, I began to appreciate these applications as an iPhone/MacBook user, since I use a majority of them to enhance my own time management as a graduate student and even keep up my social relationships. Through consistency and encouragement, Fred, Elizabeth, and our group members achieved reciprocity by contributing to each other's familiarity with technology by fostering a sense of comfortable support and experimentation with their "toys."

Problem-solving Rhetors (Isidore)

I enrolled in the class because of my interest in rhetoric and my desire to explore how rhetorical theories can help me understand rhetoric not in a negative way, but as a problem-solving mechanism. More important, I wanted to understand what the "public turn" of rhetoric meant. I was very delighted when readings from such scholars as Linda Flower, Ellen Cushman, Jeffrey Grabill, Keith Morton, and several other scholars hinted that, as rhetors, we are social agents and we can initiate changes in our communities. How exactly can we do that? This sense of applying rhetorical theories to effect changes in our communities became more relevant to me when we embarked on a semester-long, practice-oriented project that engaged directly with a local community.

Toward the end of the semester, we were asked to design workshops for clients who attended our tutoring sessions. Each group sifted through weekly written observations

to find out the most pressing needs of BDB participants. My group observed that participants wanted to learn how to take and edit digital photos, to learn how to transfer photos from camera to computers, to know more about email, to figure out how to recognize and organize icons, how to use Skype, and (overwhelmingly) how to keep track of passwords. Based on our experiences we decided to settle on one of the pressing issues that confronted us: how do people stay safe on the internet? With more than ten people attending our workshop, it became apparent that people were interested in knowing more about internet scams and frauds.

Our internet safety workshop threw more light on an issue raised by Peck, Flower, and Higgins, who describe the community center as a forum for people to begin a broader conversation about issues they care most about (200). For us and our participants, the BDB tutoring project became a space to discuss issues of concern. The workshop was not unidirectional; that is, it was not a medium of knowledge transfer from us (“experts”) to them (“non-experts”). It was a moment of exploration and discovery for both tutors and participants. We had participants ask a lot of questions. Some shared their experiences. I observed the level of seriousness that participants attached to the workshop. Participants were hungry for more; they were ready and willing to participate. I saw what it meant to be a member of a community. We had the same purpose, the same goal. The workshop was scheduled to end at 10:00am, but we continued and participants were ready and willing to stay.

The workshop also strengthened the argument that community literacy provides a site of rhetorical intervention. Thus, we started our inquiry into the community through weekly tutorials and observations. The conversations we had with people and the field notes we took gave us enough insights into the issues our participants were faced with. We organized the workshop in order to help participants understand and know how to stay safe on the internet, intervening based on inquiry and information gathering. In essence, we reflected and took action.

Belonging to a community forms a quintessential aspect of community literacy scholarship and pedagogy. The local public becomes an important “object of inquiry and a site for rhetorical intervention” (Long 25). More importantly, the local public becomes a site for rhetorical engagement and relationship building. It inspires an “ethic of love and justice,” “hope,” a “love ethic,” and “reciprocal relations,” and it becomes a standard “for ethical action in the research paradigm to facilitate social change” (qtd. in Long 25). The emphasis on local public works to “dismantle university/‘white’ privilege and to reconfigure writing instruction outside the academic classroom...” (Long 26). It is a means of speaking *about* and *for* silenced voices, or a moment of engaging *with* difference. Community literacy, Flower makes us aware, “is a rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change” (6). In her estimation, community literacy is not solely focused on language of urban “others.” Neither is it a vehicle for academicians to talk about others. It is “an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggles” (Flower 19). It enables faculty and college students to start solving problems in a community.

The “public turn” of rhetoric moves rhetors from their ivory towers on university campuses to the communities around them. It helps us to bridge the age-old binary

between theory and practice. We bring theory to practice and practice to theory in service of our communities. We become agents of change. The “public turn” of rhetoric is not only interested in academic conversations, it gives rhetors the tools to apply practical judgment (*phronesis*) to solving community problems. We are ambassadors of change. Reflection and social action are the core tenets of community literacy and rhetoric. The public turn, for me, becomes a moment of engagement with the community around us in order to explore issues of concern and a moment of helping one another in order to solve complex problems. Rhetoric becomes the medium of exploration and a tool for inquiry.

The Pragmatics of Transformational Projects (Elsa)

The roots of community literacy programs can be traced to community centers, such as Hull House, that developed at the turn of the century in response to the need for educational and recreational facilities for immigrant and lower income people in urban areas. From the very beginning, community literacy has blended idealism and pragmatism with varying levels of success. The discipline’s tendency toward self-reflection seems to work as a tempering mechanism that has kept the focus of community literacy on a pragmatic course that doesn’t lose sight of its larger goal (social transformation). Concern for this can be seen in the work of Peck, Flower, and Higgins, who speak of wrestling against “[r]esearch agendas, framed in the armchair of theory and untested in the context of real people and problems” (219), a perspective pointedly echoed by Linda Flower in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, where she continues to refine her approach to effective community literacy. Another carefully considered aspect of the field is the motivation behind academics’ participation in community literacy programs. Scholars such as Morton and Mathieu emphasize the importance of developing a relationship with one’s local community as a necessary step in any authentic project that purports to be *for* a community.

My work with Breaking Digital Barriers indicated to me that BDB was a project that grew into being in response to a community need and desire. Working on a community literacy project while engaging with academic texts on community literacy reinforced the theoretical basis of the field and demonstrated to me how theory and practice can be intertwined in a reciprocal relationship. Participation in BDB was an expression of an aspect of what we were learning in class and hence stayed true to the ethics of community literacy, which emphasize practice in relationship to theory, as well as the ethical obligation of academics to go beyond the university. Although not the goal, in working with participants at BDB, I developed a deeper appreciation for what I was learning, as I put what were formerly theoretical concepts and pedagogical approaches into practice. But an almost paradoxical part of that appreciation was the realization that what is learned in the classroom does not translate neatly into the field. Tutoring people at the BDB sessions prevented me from becoming overly idealistic about literacy; for example, one of the women I worked with just wanted to buy maps for an upcoming trip. She didn’t appear to be interested in digital literacy beyond achieving

a simple, transactional goal, and she was far from the only participant with whom this was the case. Often I found that a user's interest was limited to one of functional literacy. This aptly demonstrated to me the very constraints of theory that community literacy scholars so frequently detail.

Because of this experience, I was able to reflect more critically on community literacy as described by authors like Linda Flower and Eli Goldblatt and consider how their work might actually translate in a community different from the ones in which they worked. For example, Flower strives to maintain a careful balance between pragmatism and idealism—a thread that runs throughout her book. Her idealism is most evident in the stories she chooses to highlight of participants engaging civic activism through her project of intercultural inquiry; for example, Flower describes the efforts of 13-year-old Shirley to commit to paper her experiences with racialized police harassment. In the excerpt Flower provides, Shirley creates an essay that is included in a group publication called *Listen Up! Teen Stress*. This document, designed for intra and inter public engagement is then the source of a public reading attended by public officials. The implication is that such inspiring stories will result in community change, perhaps even transformation; but the question remains, what is the tangible result? Has racial profiling been diminished, for example?

Upon working in the everyday context of the BDB, without the lens of time to pick out the most inspirational stories, I became more skeptical of stories of individual social transformation. What I observed indicated that most users were not intentionally seeking out a program like BDB for that purpose. Rather, participants generally had what most would consider mundane goals, such as learning more about features of Facebook, how to use the new Surface tablet interface, and searching for a place to purchase a paper map. There is no need to diminish the importance of functional literacy, of mundane objectives in contributing to the loftier goals scholar-activists typically envision. In fact, in community literacy projects, including Flower's, and also those described by Cushman, Herzberg, and Grabill, one of the grounding factors in developing a program is that it sprang from the everyday needs of the people, or as Goldblatt puts it, from self-interest. *Breaking Digital Barriers* did this as well; it functioned to meet needs individuals in the community had and people were drawn to participate in it due to self-interest (the desire to use computers for their own purposes).

Although overall the field of community literacy has worked diligently to curb theoretical idealism, it still tends to surface in the stories and examples researchers pull from their work. This has a very natural cause, the desire to demonstrate that one's program is working and, more importantly, that there is evidence of more transformational change than mundane stories would seem to tell. It is also how one continues to receive funding and support. Ironically, it may be pragmatism, in some respects, that feeds such idealism. It is only in continually returning to what grounds this field, projects, that theoretical idealism can be tempered by everyday experience. The practicality that this engenders is, I believe, vital for community literacy as a field and a practice to continue transforming theory, pedagogy, and method into something tangible, fallible, and perhaps most importantly, malleable.

The Ethical Contingencies of Sharing (and Not Sharing) Knowledge (Joel)

In this section I recount my interactions with Sally, a middle-aged BDB participant whose dependence on social support networks in her technological literacy practices revealed to me a crucial ethical challenge inherent in community literacy work. Unemployed for a number of years, Sally was determined to learn the skills she needed to apply for jobs online. I was eager to help Sally from the beginning. But over the months I spent working with her, I learned that helping *someone* in the community literacy program context really means helping *someone in a particular situation*. My work with Sally has complicated for me the ethics of acting as an expert—that moment when, as Linda Flower cautions, “well meaning volunteerism” can turn community practitioners into knowledge servers (103).

Sally initially came to the BDB sessions because she needed assistance with her résumé and submitting online job applications. However, she had a rather inefficient process of preparing her résumé digitally. She lived with her sister and had access to a home computer, but said her sister wasn't very helpful in explaining how the computer worked, and continually warned Sally that her personal information might be “stolen” if she sent her résumé via email. Sally explained that technical problems made her sister nervous about Sally using the computer at all, and so technical issues would remain unresolved. To avoid adding to her sister's anxiety and risking her access to the computer, Sally would print out her résumé and other documents and mail the hard copies to her friend Jim, who lived out of state. Jim would then digitize the documents and send the files back to her via email—messages she would sometimes “lose” in an email account hosted under her sister's home ISP account, which was occasionally rendered inaccessible when Sally's sister changed its password. When her access to email was interrupted, Sally tended to blame herself—a tendency partly explained by Sally's eventual disclosure that she had a severe learning disability. Over time, she had come to see herself as the problem.

It took me a few weeks to assess Sally's system of communication, but I felt that, alongside Sally's sister and her friend Jim, I was also playing a mediating role among Sally's goals, her positive and negative experiences with technology, and the supporting people around her. At one point, I wanted to suggest that Sally create a separate email address, such as a Gmail account, that would be much easier to access and maintain on her own. It would also give her a stable place to store her digital files and exchange documents with Jim, and it would bypass her sister's gatekeeping. But in considering ways to streamline the communication process in Sally's job search, I felt the need to consider her overall situation, including those relationships that would be there well after our BDB sessions were over. Setting up a Gmail account for Sally would have been easy enough for me to do. However, given her reliance on her sister's help (which likely extended beyond her technological needs), this might have compounded Sally's fears and anxieties surrounding the internet and other technologies.

This situation marked the potential for me and the BDB project “to replicate the social structures that are part of the problem,” as a result of pairing an “expert” with a “client, patient, or the educationally deficient” (Flower 103). To resist this tendency,

Flower suggests that the “knowledge expert” repeatedly ask two important questions: “Who am I? What am I doing here?” (101). I found Flower’s suggestion to maintain the spirit of inquiry vital to my interactions with Sally which, from the first, were laden with potential to make her situation worse by knowledge-serving without regard to the specifics of Sally’s situation.

Ultimately, I decided against helping Sally create a Gmail account. On one hand, a Gmail account would eliminate many of her frustrations regarding access to her email and might have given her much more autonomy over her online communications. On the other hand, Sally relied on others to help her when things went wrong. I didn’t feel it was my place as a transitory member of her technical support network to disrupt or complicate more permanent relationships. Plus, she had the support of her friend Jim, as well as limited access to a home computer via a reluctant sister.

As I wrote my reflections on my experiences with Sally, I experienced feelings of culpability and responsibility about the information I was giving her. I didn’t think Sally couldn’t manage a Gmail account on her own, given her disability and difficulties with memory. Instead, I thought that a Gmail account would cause ripples of anxiety and tension in Sally’s existing support networks. In one of our last sessions, Sally said the most striking thing to me while waiting for the slow library internet connection to load a webpage. I said, “It just takes time with these things sometimes,” and Sally said, “Time is all I have.” I couldn’t help but feel a bit sad after hearing that. All Sally wanted was to work a part-time job. I found myself more than willing to lend whatever “expertise” I had to help her apply for jobs and work on computer skills, but I knew, too, that I had to do so without intruding on or jeopardizing her precarious access to technology at home.

Thinking about Sustainability (John)

I came to the Breaking Digital Barriers project (BDB) with over twenty years of domestic and overseas experience in technical assistance and capacity building (most recently providing technical assistance to American Indian communities throughout the midwestern and eastern U.S.), hoping to improve on personal experience through theory and academically influenced practice. I have always been troubled by the potential to wreak havoc when a humanitarian aid bomb is dropped in a community, and was looking to academia to help avoid the typical pitfalls of community aid and support projects that can alienate beneficiaries, make them dependent, or fail to provide sustained benefit. The BDB experience ended up reinforcing both the positive and negative experiences of community service, but it also provided me with new perspectives on how to avoid the negatives.

The BDB program provided patrons with eager, young volunteers who brought the knowledge and resources to solve all the computer and information technology problems an isolated retiree could ever face—or at least that was part of the expectation from both sides. When we, the BDB activists, visited a local assisted-living home for a single one-hour tutoring session, we offered plenty of knowledge and energy,

but we probably provided more friendly conversation than effective assistance with computer problems. It's not easy to unravel a novice's Facebook, Skype, and Apple Store credentials in fifty minutes, so posting a single photo turned into more frustration with already frustrating devices than any kind of knowledge transfer. At both the assisted-living home and the library, when we could not resolve issues with passwords, digital rights management, and access rights, clients gave up on those tasks and said, "Nevermind, I don't need to do that anyway." These experiences reminded me that, without a sustained and deliberate effort to guide community participants along a path of learning, the effort can alienate a new computer user to the whole concept of powerful and beneficial technology, and consequently undermine future efforts of others seeking to collaborate with community members.

Creating sustainable community service programs is a challenge, particularly when the providers are busy graduate students committing a semester to the program. Whether the services are provided by a well-funded philanthropic organization or students in a graduate class, all service programs face the limits of staff availability and project end dates. The ideal community service program will therefore seek to overcome these limitations by transferring skills and resources to the local recipients, providing for a self-sustaining program that continues to meet local needs long after the students have completed their final papers, the sponsors have moved on, or the project has run out of money. To reach this ideal, service programs should foster communities that build local capacity and intertwine the benefactors with the recipients, benefitting all parties involved and making the whole process more effective.

While the BDB portion of our graduate class did not initially emphasize community and capacity building, the potential developed through the existence of the program in a public library with regular patrons from a small community. The program's close association with dedicated faculty, students, and staff from the local university also contributed to community development across the academic/non-academic community divide. In many cases, those assisting bring vast knowledge and financial resources to bear, and it is easy for the recipients to subjugate themselves to a beneficiary role that requires little more than gratitude to keep resource contributions flowing. Morton identified this problem of power differential in a university setting:

From a critical perspective, the experts necessary to design and manage a program magnify inequalities of power, and make the served dependent on the expert. This is a particularly dangerous trap for colleges and universities which are generally regarded as repositories of expertise, and employ research tools that non-experts cannot master. (22)

The development of a community of patrons and providers helped diffuse the potential disruption of resource surges, and also helped overcome the power differential between benefactor and beneficiary.

Seeking to create a sustainable, effective program has its own perils. Paula Mathieu warns us about seeking sustainability for its own sake, which can predetermine the

kind of program that we create (99). As a program built upon the time, energy, and eagerness of university faculty and students, the BDB risks falling into this trap of predetermining the type of program offered and seeking sustainability over meeting evolving community needs. Compounding this risk, the tutors were students with varying technical and pedagogical skills who had to learn to be effective tutors and complete their own assignments within a ten-week schedule, further leading us down a potential path of determinism. So, while we repeated some of the mistakes Mathieu warned us about, we also did as Thomas Deans suggests in “Sustainability Deferred”: we did our best and moved on.

The limitations of community service programs, particularly the volunteer or compelled-volunteering types like BDB, do not prevent me from undertaking these types of projects. Building sustainable, intertwined communities helps mitigate limitations; the more severely resource-limited programs sometimes require closer ties between benefactor and beneficiary, which can be less disruptive than and just as beneficial as well-funded programs with expert humanitarian aid commandos. To BDB’s benefit, the organizers’ and tutors’ lives are at least temporarily intertwined with the community. As with Deans, Grabill, and McKee and Blair, we live in this community, and, for better or worse, we will make mistakes, learn from them, and learn from each other.

Witnessing and Responding to the Digital Divide (Kirsti and Laura)

In their article on community-based technological literacy programs for older adults, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair quote the following statement from Rachel, one of their workshop participants:

It’s a psychological thing when an older person—and it doesn’t happen with young people because they grow up with computers—when you look at the computer you just feel totally overwhelmed, like this thing is some kind of monster. It’s got all these wires and god only knows what’s going to happen. We have, I guess, a little bit of a fear like – I hate to say this, but even for women, especially, you know because it was just a totally different society... I mean people thought differently about what women should be doing and what they shouldn’t. (25)

Rachel identifies two factors that, in her experience, cause what she refers to as “psychological” barriers when dealing with technology: age and gender. On the one hand, she feels that her generation is at a disadvantage due to a lack of exposure to technology. On the other hand, she has the impression that traditional gender roles impact women of her generation more strongly than younger women.

Rachel’s statement summarizes the overall impression that we gained during the Breaking Digital Barriers project. In our tutorial sessions, we predominantly worked with women, and a clear theme arose throughout the course of the project: a lack of

confidence and agency with technology and the tendency to rely heavily on a male member of the family (husbands, sons, nephews). In one of our sessions with a couple, we asked the woman if she would like to join us at the table to participate in the session. She said, “No, thank you. He’ll learn from you, and then he can teach me later at home.” Similarly, another woman lacked any of the necessary information for her accounts or passwords: “He does all of that,” she explained, referring to her husband. This lack of agency and access even led to extreme self-doubt and criticism: “I’m so stupid with this” was only one of the self-derogatory statements we heard from women expressing their relation to technology. When asked about which technologies *she* used and owned, one woman shared her technological literacy history only using the pronoun “we,” again referring to herself and her husband. However, as we expected, all of these women were no less able to deal with technology than any of the male participants.

Access to and the ability to make use of technology are determined by a broad variety of factors. Yet it is our impression that specifically when dealing with older adults, little attention has been paid to the fact that older adults comprise a highly heterogeneous group. Our participants were mainly white and often well-educated; the gender gap we discovered may be but one additional factor. We decided to take a step in bridging the gap by offering *A Women’s Technology Workshop* to help women become more confident with technology. When responding to a question regarding her technological confidence in the workshop, one of our participants echoed Rachel’s statement when she said, “I don’t want to be a sexist, but men tend to be much more assertive, and they tend to interrupt you.” A common theme amongst this group pointed to the lack of space that women have to assert themselves when it comes to technology. Yet when one of us (Laura) attempted to find empirical data that would confirm our theory of an age-gender-divide, she came across results that were somewhat surprising. The most recent study on the digital divide was the Pew Research Center’s Internet Project on technology and old age, which used data from 2013 (Smith). While the data confirms a gap between male and female users above the age of 65, the extensive report on the study does not mention the gender divide at all. It seemed that despite the differences we noticed amongst genders in this age bracket, no one is paying close attention. There seems to be more to the story than what is being told.

The technology workshop that we offered was meant to do something about this gender divide that we had witnessed week after week. Among others, the works of Linda Flower, Caroline Heller, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire were particularly influential. The workshop began and ended in guided conversations based on one of Peck, Flower, and Higgins’ four key aims for community literacy, intercultural conversation. “[C]ommunity literacy,” they argue, “expands the table by bringing into conversation multiple and often unheard perspectives” (205). All participants, including ourselves, shared personal experience, prior knowledge, and challenges with technologies. The value of these conversations came not only from the varied perspectives, but also in the value of *being heard* as a form of empowerment. As quoted by Heller, Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center director Ben Clarke points out that to “take action and challenge those circumstances [...] happens through being heard” (7-8). Though

we cannot say for sure, these women may have never been given a space to talk about their technological strengths and the value of their prior knowledge, even if it dated back to the 70s. Also inspired by Freire's critique of the "banking concept of education," we attempted to break down any hierarchies. After hearing about both their needs and their prior knowledge, we formed groups. We joined the groups not as teachers, but as participants. For instance, while working in a team with a participant on her iPad, Laura highlighted that she had no experience with Apple products and that she was improvising. The participant later wrote in a reflection: "I can't know it all, just keep pecking away." While acting as a participant and not the teacher, Laura was able to lessen the hierarchy and admit that she too was still learning, serving as a perfect example of how technology forces all users to continue to learn in order to keep up, even for someone who may seem to be the expert.

Flower specifically talks of community literacy's effect on the individuals to "return to their own spheres enabled to think and act differently in ways appropriate to their situation" (29). It was our goal that when these women left the workshop, they may feel a small sense of empowerment and more confidence to speak up about the skills they did have, to try new things without fear of looking stupid, and to take back some of their agency. Flower understands rhetorical agency as the "work of *everyday people*" (206). That is how we understood ourselves: a small group of everyday people having a conversation. On the surface this may seem powerless, but that was hardly the case, as we were assured through our course readings and discussions. Being able to move from theory to action is the formula that made this course so valuable. Seldom, if ever, are graduate students given this opportunity during their coursework, yet it not only enhanced what we offered to the workshop participants but also provided us the chance to put the theory into practice. Only when we were able to take community literacy into the community did it impact both ourselves and others. To us, a statement often attributed to Margaret Mead captures it best: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

Conclusion (Lauren)

As my co-authors demonstrate above, the turn toward community engagement can catalyze important aspects of graduate education in writing studies. In some instances, the project was an important means of extending (not just applying) classroom-based learning, as evidenced by Cindy's contextualized understanding of reciprocity, and by Isidore's defining of rhetoric in terms of "problem-solving" and action, rather than seeing rhetoric "in a negative way." At the same time, the BDB project also occasioned critique of the readings and theories we encountered in the classroom. Elsa and Joel in particular call attention to the messiness and tension so often elided in published accounts of community engagement, and remind us to ask: What "violence" can literacy work do? In addition to the refraction of classroom learning, the BDB project also appears to have been a site for re-visioning action and engagement. As John, Laura,

and Kirsti recount moving from theory to action (and back again), their facility with social critique serves as an important critical lens for the existing practices of the BDB project and for future community literacy efforts.

To follow my co-authors' astute reflections with some parting comments of my own, I offer a critical reflection on *their* observations and raise two particular points of concern, which I will suggest are different indicators of the same problem. First, as is captured in the reflections above, my co-authors universally note that the outreach experience called sharp attention to their positionality as academics in a literacy-oriented community setting. As a group, we were critical of the "logic of expertise" (Flower 105) with which the BDB operates, and worked to resist that logic. I am not altogether surprised by their sensitivity to expert/novice or professional/client relationships with community members. After all, one of their primary objectives as graduate students is to develop expertise in a given field, even as they enter a scene in which that aspirational identity of "expert" is simultaneously challenged and reified.

Second, as I noted in the introduction, my co-authors were quick to point out during class that, despite their interest in community literacy and action, our engagement project was a one-off experience. Some have continued working with the BDB alongside other volunteer tutors, but most do not have the time or energy—circumstances for which I have a great deal of sympathy. Most will not again have a built-in opportunity for civic engagement in their classes, and nothing in their degree requirements suggests they should seek such opportunities on their own. And, unless one of my colleagues elects to teach a similar course, it will be several years before something like Community Literacy will be made available to other RTC students. As evidenced in my co-authors' reflections, our class offered students many benefits of learning through engagement, and it supported a much-needed relationship between university and community. But then the class ended, and with it, students' clearest (if imperfect) source of support for community engagement.

My co-authors' sensitivity to their roles as literacy and technology experts and the unsustainable role of civic engagement in their graduate degree programs are intertwined concerns that prevail in many graduate programs in writing studies. Since writing studies' "public turn" (Mathieu), graduate students are increasingly drawn toward community engagement and public scholarship. However, these same students quickly encounter conflicting messages. Faced with warnings that such work would be considered a diversion from professional activities that *actually* count, graduate students are bewildered by a compelling call that, alas, must not be answered before tenure. In a *Reflections* special issue on this very problem, Paul Feigenbaum recalls, "graduate school gave me both the desire for public engagement and considerable anxiety about whether to pursue it within academia" (n.p.). The problem is not, it seems, a lack of inspiration for community engagement; rather, students need more "systemic means" (Feigenbaum, n.p.) of supporting such engagement, once inspired.

When early-career academics are told that "giving trees don't get tenure" (Perlmutter), and when public engagement is viewed as naive "do-goodism" (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters 15), graduate programs have little incentive to go public.

On the other hand, graduate-level service-learning has often been lauded as a way of offering *vocational* experiences for graduate students, particularly those in social work, gerontology, nursing, and education. This vocational sentiment is, on occasion, echoed in writing studies—see, for example, Rentz and Mattingly’s argument that professional writing graduate students should consider “caring for others” as always secondary to the goal of professionalism and real-world applications of school-derived knowledges and practices.

I do not suggest that graduate programs should exclude either professional development or community wellness from their community outreach agendas (for a compelling example of the latter, see Kimme Hea). However, in reviewing my co-authors’ critical reflections, I find that there is something to be gained by thinking about graduate writing studies primarily in terms of *civic responsibility*. Resting somewhere between a logic of expertise and the uncritical charitability that service-learning scholars and teachers have long criticized, civic responsibility is an invitation for graduate students to think about their emerging expert identities in a world fraught with conflicting values and unevenly distributed resources. Not in addition to, but *as a means of* preparing students to be the best writers, thinkers, teachers, and whatever-ers, graduate programs must provide lenses through which students will recognize their work as situated within complex social and political networks (including those we attempted to map on the board during class), to which they are inescapably accountable.

In reviewing these critical reflections, which trace our struggles to adapt our theories and practices in response to negotiated community relationships, I urge graduate programs in writing studies (including my own) to more consciously support graduate students’ sense of civic responsibility, broadly defined. This does not mean graduate programs should establish institutionalized service-learning projects or specify volunteer hours as a degree requirement. Rather, programs might begin by carefully evaluating their mission statements (*Are we concerned with our students’ roles as citizens and community members?*), their course offerings (*Do we teach students how to engage with publics?*), and their mentorship culture (*Do we habitually provide for students’ ambitions for civic engagement?*) in order to recognize and support civic responsibility as a core element of graduate education.

End Notes

1. We recognize that, in these reflections, we focus exclusively on the student experience and do not directly include the voices of community members who partnered with us to run the tutorial sessions. Far from unimportant, those perspectives were a crucial element in our course, the impact of which my co-authors measure in their reflections. Still, we regret that the scope of this essay does not include a better articulation of the community members' individual interests and learning outcomes, nor does it include their assessments of what students did and should gain from their work together. We challenge our readers to follow with a critical analysis of a graduate community literacy course that directly involves community partners in evaluating course outcomes.

2. All community members' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

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