Review Essay

The Promises and Perils of Writing Partnerships

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In their introduction to *Writing and Community Engagement: A Critical Sourcebook*, Deans, Rosswell, and Wurr find the field of composition and rhetoric once again asking itself, “What does it mean to teach college writing?” (1). The deepening realization that teaching college writing is meaningful not just for our students, but for community members, organizations, prisoners, and K–12 school-aged children, has effected a sea change in the purposes and structures of writing programs. In this exciting era of institutional revisioning, community engagement classes have offered the opportunity for college students to write with, for, and in communities (Deans 2000). They’ve also offered writing program administrators a fresh set of questions from which to reimagine the scope and purpose of writing programs: “What kinds of relationships [with communities] should we be developing? And what ways of writing, knowing, teaching, public dialogue,
and social change do those relationships make possible?” (Deans, Rosswell, and Wurr 4).

The five books reviewed here offer answers to these questions—as they raise more. The contexts of the books range from research and teaching in specific curricula developed at Temple University and in Philadelphia (Parks, Goldblatt); to a research project at Michigan State University and in the Chicagoland area (Grabill); to comprehensive overviews of public engagement projects across the nation (Mathieu, Long). Along the way, each provides WPAs qualified hope and realistic visions for large-scale programs that serve local communities as well as university students. Each book is also linked in terms of the themes that emerge as relevant and useful to the everyday work of WPAs. In this review, we examine the location of writing programs, the landscape of institutional change, and the situatedness of writing programs within universities and local communities. To provide a map of sorts for the reader, we begin with a review of the writer who surveys community literacy scholarship.

An expert ranger of this intellectual geography, Elenore Long is uniquely positioned to provide a succinct and comprehensive synthesis of research and scholarship for busy WPAs. Through comparative analysis of community literacy research and programs, Long’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* maps well the landscape of community literacy projects. Her purpose is to describe the complexity of relationships between local publics and formal institutions that have emerged in the last fifteen years of scholarship on institutional work in public engagement. In chapter two of her survey, “Definitions and Distinctions,” Long provides a heuristic with which she charts the metaphors, contexts, tenor of the discourse, literacies, and rhetorical interventions of eight community literacy research and writing program initiatives (23). Chapter three, “Locating Community Literacy Studies,” situates the disciplinary homes of community literacy initiatives, while chapters four through eight profile several community literacy initiatives in terms of the heuristic outlined in the first chapter.

The implications sections at the end of each of these chapters provide WPAs vista points from which snapshots can be taken of important lessons, caveats, and tips for developing and maintaining programs. For instance, Long draws one implication among others in chapter five: “The Cultural Womb and the Garden: Local Publics that Depend on Institutions to Sponsor Them”: “the capacity for a local public to sustain its discourse depends, in part, on the viability of its sponsoring institution” (84). From this implication, WPAs would note “that it’s not always appropriate to assess a local public’s merit in terms of sustainability (though strategies for sustainability are one of the first concerns a funding officer will raise to a community
group [or program] that seeks funding)” (84). Insights like these provided at key places throughout the text make this book more than simply a map of the landscape of this research and scholarship; it also serves as a comprehensive guidebook for building successful initiatives that develop the literate capacities of students and community groups alike.

No guidebook to community literacy programs for WPAs would be complete without a chapter on pedagogical practices, and Long’s doesn’t disappoint. Her previous analysis of this research leads to an analysis presented in chapter nine that categorizes the interpretive, institutional, tactical, inquiry-driven, and performative pedagogical approaches. Students take action in these classes by producing literacies informed by those found in the public engagement projects reviewed in previous chapters. Students might go into communities to build new relationships, learn professional and local methods of negotiating workplaces and institutions, deliver and circulate their public writing, deliberate with community members and decision makers, or engage in disciplinary knowledge-making practices (154–57). Each one of these pedagogical approaches is then systematically described in terms of the roles of students and teachers, the resources they need, and types of assignments best suited to the location and communities. The last two chapters of this book also provide a richly detailed and comprehensive glossary and annotated bibliography. This rich taxonomy will prove invaluable in the training materials created and outcome measures developed in writing programs that integrate community literacy pedagogies. Long’s book serves as a richly detailed, carefully crafted, well-organized resource for WPAs. However, because it develops a rhetoric of local publics across many community engagement research trajectories and programs, the book may not have the sustained first-year composition focus for which some WPAs might hope.

With the terrain of community literacy and public engagement initiatives mapped this way, it’s worthwhile to see how metaphors of place, space, location, and engagement trace throughout the other books in this review before moving on to describe the qualified hopes and realistic visions presented in each. In Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition, Paula Mathieu argues that, because the field of composition has taken a public turn—“a turn to the streets”—a tactical orientation rather than a strategic one must be adopted. For Mathieu, who spent seven years working with the international grassroots movement of street newspapers, the word “street” serves as a “metonymic reference point for those places outside of universities and schools that have become sites of research, outreach, service, or local learning” (xii). The metonym also conjures a greater emphasis on spatial politics, which is apropos, since she maintains that academics
must consider both place and time in order to use all available approaches for engaging in effective public writing. Mathieu uses the streets as a metaphor for equalizing knowledge making, for bringing the ivory tower to street level and making “the streets” part of academe.

It is worth mentioning that the scope of Mathieu’s book does not cover assessment or evaluating student writing, nor does it focus on first-year composition. However, an important question she does raise that will be of particular interest to WPAs is how we as academics can get off our good intentions and assess how our work affects those in the streets (xi). Moreover, Mathieu insists that the landscape of institutional change could be improved upon by taking a more engaged look at street life: instead of advocating merely bringing the university to the streets—which, while sometimes challenging, still allows academe to maintain its safety by remaining ideologically and infrastructurally separate from the streets—Mathieu suggests we go one step further and situate the streets within the university. The implications of this could be, as Mathieu acknowledges and many WPAs might agree, both dangerous and incredibly exciting. While it may seem radical and unsettling, this type of change in relationship with communities has the potential for inspiring a more open public dialogue.

In chapter one, “Composition in the Streets,” Mathieu unpacks the difference between strategy and tactics. She maintains that, because universities are strategically organized by “academic calendars, disciplinary rules and methods of assessment,” when university work moves into the community, it is often encumbered with these same infrastructures, even though the university no longer controls or defines the space (16). Tactics, she believes, are more useful in helping scholars and students reimagine the types of community work possible.

The author explores public writing on the streets in chapter two, and discusses ways in which teachers can adapt tactics of hope in their own writing classrooms, thus assisting both themselves and their students in realizing more successful approaches to civic engagement. Chapter three offers more practical advice for WPAs as it considers the ethical issues of designing courses that broaden sites of pedagogy by incorporating subject matter from the streets. Chapter four explores some of the challenges of institutional service learning and suggests an alternative model for creating collaborative community-university relationships. Chapter five will be of special interest to WPAs as the author calls for professionals to examine their roles and motivations as teacher-scholars and public intellectuals. A more cynical reader may initially judge Mathieu’s book idealistic; however, throughout, she approaches complicated issues with an attitude of defiant optimism and she ends the book with a practical “Meditation on Hope:
“Tactical projects are limited by, yet given life and specificity by, spatial and temporal demands and a self-reflexive rhetorical nature; they aren’t likely to be easily replicable or generalizable; they may be unpopular or risky [. . .] but [they are] an act of hope” (134).

Hope and the politics of location are central themes of Eli Goldblatt’s work as well. In Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum, Goldblatt calls for a vision of writing beyond the curriculum in order to “make writing and reading instruction more responsive to the complex needs that arise in urban circumstances” (2). This subtle shift in perspective and location for the work of WPAs addresses a real strength and limitation of the WAC emphasis taken by many WPAs—this emphasis privileges “the campus as the unit of measure” (12). To address this problem, Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt argue for a paradigm shift away from WAC to a perspective of “writing beyond the curriculum,” the title of an article they coauthored in 2000.

Location, or more precisely the local community in which universities are situated, means everything to Goldblatt. During more than a dozen years working as a WPA at Temple University in Philadelphia, Goldblatt developed relationships between community residents, high school and college students, teachers and professors, and community leaders and administrators, all of whom are invested in literacy education. The local sites of this work include schools, neighborhood centers, two- and four-year colleges, and universities—and an implicit assumption across these sites is that “literacy learning is local” (9). These mutually sustaining, though sometimes antagonistic sites of WPA work unfold across the chapters as Goldblatt chronicles the connections and gaps between several institutional sites: in chapter two, he examines the distances between the 12th grade curriculum from a variety of high schools in Philadelphia and the first-year-writing curriculum at Temple; in chapter three, he presents data from the shared first-year course at community colleges in the Philadelphia area and at Temple to illustrate the very real impact that resource differentials have on the quality of education students receive; chapter four presents public engagement projects and philosophies from the perspective of community organizers, particularly Saul Alinsky; and chapters five and six widen the lens to scan across programmatic initiatives, institutions, and social boundaries that influence the development of social networks.

In prose richly detailed and well paced, Goldblatt paints a portrait of what is possible in these settings, presenting guideposts for the WPA hoping to develop such collaborations. The tone of possibility should not be understood as naïve or overly optimistic, for the final chapters also provide a sensible and sobering consideration of the many obstacles WPAs
encounter. He is especially mindful of the ways in which WPAs will be disappointed: funding and resources in non-profits can be inconsistent; programs can be derailed by administrators and colleagues bent on establishing their own research agendas or trademark programs; and the work that was once respected as a benchmark for teaching and as a hallmark of research can eventually become categorized as merely service. Despite these frustrations and uncertainties, WPAs will find in these pages several curricular, pedagogical, and institutional guides for developing relationships across institutional and community settings to sponsor literacy beyond the college curriculum. WPAs who seek an ultimate answer to the question “are community literacy initiatives worthwhile?” could be frustrated by Goldblatt’s rather short response: “it depends.” Evaluation of final project outcomes is always locally rooted in the specific exigencies these classes respond to, though students’ writing can show improvement across time.

Writing beyond the curriculum at Temple University, Steve Parks also developed an institutional initiative that recognized that “writing programs now existed within a larger framework that also included public-school partnerships, community writing groups, literacy research projects, and service learning courses (Parks 10). In Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love, Parks discusses two projects: the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy, and Culture and the New City Community Press. In incisive, lucid prose, Parks illustrates his attempts to build “community and university partnerships, infused with cultural and composition/rhetoric theories,” all in an effort to, following Mathieu, “help organize a local progressive politics that transcends the actual for a hoped-for future” (xxix).

Careful always to reveal the intricate connection between critical and cultural studies’ theories and practice, Parks traces the humble beginnings of a multi-school community writing project in chapter one as it challenges conceptions of hegemony. The remainder of the book provides ample selections of students’ and community members’ writing that demonstrate the complex notions of value attached to these literacies that were developed by citizens who held a stake in the New City Community Press. Offering a firsthand account of the types of powerful, moving, personal and intellectual work of community writers, chapters four and five present WPAs with the political and social justifications they might see resulting from public engagement initiatives. The final chapter presents a sobering assessment and evaluation of the New City Writing project that is now directed by Eli Goldblatt. Parks takes great care to present a balanced evaluation of the success of the program as it morphed away from university-driven disciplinary questions and alignments and into a truly community-based, stake-
holder-run program. As happens with programs that truly involve a group of stakeholders interested in maintaining and sustaining the work outside of a university and with continued university presence, the New City Writing project grew wings of its own.

Here Parks reveals a crucial insight into the real promise of WPA work within Writing Beyond the Curriculum movements: “Continuing New City Writing within the confines of the disciplinary models being placed into the college and university did not seem sustainable over the long term” (201). While institutionalizing a project like this might be one marker of sustainability, better earmarks of sustainability might be found in the extent to which initiatives like these are taken up and fought for by all the stakeholders in the program. While it may seem that much of the work for designing, creating, and sustaining community engagement initiatives must rest on the faculty member or WPA, in actuality the work must be distributed to interested stakeholders who can marshal resources and intellectual energies to carry the work forward when institutional structures, infrastructures, and alliances shift as they inevitably do. Again, WPAs considering whether work such as this is worthwhile may be disappointed with Parks’ discussion and evaluation of the students’ writing from the program. Specific indicators of growth and development across specific genres, or even longitudinal examinations of students’ preparedness for subsequent college writing, will not be found in these pages. The specific details of student improvement, chronicled though they are in rich detail, may not provide the kinds of evidence of effectiveness WPAs need to see.

In Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action, Jeffery T. Grabill explores the politics of often unseen and tacitly powerful spaces that WPAs, faculty members, students, and community members occupy. Throughout the book, he looks at infrastructures—the rules, procedures, hardware and software, buildings and systems—that only become visible to their inhabitants when they present problems. He explores how infrastructures contribute to solving—or causing—local problems and builds a rhetorical theory that examines the “practices of the powerful” as well as the common rhetorical practices of everyday people (15). In other words, Grabill believes that to increase the capacity of citizens writing community change we must not only understand the work of citizenship, but we must consider infrastructures—“the boring things that support mundane work—as terribly important and exciting” (41). In order to fully appreciate Grabill’s argument, it is important to understand that he believes infrastructures do not consist simply of information, interfaces, and computers and wires. Rather, he claims, infrastructures are imbued with much more power: “Infrastructures enact standards, they are activity systems, and
they are also people themselves” (40). As such, Grabill asserts that information infrastructures are an essential part of civic rhetoric, and, because people engage with these infrastructures to participate in civic actions, scholars must consider infrastructure when considering community literacy (38).

If we apply this same logic, we may discover that taking a careful look at writing program infrastructures could be beneficial. And if WPAs take the time to delve into Grabill’s rich analysis of infrastructures, they may discover a goldmine of information that could inspire the revisioning of university infrastructures. While his book does contain thought provoking research capable of instigating programmatic change, with the exception of the final chapter, Grabill admittedly does not focus on the writing classroom. Instead he looks at a much broader picture—that of infrastructures. And, while infrastructures are an essential component of writing programs, WPAs who are interested in practical and targeted curricular information might not find what they are looking for in this book.

Chapter six, “Writing Programs and Public Life,” will likely be of the most interest to WPAs because here Grabill directly applies the implications of his work to the writing classroom. He insists that people in writing classes are students and citizens, and it is our responsibility to teach the rhetoric necessary for them to engage in knowledge work (114). He further suggests that because of the positionality of writing courses (in English programs), the infrastructure cannot support the kinds of writing necessary in public life (117). Grabill maintains that, as scholars and teachers, we must begin creating—or reinventing—infrastructures to support writing that enables citizen action in communities (117).

Though each of the books reviewed here deals with different landscapes of institutional engagement with community members, all share the same belief that publics beyond the academy have knowledge bases and do knowledge work. They share a respect for the public as a place and reason for education and appreciation of knowledge-making citizens. As with the publications produced by the contributors to New City Press who were featured in Steve Parks book, all of the books reviewed here argue for a more inclusive concept of who is an intellectual.

Parks claims: “For although the academy has certainly broadened its most restrictive definitions of this category, it is still the case that the store owner across the street or the electrician fixing a plug in a faculty member’s office is not innately understood as an intellectual with a voice that carries wisdom and importance” (130). When understood as having knowledge bases, strategies for problem solving, and voices needing to be heard, publics beyond the academy present opportunities for engaging with our students in situated knowledge making efforts that help address local ques-
tions and problems. “Historically, the kinds of problems that have brought universities and communities together,” Elenore Long writes, “are the tenacious, structural issues of poverty, illiteracy, and social fragmentation” (49). When local community members are understood as having knowledge valuable for addressing society’s most pressing troubles, then university representatives position themselves to work more carefully with community members.

However, community members are not typically viewed as having valuable knowledge from which they work, an assumption that has proven detrimental to university-community relations. Presuming that the storekeeper across the street knows little underscores the privileged stance of noblesse oblige that universities often take: “In response to problems [of large scale] magnitude, universities have often assumed their expertise, research agendas, and curricula could be readily exported to the community. Not so. History is rife with examples of failed experiments and disappointed working relationships” (Long 49). WPAs are in unique positions of being able to develop initiatives that redress this problem, and the books presented here offer many suggestions for developing, sustaining, and teaching within such programs in ways that sometimes ameliorate social ills as they rebuild troubled town-gown relationships.

Yet, it is also important to note that community members may sometimes work from positions of misinformation, limited rhetorical strategy, and underdeveloped systems of inquiry. As Long reminds us, “community practices have their own limits that can shut down active inquiry into complex problems. One of the central challenges of designing local publics is figuring out ways to encourage participants to suspend default strategies that have thwarted community-university partnerships in the past so that participants may put their differences into generative dialogue and productive working relationships that support rhetorical action” (49). So while it’s important for WPAs to keep in mind the knowledge making potentials in communities, it’s also important to remain realistic about the breadth and depth of these potentials.

Displaying characteristically pragmatic realism, Grabill also acknowledges: “there are two fundamental problems facing ‘nonexpert’ participants in public deliberations—a problem of knowledge and a problem of performance” (14). In other words, the local public may not understand how to access the materials necessary to make new knowledge, and they may not know how to act in a public forum. Interestingly, these are the same challenges many university students face upon entering the academy. To remediate this problem, Grabill suggests that, if we want our writing programs to produce “thoughtful and effective citizens” we will allow the study of
effective “day-to-day rhetorical practices of ‘everyday people’” to inform our pedagogical decisions (15). Grabill also states: “rhetoric is no longer the terrain of the individual rhetor speaking or writing to ‘the public,’” but, rather, that “community action requires the collaboration of large numbers of people (and tools and infrastructures)” (16). This raises the stakes a bit by reminding us that the responsibility and potential of meaning making rests not only on individuals, but also on communities. If we believe that rhetorical practice is the function of organizations and not just individuals, it would behoove us to study, and even teach, writing as collaborative. However this would necessitate, as both Parks and Long might agree, a change in institutional thinking about what is recognized—and valued—as legitimate knowledge.

But how can we begin seeing community members as citizens occupying equally important publics with whom we might develop large-scale writing program initiatives? Mathieu acknowledges that our field may rely too much upon the commonly used strategic orientation to communities, which she claims privileges the university as the controlling agent working with “others” in the community. She also maintains that such an approach “seek[s] objective calculations of success and thus rel[ies] on spatial markers like sustainability and measurable student outcomes as guidelines of success” (xiv). Instead, Mathieu suggests a tactical approach, which she believes is more rhetorically responsive and humane. She maintains that a tactical orientation “needs to be grounded in hope [. . .] as a critical, active, dialectical engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures—a dialogue composed of many voices” (xv). Rather than a naïve approach to hope as an unrealistic vision of some far off future, unattainable and untenable, Mathieu offers a definition of hope that is grounded in realistic assessments of the exigencies and purposes needed to reach a desired outcome.

As Mathieu defines it, to hope is to “look critically at one’s present condition, assess what is missing, and then long for and work for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated [and] it is grounded in imaginative acts and projects, including art and writing, as vehicles for invoking a better future” (19). Grabill’s book offers a look at some of the practical challenges that community members encounter while working toward that anticipated future, that “not-yet reality,” that hope. Whereas Mathieu argues against a strategic orientation that “seeks to control spaces and create institutional relationships with an ‘other’ in the community,” Grabill calls for us to examine those spaces and institutional relationships in order to reinvent infrastructures that value citizens’ rhetorical strategies and expertise (91). Grabill suggests that if, instead of focusing on the concept of information, we focus on the
concept of infrastructure, our attention will shift “to what is indeed useful for individuals and communities as they seek to generate persuasive discourse about what is good, true, and possible” (40). What Grabill discusses in his book is practical hope that is both tactical and strategic in that he recognizes the importance of strategy (infrastructures), but encourages readers to adapt a hopeful stance to reinvent those infrastructures, thus, effectively changing their approach to public writing.

The tensions between hoped for and actualized reality emerge too in Parks’ *Gravyland* as he describes in chapter 4 the outcomes of his initial attempts to develop a community literacy initiative. His hope was that the New City Writing Project, coupled with students’ own developing writing, might “connect with efforts to create a revitalized new city” (98). He finds that instead of seeking immediate change in short-term accomplishments evidenced by one semester’s worth of study, scholars must re-envision change as something that emerges across time, from multiple forms of texts, and across institutions: “In this alternative, the faculty and students are positioned within a local community’s long-term struggle for political recognition, understanding that the university’s work is only one element within this effort” (99). As but one element of this work, the students’ individual, emergent writing should be taken as a piece of a larger constellation of outcomes that might better reveal the sustained efforts of communities and universities to create change together and at a larger scale. Students in his program moved from a “personal engagement with the contact zone to a sense of collaborative action in the public sphere” (99). Parks identifies the larger problem that WPAs around the country may have with engaging in tactics of hope: demonstrable outcomes. Parks would argue that outcomes should be measured in terms of the ways in which the student papers work rhetorically to position them within multiple publics. He also insists “we must teach our students to understand that all writing is a negotiation of voice participating in the publicly negotiated civic culture” (122). Hope actualized must be demonstrable, in other words, and Parks offers one way for WPAs to begin charting the evidence necessary to demonstrate this: the concrete analysis of students’ writing will show that they not only employed the technical and rhetorical moves of successfully integrating sources into a research paper, but it will also show how students challenged the notion of what counts as intellectual work and the importance of scholarship.

Where Parks presents options for assessing actualized hope, Goldblatt challenges the usefulness of tactics of hope that include creating student and citizen presses as the vehicle for disseminating community literacy writing. Gratifying and celebrated though they may be, the publications of student and community members’ writing he’s produced have languished.
Hundreds of copies of these publications sit in storage—with no interested new readers. Goldblatt firmly believes that “A press needs to bring its writers to the public [. . .] and we won’t stay in business long if we can’t sell at least enough books to prove to funders that we’ve got a viable plan to put our books to work for the authors and the communities” (200). Students’ buy-in to these projects can often end with the last day of class, and it’s up to the ongoing contributors and community members to publicize and distribute these works in consistent fashion. Goldblatt cautions as well that the faculty involved are required to undertake at least “two sustained investments”: the first involves ensuring quality instruction and the well-being of students on campus; the second requires professors to pay attention to “their own research and learning,” to continue publishing, and to ensure that the community literacy projects contribute to the professors’ research (203). Because they unflinchingly detail the ugly pragmatics of running community literacy programs, the failings, difficulties, tensions, and realities of enacting hope provide a useful check to what might otherwise be dismissed as Pollyannaish narratives.

Adding to the chorus of qualifiers regarding the programmatic and pragmatic details of developing community literacy initiatives, Long’s chapter nine, focused on pedagogical practices, offers more sobering advice to the would-be community literacy WPA: as educators we must “create with community partners and students at once tangible and poetic interpretive schemas to guide our participation in local public life” (199). With pedagogical intervention and development from the local to curricular, WPAs might be better positioned to “construct with others compelling, tangible interpretive schemes that are capable of describing and responding to articulate the working theories that support these interpretative schemes” (199). When hope is tempered with reality, WPAs interested in developing community literacy projects will have grounded vision based on the last 10 years of research and curricular development in the field. The books presented here offer initial answers to the questions with which we opened this essay: “What kinds of relationships [with communities] should we be developing? And what ways of writing, knowing, teaching, public dialogue, and social change do those relationships make possible?” (4). We think many and all. If we are to take any one concept from the various programmatic perspectives that these books offer, it might very well be hope—that is, a critical, realistic, and assessment-driven visioning of the future. And, while each of these authors provides models for future visioning and revisioning, their re/visioning is but a sliver of the conversation in which WPAs need to engage. Evidence-based approaches, deeper analyses of student writing (across genre, across media), thorough evaluation of student development,
and community collaboration—this is the call, we feel, that WPAs must take up as they contribute to the realization of this hope.

Works Cited
