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## Reflection on "the Field"

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## Reflection on “the Field”

*Tiffany Rousculp*

Tomorrow morning, I’m planning to talk with an old friend I haven’t seen for nearly two decades. It’s become commonplace to reach out like this during the COVID-19 pandemic; perhaps it’s a kind of inventorying of our lives while we move through the months of uncertainty, reckoning, fear, loss, and more uncertainty. Along with many others, I’ve been building digital connections with people I used to (and still) love.

I’ve found most of these friends (or they’ve found me) through internet searches or a hopeful message sent to an old email address. Not this one. This one I found in the articles that you’ve just read. You might think I’m waxing poetic, but I’m not.

I sat down to read through the manuscripts in this collection to prepare to write this reflection. I learned about new programs and smiled as I read the words of friends and colleagues: some nearby, some on the other side of the country. Then, I opened a manuscript and saw that “Dana M. Walker” was the lead author. Seriously? She and I were friends in a different life, and the last time I had seen her was in Washington, D. C. when she helped me through a very difficult experience. Dana wasn’t in community writing; she was a history major, working for some government-y thing. She was thinking of going to graduate school. I vaguely knew she had done so and that she had gotten married. It had been a long time.

During the summer, I wanted to COVID-connect with her, but there are literally hundreds of Dana Walkers in the U.S. Looking at the manuscript, I wondered if it could actually be her. How many had “M” for their middle initial? I put her name and “UPenn” into the search box and clicked on the second link.

Her picture popped up. It was her.

My mind blew. I returned to the article and read quickly. Their program in the Philadelphia Free Library system reminded me of the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center’s (SLCC CWC) work with the Salt Lake City public library system. Then, their manuscript quoted my book, *Rhetoric of Respect*. My mind blew more. Dana (Dana M. Walker!) was working and writing in the same field that I loved so much, quoting me, while I was reading her. I sent an overexcited, entirely unprofessional email to her UPenn address and waited.

A day later she wrote back, “TIFFER!!!” She explained her career changes in a sentence and wrote that when she saw her co-author reference my book, she meant to get in touch but “pandemic...protests...etc.” took her attention elsewhere. Understandable. I can’t seem to keep an intention in my head longer than the time it takes to walk from the couch to the kitchen. But there she was, in my inbox, and, tomorrow, we get to talk to each other.

When Mark Latta asked me to write this piece for this collection, I was honored . . . and hesitant. Mark specifically asked me to “reflect on the state of the field.” This seemed to be a request more appropriately made to one of those I had aspired to emulate, such as Linda Flower, Eli Goldblatt, Ellen Cushman, or Steve Parks. Who was I to reflect on this field, especially when I’ve been absent from it for nearly five years? But, as you must know (or if you don’t, you should know), Mark is one of the kindest and most generous spirits I have ever met, so I said yes, not having a clue as to what I would say.

The obvious observation to start out with is that the field of community writing (or community literacy or community-engaged writing...it has forever been a challenge to name this network of nodes that are tightly and loosely connected) is maturing into a respected status within academic environments. At the same time, it continues a dance of defiance and of acquiescence to institutional expectations and exclusions in order to survive materially, and also to make new work possible. What I notice most about the field is that it has always—and likely always will—sway within the poles of defining its boundaries and breaking them. What follows is what is left of memories of my experiences in community writing and is certainly not a full—or necessarily accurate—rendering.

As I have experienced it, the academic “field” of community writing and the people within it have long both sought and rejected such an identity. In 2008, Eli Goldblatt invited me to the first-ever “symposium on community literacy” in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> I was one of about 20 people, feeling out of place as the only person from a community college. I had met a few of the participants previously, but many seemed to know each other well: Paula Mathieu, David Jolliffe, David Coogan, Linda Flower, Tom Deans (and more I can’t remember...it was a long time ago). As we explored the possibility of creating a community literacy and writing network, arguments flew about who and what belonged in it and who and what did not. It could not belong only to academic institutions, but how would such a network benefit community partners (as they were referred to)? Community literacy and writing certainly included service-learning work, but it was more than that. Deans defined it as writing “about, for, and with” community, but then there were programs, like the CWC that I directed, where the community was doing the writing. It was a thrilling mess of ideas and people and possibility, but we didn’t come to any conclusions.

A few years later, during CCCCs in Atlanta, Goldblatt and Parks brought together a small group of people for a lunch at Mary Mac’s Tea Room. Goldblatt said there was enough happening around the country to get a group together. I participated, but mostly took notes, while Jackie Jones Royster, Juan Guerra, Kevin Reuss, Carlos Salinas, and Michelle Hall Kells talked about the possibilities of developing a national consortium. Dubbed the “National Consortium of Writing Across Communities” (NCWAC) and based on the work of Kells and Guerra (and specifically, the initiatives that Kells was leading at the University of New Mexico), this group would start with a small number of sponsor member institutions, no more than 20, with representation from all parts of the U.S. The conversations that we had in Philadelphia about who and what belonged continued: why sponsor institutions? What modalities and litera-

cies should be included? Written, oral, visual, woven, earth? Perhaps the focus should be “semiotics across communities”? Royster argued that we needed to break down the binaries and hierarchies of research/practice/service/community, but if research wasn’t a vibrant part of the NCWAC, it wouldn’t survive. Still, this was a next step in a beginning. Brian Hendrickson, then a graduate student at UNM, would coordinate the development of a wiki-space for any and all interested programs, academic or otherwise. In a year, our progress would be examined at the first “National Consortium of Writing Across Communities Summit” in Santa Fe, coinciding with the WPA conference held there that year.

The year before the meeting in Mary Mac’s, I had stepped down from the director position of the SLCC CWC. So that it could grow separately from me, I stepped fully away from the center, choosing not to serve on the advisory board. I was looking forward to building different community partnerships with the community college and supporting community writing colleagues within our metropolitan area and nationally. I chaired the formation of the Utah Community Literacy and Writing Coalition, which was invited to be a sponsoring member of the NCWAC, but, an insecure director forced a change of course, and I found myself divorced from the local community writing scene.

At the NCWAC Summit the next summer, some people from the Philadelphia group were in attendance, and so were Writing Across the Curriculum practitioners and teacher-scholar-activist proponents. Michelle Cox and Linda Adler-Kassner, among about 25 others, joined the cacophony about just what it was that we were trying to do. During the summit, the boundaries of community literacy and writing showed more potential—and also became even murkier. Adding to the modalities question, we now discussed what “community” was and how anyone or any group could possibly be outside it. Then, if that was the case, what was the point of belonging or not belonging to a network, consortium, or any other grouping? While Writing Across Communities had been an effective multi-functional initiative at UNM, it was too diffuse to succeed on a multi-institutional level. At the end of the summit, everyone needed a break from trying to define it.

For the next couple of years, I tried to stay involved with the national community literacy and writing conversation. I wrote *Rhetoric of Respect* based on what I’d learned from the SLCC CWC, consulted with new programs in other states, and attempted to remain a part of the developing field while not able to participate in it locally.

Then came Veronica House and the Conference on Community Writing (CCW) in 2015. The first conference, at the University of Colorado Boulder, was thrilling! Though I still felt a bit of an outsider, participating in the conference was delightful, sharing time with old friends like Beth Godbee, Tobi Jacobi, Eliana Schonberg, and Thomas Ferrell (the latter two, like me, worked at the crossroads of writing centers and community writing), and meeting new ones like Erec Smith, Lauren Rosenberg, and Paul Feigenbaum. These new friends led to other connections, including Mark Latta and Glenn Hutchinson (also writing center/community writing people), and a

cyclical joy of knowing people who were passionate about the same kind of work that I was.

At the end of the first CCW, a meeting was held to consider steps towards forming a national organization. There were familiar faces (some who had always been there like Goldblatt and Parks) and new ones: some I'd heard of, some I'd read, all seemingly ready to take this collection of connections to a new level. And, with that came the same debates and arguments about what belonged in community writing and what didn't. Whose voices, what institutions, what scholarship, which practitioners? If everything belonged, then was there a field at all? And, if there wasn't a distinct field, how would the work benefit the academics who were participating in it? But, if the priority was on how it benefitted academics, wasn't that counter to the standards of reciprocity and partnership? Similar to the Santa Fe summit, emotions occasionally got heated, trying to forge the amorphous into a shape that had meaning for multiple distinct stakeholders. Again, we left unsure.

And, then it was over for me. During the next couple of years, I tried to hang on to the fringes of the developing Coalition of Community Writing, but it just wasn't possible. I had taken on a new position, founding a WAC program at the community college. I spun it off into a version of community writing, renaming it Writing Across the College, and providing similar programming to the members of the college that the CWC provided to the Salt Lake community (e.g. writing support, workshops, partnerships). Though I had tried to connect my work to the community writing field, presenting at the CCW and at CCCCs, this single boundary was clear: community writing did not take place within the boundaries of an academic institution. While the type of work and the modalities could vary—research, service-learning, partnerships, visual, oral, digital, textual, woven—the locale for community writing was not on campus. Right when it was becoming a field, I discovered I no longer belonged in it.

However, I continued to watch from loosely defined roles on editorial or advisory boards, as community writing became organized, institutionalized, and disciplinary. It found its shape, under the determined guidance of House, Mathieu, Feigenbaum, Cushman, Jacobi, Jenn Fishman, Seth Myers, Cristina Kirklighter, Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, Laurie Grobman, Melody Bowdon, Smith, Elaine Richardson, Beverly Moss, Iris Ruiz, Godbee, Steven Alvarez, and, as always, Goldblatt and Parks. Many others (whom, sadly, I don't know because I've not been there; I apologize for what I know are many omissions) have been there too, pushing this project along, into what it is now. The Coalition of Community Writing's conferences and resources, working together with the (now) long-standing journals, *Reflections* and the one you are reading now, *Community Literacy Journal*, attest to the successful evolution of disparate (and desperate for connection) beginnings into a powerful and institutionalized group of scholar-activists and community partners.

The dozens of scholars, scholar-activists, teacher-scholar-activists, and community partners that currently serve on the CCW team, Board of Directors, and Advisory Board, the *Reflections* Editorial Team and Board, and the *Community Literacy Journal* Editorial Team and Board reflect the history and the future of this field. Again, famil-

iar faces intermix with new (to me) faces in tightly and loosely connected nodes, and now with a depth that ensures a long and healthy future. The questions of who and what belong in this field—and the resistance towards codification—will likely always be a part of “community writing,” but that tension, to me, is this field’s beating heart. I hope it never stops.

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I did get to talk to Dana M. Walker over Labor Day weekend. As expected, after the initial cries of “It’s you!” and “I can’t believe this!” Dana and I were who and what we used to be with each other. The only difference was that we now had the chance to talk about what we newly shared: community writing.

As I read through the other manuscripts that were sent to me, I felt kinship and admiration alongside nostalgia and loss. I learned about developments in the local Salt Lake community writing scene that I couldn’t know before. I met new, passionate poets and community builders. I finally had the chance to drink in details about the detention/writing center campaigns that I learned about several years ago. And, frankly, I felt vindicated by the critique of the neo-colonial crusading of 826 Valencia. (I shed real tears while reading it.)

Even though I no longer actively participate in this beautiful field, being given the chance to do so for this moment brought me the same joy of spending some time with a dear old friend. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to witnessing what else is to come.

### Note

1. After having learned from Eli through his writing and work with Steve Parks within the Institute of Literacy, Literature, and Culture, I finally met him in 2007 when we invited him to conduct a program review of the SLCC Community Writing Center.

### Author Bio

Tiffany Rousculp was the founding director of the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center. After leaving the CWC a decade ago, Rousculp founded SLCC Writing Across the College, a WAC program built through community writing & literacy praxis. She is the author of the award-winning *Rhetoric of Respect: Recognizing Change in a Community Writing Center*.