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## Tactics and Strategies of Relationship-Based Practice: Reassessing the Institutionalization of Community Literacy

*Paul Feigenbaum*

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This essay revises Paula Mathieu's call for relationship-based tactics of engagement over institution-based strategies. Because engaged scholars operate within institutional contexts, they should utilize both tactics and strategies to make the academic institutional paradigm more conducive to relationship-based engagement. In supporting this long-term goal, community-literacy practitioners can adapt Brian Huot's theory of instructive evaluation to enable collaborative assessment of community partnerships. One possible mechanism for such institutional invention would be the establishment of quasi-strategic, quasi-tactical Community-Literacy Associations.

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Amid the evolving scholarship on community literacy, a debate has emerged about the relative merits and dangers of institutionalization. Linda Flower frames this debate nicely, explaining that one of "the enduring sources of controversy in community engagement ... is this relationship to the problematic power of larger institutions. How does one weigh their tendency to co-opt and control against their potential for wider social change" (27-8)? That is, the specter of institutional colonialism operates uneasily alongside the idea that to work for social transformation, community-literacy scholars must embrace, and seek to reform, the institutions that provide structure for their everyday practices in the classroom and the community. One of the most compelling arguments *against* institutionalization appears in Paula Mathieu's book *Tactics of Hope*, which calls on engaged scholars to pursue small-scale *tactical* projects rather than long-term *strategic* programs. In arguing against the strategic model, Mathieu asks engaged faculty to undergo "a serious re-examination of the work we do as teachers, writers, and scholars" (116). For Mathieu, Flower explains, a proper response to the "institutional self-interest" of the academy is to build a "protective moat around community actions" (28).<sup>1</sup>

Mathieu's rejection of institutionalized engagement illustrates her apprehension that the bottom-up, relationship-centered praxis she pursues with community partners simply does not harmonize with the top-down mechanisms through which universities regulate scholars' access to community spaces. Instead, Mathieu is guided by an "ethical vision" (Long 25) that reflects increasing attentiveness among community-literacy scholars to the implications of the work they perform in and with local communities. Flower, for example, examining various tensions that underlie the motivating "logics" of engagement, observes that the "logic of cultural mission" and the "logic of technical expertise" can reinforce a dichotomy of server and served and define community partners in terms of deficits (103-6). Drawing instead from the logics of prophetic pragmatism and intercultural inquiry, Flower's own "ethic of service" embraces "the difficulties of entering a cultural contact zone" (103) and supports "rigorous openness to inquiry and the consequences of our actions" (111). For her part, Mathieu works from an "active and critical" understanding of *hope*. Building on philosopher Ernst Bloch's utopianism, she explains that 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" (19).

Citing the work of Mathieu, Flower, Eli Goldblatt, Ellen Cushman, and David Coogan, Elenore Long observes that "the ethical visions that inspire community-literacy scholars' interest in local publics vary" (25). However, she adds, "For all the differences in their language, politics, and theoretical orientations, these scholars are drawn to the potential of local publics to dismantle university/'white' privilege and to reconfigure writing instruction outside the academic classroom in terms of mutual learning, linguistic and cultural diversity, and rhetorical action" (26). Echoing Long, I argue that although their ethical visions are connected to the specific material exigencies of local contexts, these scholars all share a commitment to promoting relationship-based engagement practices, which means preventing exploitation of the community to advance academic interests; leveling power disparities, especially as implied by assumptions about who "serves" and who is "served"; and ensuring that projects produce beneficial outcomes for *both* community and university partners. Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope* in particular, as much as any contribution to the discourses of community literacy, inspires (and admonishes) through its exhortation that scholars maintain an unyielding determination to ensure that community needs and objectives are built into the fabric of engagement, and that *relationships* beget *projects*, rather than the other way around.

Roused by the moral force of her argument, I share Mathieu's concerns about the academy's poor track record for supporting community-based partnerships that are both egalitarian in process and reciprocal in outcome, and I agree that engaged scholars should continually re-examine

their work in local communities. Yet, in spite of my great esteem for her scholarship, I question the binary logic implicit in Mathieu's framework of strategies and tactics, according to which scholars can either collaborate with community partners on small projects that emerge organically from the give-and-take of their relationship, *or* they can pursue institutionalized, programmatic sustainability that invariably marginalizes community interests. Drawing from Xin Liu Gale and Kirk Branch, I contend that Mathieu's preference for tactics overlooks important ways in which institutional self-interest constrains our work in the community, even when we disassociate ourselves from those aims. Moreover, this either-or scenario leaves little room for community literacy to realize the "potential for wider social change" addressed by Flower. I argue instead that the academic paradigm is not fundamentally disruptive to relationship-based practice; the problem is that the cultivation and continuation of such practice depends almost exclusively on individual scholars' personal commitments to an ethical vision, rather than being a communal responsibility of all partners. Unfortunately, conceiving of relationship-based practice as divorced from strategies actually reinforces this prevailing feature of the institutional paradigm.

Therefore, building on Jeffrey Grabill's understanding of institutions as rhetorical, changeable entities, as well as Louise Wetherbee Phelps's concept of *institutional invention*, I argue that we should strive not for the utopian avoidance of institutional constraints but for the incorporation of relationship-centered practice into the academic paradigm itself. Instead of merely protecting the community from the institution, engaged scholars should work to make the institution more welcoming of the ethical visions that inspire their work. In other words, the tactics scholars use to promote relationship-based practice should ultimately have strategic consequences. Thus, in seeking to put shorter-term aims in conversation with what might be possible over the long haul, I exhort engaged scholars to pursue a path in which, as Michel de Certeau suggests can happen, "the strategy is transformed into tactics" (37). Such a transformation, I suggest, would bring us closer to enacting Ernest Boyer's vision of the New American College, which, "as a connected institution, would be committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition" (A48). Obviously, institutional reform writ large is a tall order, and I accept the arguments of Grabill and Phelps, who believe that scholars must strive for reform in local institutional contexts; hence, my more humble focus here is institutional change writ small. Specifically, I propose that community-literacy practitioners, working in collaboration with local partners, develop institutional mechanisms to support collective responsibility for sustaining relationship-based praxis. Toward that end, I urge partners to adapt Brian Huot's dialogic vision of *instructive*

*evaluation*, in which students participate actively in writing assessment, to enable community agency in the devising, carrying out, and ongoing revision of the work partners undertake together. I conclude by theorizing the establishment of quasi-tactical, quasi-strategic *Community-Literacy Associations* as a preliminary means for making such formative assessment possible.

## **The Binary of Institution-Centered Strategies and Relationship-Centered Tactics**

A hallmark of much community-based academic work has been its pursuit of institutionalization, as evidenced by such titles as *Creating a New Kind of University: Institutionalizing Community-University Engagement* (Eds. Percy et al) and *Make It Last Forever: The Institutionalization of Service Learning in America* (Kramer). Paula Mathieu points out that frequently “scholarship related to service learning equates institutionalization with success” (96). But rather than enabling productive outcomes for both university and community partners, Mathieu argues that institutionalization, which she associates with a *strategic* orientation to the community, frequently fosters exploitation. Following de Certeau, Mathieu explains that strategies are... calculated actions that emanate from and depend upon “proper” (as in propertied) spaces, like corporations, state agencies, and educational institutions, and relate to others via this proper space.... The goal of a strategy is to create a stable, spatial nexus that allows for the definition of practices and knowledge that minimize temporal uncertainty. Strategic thinking accounts for and relies on measurability and rationality. (16)

Strategies, then, engender sustainable practices and bodies of knowledge within institutional spaces; as de Certeau puts it, they reflect a “*triumph of place over time*” (36, emphasis in original). Higher education itself, Mathieu notes, is a propertied space “organized by strategies: academic calendars, disciplinary rules and methods of assessment, and organization along strategic units, such as colleges, departments, and institutes” (16). For Mathieu, these strategic facets of academic life can undermine the development of strong community partnerships.

First, the values, needs, and metrics relevant to academic spaces often correspond poorly with those of community partners. As she explains, “The rhythms of the university do not necessarily harmonize with the rhythms and exigencies of community groups” (99), and even the frequently celebrated goal of sustainability can “create a generic set of needs and priorities that make it difficult to respond to communities’ needs and ideas” (98). A second problem concerns the hierarchy of research, teaching, and service within the academic paradigm, which provokes some scholars to pursue “research or teaching projects that serve to enhance their academic

profile but may not serve the community in whose names they work” (121). She supports this claim by narrating a series of “academic horror stories” in which the community at best gains nothing from its involvement with a university, and at worst is “burned” by it (100-6; 122-5). Third, Mathieu argues that “the contemporary push toward institutionalized programs of service learning can be dated to the selfish decade of the 1980s and was born, in part, from public relations” (95); hence, corporate and elite interests strongly undergird the drive toward “creating long-term, top-down, institutionalized service-learning programs” (96). According to Mathieu, strategic engagement is associated not only with university control but also with the corporate takeover of higher education.

Because of the dangers of strategies, Mathieu proposes that scholars turn instead to *tactics*, which are “available when we do not control the space” (16). As she explains, “If one applies tactical logic to community-based university work, one seeks not stability but clever uses of time” (17). Crucially, whereas strategic programs “frequently originate inside the university first and then seek out community sites of service” (90), so that community expertise and goals are fit (snugly or not) into a university-dominated scheme, tactical engagement emerges from existing community-university relationships built on mutual trust. Moreover, while a strategic approach to engagement “operates from a negative space, in that it seeks to solve a problem, ameliorate a deficit, or fix an injustice” (50), tactics focus on the development and execution of concrete *projects*. A problem orientation, she argues, “runs the risk of leaving participants overwhelmed, cynical, and feeling weak” (50). Tactical projects, however, display an awareness of larger structural problems and seek some active response to them, but in conjunction with a realistic assessment of their limited capacity to do so. Projects “have value in themselves but hope for intangible changes—in students, in community members, in the university itself. The key to that hope, however, is an acknowledgment of the radical insufficiency of any single project” (114). The hope Mathieu associates with tactics, then, reflects a conviction that, over time, the input of creative collaborative energy and the output of interesting projects will lead to change on a larger scale.

Mathieu postulates a “spectrum” of engagement practices that range “from strategic—focused on institutionalization and sustainability—to tactical—prioritizing bottom-up, time-contingent, flexible development of projects” (113). This “strategic-tactical binary,” she claims, “serves a more rhetorical purpose rather than a descriptive one; approaches to doing neighborhood projects range from larger top-down, mandatory, general service programs to extremely ad hoc unfunded labors of love that last for a short time and then disappear” (113). Though this formulation ostensibly leaves room for institutionalization that occurs “from the bottom-up, project by project, relationship by relationship” (114), Mathieu’s deep skepticism

about strategies indicates that she holds little confidence in such scenarios playing out. Thus, conceptually, Mathieu's framework of strategies and tactics functions less as a spectrum than as a dyadic scale heavily weighted at one end.

Generally speaking, Mathieu makes a persuasive case that engagement too often imposes university time frames and metrics on community partners, and that even as "the scholarship on service has gotten more critical and self-reflexive, local communities and their evaluation of the work remain secondary, appearing primarily in peripheral ways in the scholarship and evaluations of service-learning programs" (94). Nevertheless, I argue that these ongoing problems do not result inherently from a strategic orientation; just as importantly, I argue that a turn to tactics will not negate these problems. That is, according to the logic of Mathieu's spectrum, strategies represent the embrace of institutionalization, while tactics represent the artful and conscious dodging of such entanglements in favor of relationship-centered praxis. However, although drawing from de Certeau, the spectrum misleadingly implies an ontological status for tactics that contradicts de Certeau's formulation of the terms. As he explains, the "space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it an.organized by the law of a foreign power" (37). Tactics, being "an art of the weak," always occur within strategic spaces, and so their use is delimited via the constraints imposed by strategic boundaries; the bottom from which tactical projects build up is a strategic bottom. Thus, I contend that tactics, lacking a place of their own, cannot offer scholars an autonomous location exempt from the long arm of the institution, and in the following section, I will examine the implications of this proposition.

## **The Institutional Paradigm's Impact on Community Literacy**

In rejecting the division of tactics and strategies on a spectrum of engagement, I argue that community-literacy scholars cannot ignore the institutional constraints that both enable and disable their pedagogic, civic, and research goals, even when these goals conflict with those of the institution. For, as Xin Liu Gale explains, "no matter how radical a theory and a pedagogy a teacher espouses, he or she cannot alter the fact that it is the institution's acknowledgement of the teacher's knowledge as legitimate that gives the teacher the authority of expertise" (48). Similarly, Kirk Branch argues that scholars "must recognize that what we do is shaped fundamentally by the institutions and discourses within which we teach, that we live, not in some future world, but in the present, with everyone else" (190). Within classrooms, then, the teaching event is made possible by the institutional structure that bestows authority on the teacher, and any

pedagogical practice, even one that critiques the institution, relies on the continued existence of that institution. Extending Gale's and Branch's points beyond the classroom, I argue that university-community partnerships also cannot exist absent the academic institutional structure. Our authority to act as scholars and teachers in community collaborations is bestowed by the institution; forsaking its affiliation would also mean forsaking our capacity to participate as representatives of academia—including the positive aspects of what this entails. When we enter the community, we bear the university's imprimatur, even when we participate in the "ad hoc unfunded labors of love" that Mathieu affiliates with tactics.

While this conclusion may seem pessimistic, especially among grassroots scholar-activists resistant to colonialist institutional structures, I argue that the institutional paradigm is neither universally nor invariably toxic to relationship-based praxis. For example, there is nothing inherently unethical in scholars using community literacy as a basis for their own institutional advancement—as Mathieu herself has done—even when what they publish does not directly benefit local partners. Not only are these publications inevitable, but in contributing to the discourses of engagement, such research can produce positive consequences that *will*, over the long term, benefit community partners in various locations. Without *Tactics of Hope*, for instance, I might not appreciate the implications of whether relationships precede projects or vice versa. On the contrary, a "utopian" tactical engagement unconstrained by the paradigm's influence might weaken the drive to build up this knowledge base, ironically truncating opportunities for collective learning. As de Certeau explains, when a group operates by way of tactics, "What it wins it cannot keep" (37). Ultimately, the problem is not with research per se, but with research that, wittingly or otherwise, exploits community partners or claims to promote reciprocity but fails to produce tangible community benefits.

The institutional paradigm, then, does not necessarily impede conscientious engagement. Yet, the frequency of academic horror stories cited by Mathieu demonstrates that insufficient institutional mechanisms exist for ensuring that scholars enter community spaces prepared to develop, and sustain, a civic commitment to community expertise, goals, and benefits. Numerous scholars have argued that this problem reflects limitations in institutional procedures for evaluating community-based research. While Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are charged with "protecting the welfare, rights, and dignity of those individuals participating in institutionally sanctioned research" (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood 120), they tend to "conceptualize [scholars] as individually accountable for ethical practice" (Elwood 337), rather than enabling research participants to collaborate actively in judging the merits and risks of proposed studies. Therefore, responsibility for enacting an ethical vision for research is placed



almost entirely on the scholar. This responsibility gap also implies that once a scholar has obtained “ethical clearance” (Askins 356), she has fulfilled her moral obligation to the community. However, completing the institutional review process does not remove moral considerations from a research protocol, such as when ethnographers have “bad news” to report (Newkirk), i.e. “information that has the potential to hurt or embarrass those who have participated in the research” (Williams 46). While many community-literacy scholars obviously take such considerations seriously, the system nevertheless lacks incentives for pursuing relationship-based practice that extends beyond the prevention of harm, such as the rhetorical timeliness advocated by Mathieu or the attention to cultural difference in Flower’s logic of intercultural inquiry.

This absence of an institutional imperative toward relationship-based practice can be seen clearly in the tensions over reciprocity, which has become an increasingly highlighted concern among community-based scholars, particularly how research serves (or fails to serve) community interests. Even when scholars seek to place reciprocity at the center of their work, they face considerable challenges. Ellen Cushman, for example, whose praxis of *activist research* demands the formulation of socially relevant research goals, describes her considerable efforts to ensure reciprocity when studying the literacy practices of minority women in an urban community (*Struggle*). Among other actions, Cushman developed dialogic methods of inquiry and data collection, offered support in her participants’ encounters with institutional gatekeepers, and even shared book proceeds. Yet, although Cushman’s account illustrates her commitment to relationship-centered research, her attempts to promote reciprocity also clearly faced important institutional constraints. First, and key to my point about the paradigm’s responsibility gap, is that Cushman’s efforts emerged from her individual commitment to activist research. She faced no institutional obligation, beyond protecting the confidentiality and safety of her subjects, for doing so. For instance, although she notes that several of the women requested a full or partial stake in the royalties, it was her choice whether to comply.

Furthermore, this scenario raises difficult questions about assessment. First, how much must the community benefit to establish that reciprocity has occurred? And second, who gets to answer the first question? Indeed, regarding this first question, and despite her emphasis on reciprocity, Cushman has been criticized by some for enacting insufficiently mutual benefits. In particular, Laurie Alkidas argues that while Cushman garnered a doctorate and multiple publications from her research, the women procured (at best) modest rewards such as drivers’ licenses; consequently, Alkidas accuses Cushman of promoting a “dominatory” form of “social activism” (105). Cushman’s response to Alkidas stresses that within the contexts of the women’s lives, obtaining a driver’s license constitutes a

significant expansion of one's economic and professional possibilities, the importance of which can only be dismissed according to constricted academic values about the nature of social change. And certainly, in trying to answer the first question above, we must heed Cushman's point that community benefits are inextricably tied to their discursive and material locations, making benefits hard to compare across differing contexts of assessment. Yet, when a scholar acquires prestige and career advancement from such work, shouldn't community partners experience *parallel* levels of social mobility, including the direct procurement of more lucrative jobs? How many community-based projects manage to achieve this parallelism? In most cases, the scales of reciprocity still favor the academy in a lopsided manner, but this unevenness is not the fault of individual scholars; it simply reflects the fact that academic institutions have established a (relatively) straightforward process for career advancement that scholars know they must follow. On the contrary, the potential benefits for community partners may look very different from location to location, and are rarely tied so concretely to tangible professional outcomes.

Concerning the second question about who gets to judge whether reciprocity has been established, I am struck by how the paradigm defines the very terms of the Cushman-Alkidas debate, which addresses university-initiated research and plays out within an academic forum (namely, CCC). In building their arguments, both scholars end up speaking for the participants in Cushman's study, whose disembodied voices hang over the debate, but never intervene directly in it. I do not make this point to criticize either Cushman or Alkidas, who must respect the confidentiality agreements of the IRB.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I seek to emphasize how profoundly the institution structures our capacity to promote reciprocity in community-based scholarship, even shaping how we argue about the concept of reciprocity itself; to the extent that we have imbibed the institution's discursive practices, we have ourselves been institutionalized. Accordingly, Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi observe that when scholars follow the classic script of

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“extending an invitation for [research participants] to accept a role we have created for them in a study we have shaped” (398), they create relationships that are *collaborative* without being truly *reciprocal*. In words that echo the arguments of Gale and Branch above, Powell and Takayoshi claim that, “No matter how we attempt to flatten our relationships with our participants, we must also be rigorously aware of the hierarchies that can exist, at least in our participants’ minds if not our own, and the implications of those hierarchies on the interpretations of our data and the appropriateness of our actions” (417). To promote a more “authentic reciprocity,” they contend, “research participants should be allowed to construct roles for themselves and us in the same way we construct roles for them” (398).

I argue below that to facilitate this mutual role construction, engaged scholars must respond more actively to the influences of the academic paradigm, rather than conceding its strategic power to set the terms of their work. Hence, while Mathieu writes that when working in the community, thinking “strategically ... is not an option, because the dynamic spaces where we work should not be considered strategic extensions of academic institutions” (17), I contend that the opposite is true; in many ways, the institution extends strategically into those dynamic spaces whether we like it or not.<sup>3</sup> The objective should be not to avoid the institution but to make it more conducive to the ethical visions that guide us. In making this argument, I build on the work of Stephen Parks, who asserts that under the right conditions, top-down engagement practices might *preserve* a university’s commitment to the interests of community partners, a conclusion that seems to directly contradict Mathieu. “For many ‘failed’ university/community projects,” he argues, “the individual (read ‘tactical’) nature of the work allows the department or university to be unaffected” (517). For Parks, a lack of institutional support can also mean a lack of institutional accountability; that is, academic horror stories are actually more likely to have *tactical* origins. Instead, he continues, “the ‘hope’ of such community-based work can be realized only by the creation of *strategic* university spaces that bring with them a collective ethical and institutional commitment to the numerous literacy populations that make up a neighborhood, city, or state” (517, emphasis mine).

I agree with Parks that strategies must be part of enhancing academic responsibility to local communities; tactics alone will not generate institutional reform. However, considering Mathieu’s stories of strategic engagement gone wrong, I disagree that strategies necessarily create any greater “collective ethical and institutional commitment” than tactics. Furthermore, in spite of their apparently contradictory outlooks, Mathieu and Parks agree much more than they disagree. Both scholars are anxious about the potentially corrosive effects of larger institutions on smaller ones, as well as on the individuals who represent these institutions.

Both emphasize the challenges—institutional, social, cultural, discursive, political—that can test a scholar’s desire for civic responsibility. Both affirm their commitment to the community’s goals and expertise regardless of such obstacles. And, finally, both recognize the importance of maintaining pragmatic flexibility in the face of shifting contingencies. Thus, the key lesson that emerges from comparing the work of Mathieu and Parks is not a preference for strategies over tactics, or vice versa, but the fact that relationship-based practice can be pursued within community-literacy projects and programs of various sizes, scopes, and time frames. At the same time, an implicit contradiction underlies this conclusion, in that responsibility for centering practices around healthy relationships tends to fall on one or two individuals (almost invariably from the university), rather than being shared communally by all members of that relationship.

For engaged scholars who want to resolve this contradiction, the task ahead is to develop institutional mechanisms that actively support a redistribution of these responsibilities, i.e. that close the paradigm’s responsibility gap. Of course, such transformation throughout higher education represents a giant undertaking that surpasses the scope of this essay, and in the following section, I aim for more modest goals of local institutional reform. In particular, drawing from the work of Brian Huot, I focus on possibilities for engaged rhetoric and composition scholars, who have in many ways driven the academic turn toward engagement (Adler-Kassner et al; Deans), to develop formative and collective means for assessing their work within local community contexts. Assuming local responsibility for assessment through means that themselves reflect relationship-based praxis might, I argue, help create a basis for broader institutional changes and reinforce rhetoric and composition’s historical role as an advocate and innovator of community-based scholarship.

## **Toward a More Conscientious Paradigm**

What are the prospects for enacting institutional change? In seeking answers to this question, I heed compelling arguments about the challenges to reform, such as Richard Miller’s book *As if Learning Mattered*, which uses historical examples to emphasize the (at times exceedingly) slow pace of change. Miller contends that as universities become increasingly bureaucratic, scholars must retain a sober humility about overcoming institutional inertia. Also, if we think of the paradigm in the abstract, as a pervasive, systemic feature of higher education, then the idea of reform becomes almost inconceivable. But taking my cue from Jeffrey Grabill, I argue that our daily experiences of institutions do not occur at this abstract level; we experience them as local, site-specific entities. Grabill explains that an institution is “a well-established, rhetorically constructed

design, a bureaucratic and organizational site where people live and work and where they interact with others inside and outside the institution” (127). And because institutions are written, Grabill suggests, they “can be rewritten” (8). I draw similar inspiration from Louise Wetherbee Phelps, who asks, “To what extent might academic leaders or collectives be thought of as ‘composing’ or ‘revising’ an institution in response to an exigence, in situations defined as rhetorical by their uncertainty, indeterminacy, probable reasoning, and conflicts of value?” (67). Phelps argues that, through this process of *institutional invention*, “local institutions, or units and domains within them ... may contribute to the work of reforming higher education itself as a system, an institution in the more abstract sense” (68). Following

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Grabill and Phelps, I propose that we need not conceive of institutional reform as changing the paradigm in the abstract. Rather, we need to work for change at the level of local institutions. Although still daunting, these local change efforts are more feasible, and they offer reason to believe that institutions *can* be changed for the better. This perspective also (somewhat ironically) seems strikingly conversant with Mathieu’s conception of tactics, especially their rhetorical timeliness and flexibility.

Therefore, conceiving of institutions as rhetorically written, changeable entities, offers a way to revise Mathieu’s call for tactical adaptability as a radically insufficient means for promoting the institutionalization of relationship-centered community literacy.

As a starting point, I urge community-literacy scholars to develop procedures for more formative, and collaborative, evaluation of partnerships and projects. Currently, as Mathieu observes, assessment metrics tend to focus on end-products such as “student performance and satisfaction” (16-17). Indeed, most institutions participating in Carnegie’s Engagement Classification System focus on recording outcomes (Driscoll), and this summative emphasis works against situational malleability. Instead, community-literacy partners can adapt the methods of *instructional evaluation*, as articulated by Brian Huot in regard to the assessment of

writing. Huot argues that, when practiced thoughtfully and dialogically, assessment can become a “process of inquiry” (149) rather than what Ann Feldman refers to as “levying a tax” on learning (150). The characteristics Huot associates with instructive evaluation: “Site-Based,” “Locally-Controlled,” “Context-Sensitive,” “Rhetorically-Based,” and “Accessible” (105), correspond well with Mathieu’s tactical engagement practices. Hence, reframed for community literacy, Huot’s ideas could create opportunities for project flexibility and relationship self-renewal as partners learn from one another and from their situational exigencies.

Moreover, Huot argues that being proactive about assessment, as opposed to having its mandates and metrics imposed externally, can empower teachers and provide a basis for local institutional reform. Making assessment a process for inquiry would change “not only the ways in which writing assessment is conducted but the culture surrounding assessment, the role of assessors and the products of our assessments, providing the possibility for real change in the ways we think about writing assessment and the positive role assessment can play in the teaching of writing and the administration of writing programs” (149-50). As Huot notes, “Assessments are powerful cultural markers, whose influence ranges far past the limited purposes for which they might originally be intended”; they can “have much power over the ways we do our jobs” and “how we and others will come to judge us” (176). Assessment, then, has strategic implications for how writing is taught, and similarly, within the discourses of community literacy, assessment can become a means for strategic intervention into how the institution provides structure for our work.

The challenge becomes translating Huot’s ideas into local assessment practices for community-literacy partnerships. In order to initiate further discourse about the advantages and disadvantages of institutionalized formative assessment, I propose establishing what I am provisionally calling Community-Literacy Associations (CLAs) as a mediating force between the conscientious practices promoted by scholars like Mathieu and Parks, and the institutional procedures that regulate scholars’ entry into community spaces. CLAs would facilitate the sharing of responsibility for relationship-based practice, bringing community-literacy scholars and their partners together to conduct ongoing and cooperative assessments of relationships and the projects they generate. The primary contribution of CLAs, I envision, would be to enable more consistent and substantive dialogue between partners about what they want to accomplish together, what benefits they expect to procure from such work, and how to address rhetorical exigencies as they arise—i.e., to construct each other’s roles, rather than having these roles assumed by default according to university parameters. Crucially, this dialogue would work in two directions, both helping to ensure that in the short term, the best practices of community

literacy are supported within ongoing relationships, but also in the long term incorporating such practices into the paradigm itself. Hence, CLAs would have tactical *and* strategic aims.

One aspect of this two-way process might involve making IRB procedures more conducive to relationship-centered research. Because IRBs will remain a part of the strategic apparatus of community-university relations going forward, a productive way to negotiate its influence would be to assume greater community agency, rather than condescendingly (Eikelend) deciding *for* community partners how they might be victimized and how to protect them from such exploitation. Activities might include conducting periodic workshops in which IRB members discuss their standards for determining whether proposed studies have sufficiently accounted for the welfare of participants. Through such forums, CLAs could help demystify various aspects of the IRB process, as multiple scholars advocate (Boser; Brydon-Miller and Greenwood; Elwood; Newkirk). Sarah Elwood, for example, writing from the perspective of a participatory action researcher, observes that “directly highlighting the broader context and potential silences of consent forms is one way of using these documents to build interaction and connection, and encourage participants to voice concerns that may otherwise go unrecognized” (336). Thus, clarifying and discussing the intent, applications, and consequences of IRB-mandated procedures such as consent forms could have immediate tactical benefits for ongoing partnerships. In turn, however, Elwood argues that in order to reform institutional structures, researchers must “actively and constructively engage them” over time. Accordingly, bringing IRB members into greater contact with community partners might gradually produce strategic transformations by encouraging greater “flexibility in rules, codes, and procedures, to accommodate a more diverse range of research topics and approaches” (336).<sup>4</sup>

Of course, important logistical issues attend the putting together and sustaining of CLAs, particularly in terms of participation, resources, and institutional positioning within the university’s bureaucratic structure. Ideally, CLAs would emerge from existing partnerships and be comprised of an equal number of university and community members; such a process of development would itself reflect a form of relationship-based practice. But other relevant questions include: How regularly would they meet? What amount of funding would CLAs require, and who would provide this funding? Should they acquire official capacity to review community-literacy projects? That is, when they deem that a planned project has insufficiently articulated its mechanisms for supporting relationship-based practice, should CLAs hold the power to *require* revisions? I do not envision CLAs operating uniformly everywhere, and thus answers to these questions will look different depending on circumstances specific to local

contexts. Clearly, however, care must be taken to prevent CLAs from simply becoming another means for the institution to co-opt community-based work—some kind of IRB-lite—and as a reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay pointed out, a strategic mandate to regulate projects, even if acquired in the ostensible pursuit of relationship-based practice, could produce homogenized engagement that would root tactical flexibility out of the process, thus subverting the intent of CLAs. Considering the uniqueness of each rhetorical and material situation, I am not certain that such scenarios would inevitably ensue in all locations. Nonetheless, accepting the validity of the concern, I find myself leaning toward the idea that CLAs would operate more effectively as allies and sponsors of conscientious practice than as its institutional overseers.<sup>5</sup>

I also predict, however, that as engagement becomes more common throughout the academy, there will be increasingly vociferous calls for evaluation and regulation by “experts” outside the fields in which engagement actually occurs. Such calls could grow out of the standardization movement, which, as predicted by Linda Adler-Kassner in *The Activist WPA*, might increasingly impact higher education as it has profoundly affected public K-12 education. Additionally, if we recall that IRBs arose from legislators’ rising sense of distrust that scientists would pursue human research in ethical ways (Anderson), we can imagine a similar push if lawmakers come to doubt the capacity or willingness of scholars to pursue engagement responsibly. I argue, therefore, that community-literacy scholars should proactively develop formative, inquiry-based methods of assessment before outside forces impose far less productive procedures on them. CLAs are one possible way to begin this process, and even if their ability to promote relationship-based practice emanates more from the power of persuasion than from a formal mandate, they might still advantageously position community-literacy scholars and their partners to actively shape the assessment, and in many ways, the future of engaged scholarship.

Considering this future, and recalling Mathieu’s definition of hope, I want to reflect briefly on possible paths between our “present condition” and a “future anticipated” (19). Broadly speaking, I share Amy Rupiper Taggart’s aspiration that engagement not remain a “scrappy margin-dweller” (79) in the academy, but move toward the heart of our collective mission. I am likewise inspired by the visions of Ernest Boyer and Ira Harkavy, who believe that institutions of higher education, when their resources are tapped in the right ways, offer tremendous potential to create a more just world. I operate from the hope that building Mathieu’s call for re-examination into our engagement practices as ongoing, collaborative processes of inquiry would support this fuller blossoming of locally engaged writing programs, globally engaged universities, and the collaborative pursuit of



social change with community partners. Yet I am also cognizant of Kirk Branch's perspective that formal institutions of education are "morally ambiguous places, rife with multiple and contradictory impulses," and that since engaged scholars represent these places, "we must recognize the ambiguity inherent in our own actions" (190). Indeed, I suspect that most academic horror stories result not from malicious intent but from individual commitments succumbing to this institutional ambiguity.

Unfortunately, these harmful experiences have considerable implications for the future of community literacy; as Mathieu points out, even "isolated cases of campus community work gone wrong cast long shadows for everyone involved in university-community partnerships" (106). Thus, conscientious scholars who remain hopeful that higher education can function effectively as an agent for social change have little choice but to continue fighting the ambiguities of the paradigm. At present, these scholars remain the last and best lines of defense against academic horror stories, and they must continue to act as leaders in their various institutional roles: as teachers ensuring that projects enhance students' writing *and* their civic responsibility, as editors of community presses cultivating the mutual production of knowledge, as faculty insisting on the value of community literacy in departmental and university committees, and as sentries preventing the paradigm's responsibility gap from overwhelming civic intentions. Over the long run, however, I argue that the more actively our community partners participate in this struggle, the more successful all of us will be at replacing the ambiguities of the paradigm with a harmony of ethical visions and institutional prerogatives. I submit the idea of Community-Literacy Associations toward this anticipated future in which the best practices of engaged scholarship have also become institutionally habituated practices that are communally supported and sustained.

## Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the editors and reviewers from *CLJ* for their insightful feedback on a previous draft of this essay. Special thanks as well to Kimberly Harrison, Steven Blevins, and Andrew Strycharski for their recommendations and support.

2. Were I pointing fingers, I would obviously have to direct another one at myself as I contribute my own perspective to this debate within another academic forum.

3. Although this essay is focused primarily on the impact of *academic* institutional structures on community literacy, scholars must also negotiate the constraints of their community partners' "home" institutions. In some cases, the implications of community institutional paradigms can be equal to, if not greater than, their academic counterparts. For example, scholars

who work with incarcerated citizens must accept the possibility that, as Stephen John Hartnett explains, prisons or jails will use this work “to enjoy good public relations or fulfill their need for programming” (in Yaegar 561), thus (however modestly) helping to sustain a grossly unjust system. This does not mean that scholars who want to reform or even abolish the prison-industrial complex should refrain from these collaborations. However, they must remain cognizant that such work, which may be tactical in many respects (Carter), nevertheless occurs within strategic frameworks, and that these “foreign powers” (de Certeau 37) possess institutional prerogatives that also influence the work of community literacy. In turn, while concerns about exploitation usually center on how university representatives might leverage community work in ways that harm community partners, the above example illustrates that *community* institutions can also use partnerships with *universities* to advance their own self-interests in ways that university representatives may not always welcome.

4. In this way, CLAs would contribute to the work of developing review procedures more amenable to relationship-centered research. Mary Brydon-Miller and Davydd Greenwood describe the successes of participatory action researchers working with local IRB members on such reforms at multiple institutions.

5. For similar reasons, I do not suggest that all community-literacy partnerships would necessarily benefit from the support of CLAs. In some cases, if partners have established long-running relationships in regard to which they already carry out regular assessments, they may have little need for consultation with CLAs, which should be available to all but imposed on none. In other cases, either university or community partners, or both, might feel they are too busy to confer with CLAs. However, I fear that in situations where partners lack sufficient time to periodically evaluate the progress of their collaborative work, relationship-based practice may not be feasible. Moreover, in such circumstances, conditions may be ripe for academic horror stories.

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