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W.02 The Political Turn: Writing Democracy for the 21st Century

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W.2 The Political Turn: Writing Democracy for the 21st Century

Reviewed by Brian Hendrickson

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The morning of the CCCC pre-convention workshops feels a lot like the beginning of a marathon. The atmosphere is full of both excitement and apprehension as attendees slowly fill the seats around each table—a few seasoned veterans casual in their conversation and demeanor, as if the morning were just like any other, whereas others appear to be only half present, staring far off into space as if trying to focus on imagining what it will feel like to finally cross the finish line and not what it will take to get there. I arrived at this year’s **“The Political Turn: Writing Democracy for the 21st Century”** workshop with a mixture of both excitement and apprehension—excitement because I was sold on the idea of a national network through which local campus-community civic engagement projects could share resources and promote and advocate for one another, but apprehension because without a centrally funded organizing entity, such a project would require a level of coordination to which few if any scholars have the time, energy, or other resources to commit.

Background

At last year’s half-day workshop, **“Writing Democracy 2012: Envisioning a Federal Writers’ Project for the 21st Century,”** I was honored to speak about the work we were doing at the University of New Mexico to establish grassroots campus-community literacy partnerships in order to assign greater value in the academy to our students’ own literacies. My remarks were infused with a sense of the tragicomic for which one must acquire a taste when engaged in projects aimed at radical institutional transformation. Only two years into my graduate study in rhet-comp, I was developing then a certain stoicism regarding our field’s more radically democratic projects in this era of increasingly neoliberal agendas at institutions of higher education across the US, and I argued that any kind of viable 21st century FWP would have to be tactical, fluid, and segmented enough to survive in so harsh a climate. That workshop was inspiring in the sense that everyone there was hungry for something—something we thought our students, our scholarship, and our country desperately needed as much now as when FDR established the FWP in 1935. But four hours just wasn’t enough time for that hunger to coalesce into a shared vision for how we might move forward with FWP 2.0.

Flash forward a year to the full-day “The Political Turn: Writing Democracy for the 21st Century” workshop, and co-chairs Shannon Carter (Texas A&M-Commerce) and Deborah Mutnick (Long Island University) have kept that conversation going, enlisting Steve Parks (Syracuse University), a speaker at last year’s workshop, as a third co-chair, and bringing with him the community-organizing skills necessary to get a room full of academics to move beyond debating semantics to charting a pragmatic course of action. I don’t mean to deny the value of an exercise like defining “democracy” but to recognize the value of admitting that such a task is never finished, so anyone—let alone any group—interested in “writing democracy” better be willing to make it up as they go along. To do so, Parks facilitated much of the workshop around exercises in storytelling.

“This I Believe”

Accompanied by a workbook adapted by Parks from the works of Marshall Ganz, the storytelling exercises led workshop participants through three storytelling exercises. The first followed immediately after the day’s introductions, when we were assigned to groups and asked to come up with a “story of self” that answered the question, “Why are you called to work for democratic rights?” In constructing our stories, we were prompted to identify a challenge we faced, a choice we made, and an outcome that influenced us, and we were encouraged to make our stories as narrative and descriptive as possible. After sharing our stories with a partner and offering one another constructive feedback, we picked the best story from our small groups to share with the entire workshop. Our small group’s best story came from Carla Maroudas, who related how her former military career impressed upon her the importance of upholding the constitution in her current teaching career, where through promoting literacy she helps students access justice, and as an example, Carla shared a story about helping a student petition a judge on behalf of her undocumented husband. The exercise functioned as an icebreaker and succeeded in personalizing the workshop experience, reminding everyone that we had all committed to spend the day together for reasons both very personal and political.

“Democracy and the Open Hand / Closed Fist”

After sharing our own stories, Shannon Carter screened a **brief documentary** she produced with her students at Texas A&M-Commerce as part of the **Remixing Rural Texas** digital humanities project. The documentary told the story of featured workshop speakers John Carlos, Joe Tave, and Belford Page regarding their roles in the Civil Rights movement locally and, in the case of John Carlos, nationally. John Carlos is best known for his actions at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, where after winning bronze in the 200 meters, he and gold medalist Tommie Smith stepped to the podium and raised black-gloved fists in solidarity with the Black Power movement. Carlos’ story was fortuitous in ways I doubt Carter and her co-chairs had planned. In fact, his was a story portrayed as a series of fortuitous moments conditioned more on conscience than calculation. If there was a moral, it was that just by committing yourself to an ideal, you have charted a course that will lead you in the right direction. But John Carlos didn’t make it sound easy or inevitable. In fact, he expressed concern that he didn’t see the next person in line to pass the baton to.

“Theories of Democratic Writing”

What it might mean to take that baton was a matter taken up by Deborah Mutnick and Kurt Spellmeyer (Rutgers University). Opening with MLK’s remark that “an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring,” Mutnick reminded the audience that pluralism, diversity, and inclusiveness are insufficient without fundamental economic change, and any reincarnation of the Federal Writers’ Project will need to work toward just as radical a restructuring by structuring itself as what economist Rick Wolf calls worker self-directed enterprise. Mutnick imagined that an FWP 2.0 might consist of collectives of self-publishing writers documenting neoliberal advances while also telling stories of collective acts of resistance, and these collectives might in turn form freedom schools like the ones launched by the Council of Federated Organizations as part of the Freedom Summer initiative of 1964.

Kurt Spellmeyer emphasized the contemporary possibilities of such a reconstituted vision by arguing that what Barbara and John Erenreich identified in the 1970s as the rising Professional Managerial Class is now on the wane. This is especially the case in academia, Spellmeyer noted, where the disappearance of tenure and rising student debt is eroding the stratification that once allowed tenure-track faculty to remain aloof from their contingent peers, and that once gave students the impression that a college education

was their ticket to upward mobility. According to Spellmeyer, that stratification worked hand in hand with Clifford Geertz's notion of the theater state—i.e. the hegemonic practice of saturating all life activity in the bootstrap illusion—to transform colleges and universities into devices for inculcating several generations of Americans into identifying vertically rather than horizontally in terms of SES. Spellmeyer argued that this erosion could lead to a proletarianization of the intelligentsia, so long as academics refused to perpetuate the illusion of the theater state, and he seemed to imply that the Writing Democracy project might serve as a means to that end, that through their participation faculty might help students become more cognizant of the difference between the image of life that they have been sold and the reality they will face if they do not take action to change the current course of events. The most pernicious form of ideological deceit, claimed Spellmeyer, is the withholding of information, so informing our students is a highly political act.

“Democratic Struggle: Writing On Line, Off Campus, and In the Streets”

After lunch, Carmen Kynard (St. John's University) picked off where Kurt Spellmeyer left off by complicating exactly how well equipped compositionists really are to speak truth to power, housed as they are in institutions promoting what she called “epidermic diversity.” Kynard accused the social turn in composition studies of complicity in promoting “epidermic diversity” as a 21st century auction block on which our institutions commodify students of color. By trading in this discourse, we have rendered ourselves incapable of critiquing institutional racism. Sharing an anecdote in which one of her students was red-flagged by security after printing his racial analysis on a campus printer, Kynard argues that the discourse in which her student traded was radical enough to trigger institutional backlash, and she contrasts the import of her student's work to our own field's scholarship by remarking that she has never been red-flagged by campus security when printing an article from a composition studies journal.

Steve Parks further critiqued our field's social turn for what he described as its volunteerist ethos, which is actually an extension of the neoliberal hegemony rampant in institutions of higher education in that it ultimately seeks to accommodate existing structures of power. As a case in point, Parks recounts Syracuse University's attempt to revitalize the city's Near Westside community. In implementing its plan, Parks and a number of undergraduate students were commissioned to establish rapport with the community as part of the “civic engagement” work he was known for. After going door-to-door to gauge public opinion, students found that the community's most common concerns included crime, housing, employment, and, most importantly, representation. The neighborhood wanted a voice in the matter of revitalization, and with the students, they created their own grassroots democratic organization. When the Chancellor discovered that the community was organizing to potentially rally against parts of the revitalization plan, both students and faculty involved in the project were accused of not participating in “civic engagement” but acts of manipulation and subversion. Ultimately, the community rallied behind the students by holding a picnic/open mic where roughly 200 people were able to voice their opinions on the matter.

And to make sure that their voices were being heard, the community also formed the **Gifford Street Community Press**. Syracuse graduate student Ben Kuebrich shared the story of his collaboration with the community to produce **I Witness: Perspectives on Policing in the Near Westside**, a collection compiled in response to the placement of surveillance cameras on street corners throughout the Near Westside community. The moral of his and Ben's stories, Parks insisted, was that in theorizing a political turn for composition studies, we ought not think of our mission as one that reifies the same power imbalances that often already exist between campus and community. Instead, we need to work with the community to create spaces where new power relations might be negotiated. As Ben noted, composition studies need to not

remain removed from the struggle but can help reinforce democratic mechanisms that allow communities to take risks in resisting power imbalances.

“This We Believe”

After being provided examples of what the political turn toward writing democracy might look like in practice, it was time to move toward strategizing. After performing a brief “story of us” exercise, we were introduced to the **This We Believe** project, an initiative aimed at recording and archiving two-minute statements of individuals’ personal understandings of “democracy.” The idea, I think, was to encourage small groups to come up with ways that they might support this initiative through what our workbook described as a “mini-campaign” with a clear goal and meeting four outcomes: achievability, creative use of resources, increasing capacity, and leadership development opportunities.

In my own small group, a few of us struggled to understand our connection to the This We Believe project. Our “story of us” was partly a recognition that we all had very different scholarly interests; though we shared very similar values and goals. We then began to brainstorm a more capacious network that could link projects like This We Believe, so that composition instructors interested in taking a public turn in their own teaching might be able to share assignments and student texts through some kind of online interface that allowed for tweaking, appending, etc. Other groups proposed a follow-up conference in Boulder in 2014, inviting students, teachers, and community activists, and creating a FWP 2.0 website where that conference’s proceedings would be published; a Facebook page or listserv where people could share stories and request/give advice for doing public work; and classroom curricula that encourage students to collect narratives in the community, create multimedia documents on local political, social, and economic issues, and analyze what democracy means in those particular situations.

Basically, we were all over the board with our projects, but we were able to identify that all of our mini-campaigns emphasized a link to teaching, through which we wanted to give our students a broader understanding of what democracy might mean in their own local contexts. We all wanted a venue to share our various teaching experiments and their results, both the products of our successes and the difficulties we encountered along the way. We wanted to allow for a diverse range of textual expression, including audio, video, and web. And with any luck, we’d get to share our successes both online and in person at the conference in Boulder.

The trick, of course, is to get folks to follow through on all these great ideas, which is again where Steve Parks’ community-organizing skills came in handy. In those last few minutes of the workshop, twenty-four people agreed to create assignments about teaching democracy for the Fall 2013 semester. Mark Bousquet (Emory University) agreed to help Shannon Carter expand the current **Writing Democracy** website to allow for an assignment archive. Chris Foreé and Steve Parks decided to work on a YouTube video explaining the emerging project. A team of six led by Veronica House (UC Boulder) would draft a conference CFP. And another team of seven all agreed to develop community partnerships for the initiative.

Keeping Promises

One of those partners, Olivia Armstrong of the Rainbow-Healing Dance Center, attended the workshop as one of the more enthusiastic participants, both in her criticisms and praises of the various perspectives shared throughout. It’s all too easy in an academic setting to speak of the community as if it exists in a petri dish, and Armstrong made a point to remind us all a number of times that she was exactly the kind of person people kept referring to when insisting that we needed to build partnerships with members of the

community who are already doing social justice work. Ms. Armstrong wanted to be sure that we would not tokenize her then or in the future by making her or other community activists like her into poster children for FWP 2.0. After all, the “political turn” is no less immune than the “social turn” to turning our campuses, conferences, periodicals, and even neighborhoods into “auction blocks,” to borrow a trope from Carmen Kynard.

I’d like to honor Ms. Armstrong’s wish here by refraining from tokenizing her as emblematic of “exactly the kind of person” to whom each attendee is obliged in fulfilling the commitments they agreed to at workshop’s close, but I will say this: in building campus-community partnerships, it is not uncommon to have to work through layers of cynicism that the community has often rightly developed toward the intentions of academic do-gooders, so it was genuinely touching to hear someone from the other side of the campus-community divide express enthusiasm for the ways we theorize and strategize our end of things. That tells me there was something of value materializing during “The Political Turn: Writing Democracy for the 21st Century.” It will be interesting now to see how workshop co-chairs Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, and Steve Parks keep the momentum going after we’ve all returned to our research, teaching, and service.

Will the centripetal force generated by the day’s events entropy in the coming months, or will we all find in FWP 2.0 a national network capable of generating new ideas, facilitating resource sharing, and reinforcing the agency of our various constituencies in a manner vital enough to keep us all invested in its further development and upkeep? I sincerely hope the latter, because I left “The Political Turn” charged, hungry for the rest of the conference, and more excited than I had been in a while about a possible future in which grassroots campus-community civic engagement projects across the nation had the means to support one another in ways we’ve only just begun to imagine.