

## matfield green

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I am writing in what is left of Matfield Green, a Kansas town of some fifty people situated in a country of a few more than three thousand in an area with thirty-three inches of annual precipitation. It is typical of countless towns throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. People have left, people are leaving, buildings are falling down, buildings are burning down. Fourteen of the houses here that do still have people have only one person, usually a widow or widower. I purchased seven rundown houses in town for less than four thousand dollars. Four friends and I purchased, for five thousand dollars, the beautiful brick elementary school that was built in 1938. It has ten thousand square feet, including a stage and gymnasium. The Land Institute has purchased the high school gymnasium (four thousand dollars) and twelve acres south of town (for six thousand). A friend and I have purchased thirty-eight acres north of town from the Santa Fe Railroad for three hundred thirty dollars an acre. On this property are a bunkhouse, some large corals to handle cattle, and about twenty-five acres of never-plowed tallgrass prairie.

South of town is an abandoned natural gas booster station with its numerous buildings and facilities. Situated on eighty acres, it was part of the first long-distance pipelines that delivered natural gas from the large Hugoton field near Amarillo to Kansas City. A neighbor in his late seventies told me that in about 1929 his father had helped dig the basement, using a team of horses and a scoop (contemporary sunlight used to leverage extraction of anciently stored energy). Owned by a major pipeline company, the booster station stands as a silent monument to the extractive economy, foreshadowing what is to come. A small area has been contaminated with PCBs. Think of the possible practicality and symbolism if this facility, formerly devoted to transporting the high energy demanded by an extractive economy while at the same time dumping a major environmental pollutant, could be taken over by a community and converted to a facility that would sponsor such renewable technologies as photovoltaic panels or wind machines.

Imagine this human community as an ecosystem, as a locus or primary object of study. We know that public policy, allegedly implemented in the public interest, is partly responsible for the demise of this community. The question then becomes, How can this human community, like a natural ecosystem community, be protected from that abstraction called the public? How can both kinds of communities be built back and also protected?

The effort begins, I think, with the sort of inventory and accounting that ecologists have done for natural ecosystems, a kind of accounting seldom if ever performed for human-dominated ecosystems. How do we start thinking about what is involved in setting up the books for ecological community accounting that will feature humans? I emphasize accounting because our goal is renewability, sustainability.

About 85 percent of the county in which this small town is situated is never-plowed native prairie. Over the millennia it has featured recycling and has run on sunlight just as a forest or a marsh does. Though the prairie is fenced and is now called pasture and grass, aside from the wilderness areas of our country it is about as close to an original relationship as we will find in any human-managed system. Even though the people left in town seem to have a profound affection for the place and for one another, they are as susceptible to the world as anyone else—to shopping mall living, to secular materialism in general.

Nevertheless, I have imagined this as a place that could grow bison for meat, as a place where photovoltaic panels could be assembled at the old booster station, where the school could become a gathering place that would be a partial answer to the mall, a place that might attract a few retired people, including professor types, who could bring their pensions, their libraries, and their social security checks to help support themselves and take on the task of setting up the books for ecological community accounting. Essentially all academic disciplines would be an asset in such an effort, but only if confronted with a broad spectrum of ecological necessities in the face of small-town reality. Much of what must be done will be in conflict with human desires, if not human needs.

Let us allow our imaginations to wander. What if bison (or even cattle) could be slaughtered in the little towns on a small scale and become the answer to the massive industrialized Iowa Beef Packers plant at Emporia, a plant to which some area residents drive fifty miles and more in order to earn modest wages and risk carpal tunnel syndrome. What if the manufacture of photovoltaic panels could happen before the eyes of the children of the workers? What if the processing of livestock could take place with those children present? What if those children were allowed to exercise their strong urge to help—to work? What, finally, if shopping malls and Little League were to become less interesting than playing “make-believe” with all ages?

One of our principal tasks as educators is to expand the imagination about our possibilities. When I walk through the abandoned school with its leaky gym roof and see the solid structure of a beautiful 1938 building, with stage curtains rotting away and paint peeling off the walls, where one blackboard after another has been carried away as though the building were a slate mine, I am forced to think that the demise of this school has resulted in part from a failure of imagination, but more from the tyranny of disregard by something we call the economy.

I am in that town at this moment typing in a house that in its history of some seventy-five years has been abandoned more times than anyone can recall. First it was home to a family in a now-abandoned oil field a few miles southeast of here. Then it was hauled intact on a wagon into town in the 1930s, set on a native stone foundation which, when I bought it recently, was crumbling and falling away. Three ceilings supported as much as three inches of dirt, much of it from back in the Dust Bowl era. The expanding side walls had traveled so far off the floor joist in the middle that the ceiling was suspended. They had to be pulled back onto the

floor joist and held permanently with large screws and plates. Three major holes in the roof had allowed serious water damage to flooring and studs. An opossum had died under the bathtub long enough ago that only its bones were displayed, lying at rest in an arc over the equivalent of half a bale of hay. Two of my seven houses, one empty for nearly twenty years and the other for fifteen, had been walked away from with their refrigerators full. Who knows when the electric meters were pulled—probably a month or two after the houses were vacated and the bill hadn't been paid. To view the contents—eggs and ham, Miracle Whip and pickles, mustard and catsup, milk, cheese, and whatnot—was more like viewing an archaeological find than a repulsive mess.

Where I sit today at my typewriter in that oil field house that relatives and friends have helped remodel, I can see an abandoned lumberyard across the street next to the abandoned hardware store. Out another window, but from the same chair, is the back of the old creamery that now stores junk (on its way to becoming antiques?). With Clara Jo's retirement, the half-time post office across the street is threatened with closure. From a different window, but the same seat, I can see the bank, which closed in 1929 and paid off ten cents on the dollar. (My nephew recently bought it for five hundred dollars.) I can see the bank now only because I can look across the vacant lot where the cafe stood before the natural gas booster station shut down. If my front door were open, given the angle at which I sit, I would be looking right at the Hitchin' Post, the only business left—a bar that accommodates local residents and the cowhands who pull up with their pickups and horse trailers and some of the finest saddle mounts anywhere. These horses will quiver and stomp while waiting patiently as their riders stop for lunch or after work to indulge in beer, nuts, and microwave sandwiches and to shoot pool. (The Hitchin' Post lacks running water, so no dishes can be washed. The outhouse is out back.) Around the corner is an abandoned service station. There were once four! Across the street is the former barbershop.

I know that this town and the surrounding farms and ranches did not sponsor perfect people. I keep finding whiskey bottles in old outhouses and garages, stashed between inner and outer walls here and there, the local version of a drug culture. I hear the familiar stories of infidelities fifty years back—the overalls on the clothesline hung upside down, the flowerpot one day on the left side of the step, the next day on the right—signals to lovers even at the height of the Great Depression, when austerity should have tightened the family unit and maybe did. There were the shootings, the failures of justice, the story of the father of a young married woman who shot and killed his son-in-law for hitting his daughter and how charges were never filed. Third-generation bitterness is common. The human drama goes on. This place still doesn't have a lifestyle, never had a lifestyle, but rather livelihoods with ordinary human foibles. Nevertheless, the graveyard contains the remains of both the cuckold and the cuckolded, the shooter and the shot, the drunk and the sober.

This story can be repeated thousands of times across our land, and no telling

will deviate even 10 percent. I am not sure what should be done here by way of community development. I do believe, however, that community development can begin with putting roofs on buildings that are leaking, and scabbing in two-by-fours at the bottom of studs that have rotted out around their anchoring nails. I doubt, on the other hand, that a sustainable society can start with a program sent down from Washington or from a Rural Sociology Department in some land-grant university, or for that matter as a celebration of Columbus Day.

Locals and most rural sociologists alike believe the answer lies in jobs, *any* jobs so long as they don't pollute too much. Though I am in sympathy with every urgent impulse toward human welfare, rural America—America!—does *not* need jobs that depend on the extractive economy. We need a way to arrest consumerism. We need a different form of accounting so that both sufficiency and efficiency have *standing* in our minds.

The poets and scientists who counseled that we consult nature would have understood, I think, that we might begin by looking at that old prairie, by remembering who we are as mammals, as primates, as humanoids, as animals struggling to become human by controlling the destructive and unlively side of our animal nature even as we set out to change parts of our still-unlovely human mind. The mindscape of the future must have some memory of the ecological arrangements that shaped us and of the social structures that served us well. So many surprises await us, even in the next quarter-century. My worry is that our context then will be so remote from the ways we survived through the ages that our organizing paradigm will become chaos theory rather than ecology.

At work on my houses in Matfield Green, I've had great fun tearing off the porches and cleaning up the yards. But it has been sad as well, going through the abandoned belongings of families who lived out their lives in this beautiful, well-watered, fertile setting. In an upstairs bedroom I came across a dusty but beautiful blue padded box labeled "Old Programs—New Century Club." Most of the programs from 1923 to 1964 were there. Each listed the officers, the club flower (sweet pea), the club colors (pink and white), and the club motto ("just be glad"). The programs for each year were gathered under one cover and nearly always dedicated to some local woman who was special in one way or another.

Each month the women were to comment on such subjects as canning, jokes, memory gems, a magazine article, guest poems, flower culture, misused words, birds, and so on. The May 1936 program was a debate: "Resolved that movies are detrimental to the young generation." The August 1936 program was dedicated to coping with the heat. Roll call was "Hot Weather Drinks"; next came "Suggestions for Hot Weather Lunches"; a Mrs. Rogler offered "Ways of Keeping Cool."

The June roll call in 1929 was "The Disease I Fear Most." That was eleven years after the great flu epidemic. Children were still dying in those days of diph-

theria, whooping cough, scarlet fever, pneumonia. On August 20, the roll call question was "What do you consider the most essential to good citizenship?" In September that year it was "Birds of Our Country." The program was on the mourning dove.

What became of it all?

From 1923 to 1930, the program covers were beautiful, done at a print shop. From 1930 until 1937, the effects of the Depression were apparent; programs were either typed or mimeographed and had no cover. The programs for two years are missing. In 1940, the covers reappeared, this time typed on construction paper. The print-shop printing never came back.

The last program in the box dates from 1964. I don't know the last year Mrs. Florence Johnson attended the club. I do know that Mrs. Johnson and her husband, Turk, celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, for in the same box are some beautiful white fiftieth anniversary napkins, with golden bells and the names "Florence" and "Turk" between the years "1920" and "1970." A neighbor told me that Mrs. Johnson died in 1981. The high school had closed in 1967. The lumberyard and hardware store closed about the same time, but no one knows for sure when. The last gas station went after that.

Back to those programs. The motto never changed. The sweet pea kept its standing. So did the pink and white club colors. The club collect that follows persisted month after month, year after year:

#### A Collect for Club Women

Keep us, O God, from pettiness; Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed.

Let us be done with fault-finding and leave off self-seeking.

May we put away all pretense and meet each other face to face, without self-pity and without prejudice.

May we never be hasty in judgment and always generous.

Let us take time for all things; make us grow calm, serene, gentle.

Teach us to put in to action our better impulses; straightforward and unafraid.

Grant that we may realize it is the little things that create differences; that in the big things of life we are as one.

And may we strive to touch and to know the great common woman's heart of us all, and oh, Lord God, let us not forget to be kind.

—Mary Stewart

By modern standards these people were poor. There was a kind of naivete among these relatively unschooled women. Some of their poetry was not good. Some of their ideas about the way the world works seem silly. Some of their club programs don't sound very interesting. Some sound tedious. But their monthly agendas were filled with decency, with efforts to learn about everything from birds

to our government, and with coping with their problems, the weather, diseases. Here is the irony: they were living up to a far broader spectrum of their potential than most of us do today!

I am not suggesting that we go back to 1923 or even to 1964. But I will say that those people in that particular generation, in places like Matfield Green, were farther along in the necessary journey to becoming native to their places, even as they were losing ground, than we are.

Why was their way of life so vulnerable to the industrial economy? What can we do to protect such attempts to be good and decent, to live out modest lives responsibly? I don't know. This is the discussion we need to have, for it is particularly problematic. Even most intellectuals who have come out of places such as Matfield Green have not felt that their early lives prepared them adequately for the "official" culture.

Let me quote from two writers. The first is Paul Gruchow, who grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota:

I was born at mid-century. My parents, who were poor and rural, had never amounted to anything, and never would, and never expected to. They were rather glad for the inconsequence of their lives. They got up with the sun and retired with it. Their routines were dictated by the seasons. In summer they tended; in fall they harvested; in winter they repaired; in spring they planted. It had always been so; so it would always be.

The farmstead we occupied was on a hilltop overlooking a marshy river bottom that stretched from horizon to horizon. It was half a mile from any road and an eternity from any connection with the rest of the culture. There were no books there; there was no music; there was no television; for a long time, no telephone. Only on the rarest of occasions—a time or two a year—was there a social visitor other than the pastor. There was no conversation in that house. (Gruchow 1991, 20)

Similarly, Wallace Stegner, the great historian and novelist, confesses to his feeling of inadequacy in coming from a small prairie town in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan. In *Wolf Willow* he writes:

Once, in a self-pitying frame of mind, I was comparing my background with that of an English novelist friend. Where he had been brought up in London, taken from the age of four onward to the Tate and the National Gallery, sent traveling on the Continent in every school holiday, taught French and German and Italian, given access to bookstores, libraries, and British Museums, made familiar from infancy on with the conversation of the eloquent and the great, I had grown up in this dung-heeled sagebrush town on the disappearing edge of nowhere, utterly without painting, without sculpture, without architecture, almost without music or theater, without conversation or languages or travel or stimulating instruction, without libraries or museums or

bookstores, almost without books. I was charged with getting in a single lifetime, from scratch, what some people inherit as naturally as they breathe air. How, I asked this Englishman, could anyone from so deprived a background ever catch up? How was one expected to compete, as a cultivated man, with people like himself? He looked at me and said dryly, "Perhaps you got something else in place of all that."

He meant, I suppose, that there are certain advantages to growing up a sensuous little savage, and to tell the truth I am not sure I would trade my childhood of freedom and the outdoors and the senses for a childhood of being led by the hand past all the Turners in the National Gallery. And also, he may have meant that anyone starting from deprivation is spared getting bored. You may not get a good start, but you may get up a considerable head of steam.

Countless writers and artists have been vulnerable to the so-called official culture, as vulnerable as the people of Matfield Green. Stegner goes on to say:

I am reminded of Willa Cather, that bright girl from Nebraska, memorizing long passages from the *Aeneid* and spurning the dust of Red Cloud and Lincoln with her culture-bound feet. She tried, and her education encouraged her, to be a good European. Nevertheless she was a first-rate novelist only when she dealt with what she knew from Red Cloud and the things she had "in place of all that." Nebraska was what she was born to write; the rest of it was got up. Eventually, when education had won and nurture had conquered nature and she had recognized Red Cloud as a vulgar little hold, she embraced the foreign tradition totally and ended by being neither quite a good American nor quite a true European nor quite a whole artist. (Stegner 1962, 24–25)

It seems that we still blunt our sensitivities about our local places by the likes of learning long passages from the *Aeneid* while wanting to shake from us the dust of Red Cloud or Matfield Green. The extractive economy cares for neither Virgil nor Mary Stewart. It lures just about all of us to its shopping centers on the edges of major cities. And yet, for us, the *Aeneid* is as essential to becoming native to the Matfield Greens as the spear was to the paleolithic Asians who walked here across the Bering land bridge of the Pleistocene.

Our task is to build cultural fortresses to protect our emerging nativeness. They must be strong enough to hold at bay the powers of consumerism, the powers of greed and envy and pride. One of the most effective ways for this to come about would be for our universities to assume the awesome responsibility for both valuing and educating those who want to be homecomers—not that they necessarily want to go home, but rather to go someplace and dig in and begin the long search and experiment to become native.

It will be a struggle, but a worthy one. The homecomer will not learn Virgil to adorn his or her talk to show off, but will study Virgil for insight, for utility, as well as for pleasure.

We can then hope for a resurrection like that of Mrs. Florence Johnson and her women friends, who took their collect seriously. Unless we can validate and promote the sort of cultural information in the making that the New Century Club featured, we are doomed. An entire club program devoted to coping with the heat of August is becoming native to a place. That club was more than a support group; it was cultural information in the making, keyed to place. The alternative, one might suggest, is mere air-conditioning—not only yielding greenhouse gases but contributing to global warming and the ozone hole as well, and, if driven by nuclear power, to future Chernobyls.

Becoming native to this place means that the creatures we bring with us—our domesticated creatures—must become native too. Long ago they were removed from the original relationships they had with their ecosystems and pressed into our service. Our interdependency has become so complete that, if proprietorship is the subject, we must acknowledge that in some respects they own us. We humans honor knowledge of where we came from, counting that as baseline information, essential to our journey toward nativeness. Similarly, we must acknowledge that our domesticated creatures are descendants of wild things that were shaped in an ecological context *not* of our making when we found them. The fence we built to keep their relatively tame and curious wild ancestors out of our Early Neolithic gardens eventually became the barbed wire that would contain them.

At the moment of first containment, those fences must have enlarged our idea of property and property lines. When we brought that notion of property lines with us to this distant and magnificent continent, it was a short step to the invisible grid that in turn created the tens of thousands of hard and alien lines that dominate our thoughts today. Those lines will probably be with us forever. But we can soften them. We'll have to, for the hardness of those lines is proportional to our sense of the extent to which we own what we use. Our becoming native will depend on our emerging consciousness of how we are to use the gifts of the creation. We must think in terms of different relationships. Perhaps we will come to think of the chicken as fundamentally a jungle fowl. The hog will once again be regarded as a descendant of a roaming and rooting forest animal. Bovines will be seen as savanna grazers.

An extractive economic system to a large degree is a derivative of our perceptions and values. But it also controls our behavior. We have to loosen its hard grip on us, finger by finger. I am hopeful that a new economic system can emerge from the homeowner's effort—as a derivative of tight livelihood rather than of purposeful design. It will result from our becoming better ecological accountants at the community level. If we must as a future necessary recycle essentially all materials and run on sunlight, then our future will depend on accounting as the most important and interesting discipline. Because accountants are students of boundaries, we are talking about educating a generation of students who will know how

to set up the books for their ecological community accounting, to use three-dimensional spreadsheets.

Still, classroom work alone won't do. These students will need a lifetime of field experience besides, and the sacrifices they must make, by our modern standards, will be huge. They won't be regarded as heroic, at least not in the short run. Nevertheless, that will be their real work. Despite the daily decency of the women in the Matfield Greens, decency could not stand up against the economic imperialism that swiftly and ruthlessly plowed them and their communities under.

The agenda of our homecoming majors is already beyond comprehensive vision. They will have to be prepared to think about such problems as balances between efficiency and sufficiency. This will require informed judgment across our entire ecological mosaic. These graduates in homecoming will be unable to hide in bureaucratic niches within the major program initiatives of public policy that big government likes to sponsor. Those grand solutions are inherently antinative because they are unable to vary across the mosaic of our ecosystems, from the cold deserts of eastern Washington to the deciduous forests of the East, with the Nebraska prairie in between. The need is for each community to be coherent. Knowing this, we must offer our homeowners the most rigorous curriculum and the best possible faculty, the most demanding faculty of all time.

*The fight against  
consumerism -  
the value of all  
ecosystems -  
in relation  
to economics, etc.  
The need for  
coherency*

explored them in new contexts. And we see how the strategic practices of community literacy support inquiry at the same time they reveal the rhetorical agency of both community and university partners.

### *What Is Community Literacy?*

Mark is a teenage writer at the Community Literacy Center, or, as he would say, a "rap artist waiting to be discovered." Through rap, Mark imagines and sings of a world in which teenagers play powerful roles and have valuable messages to tell. . . . He is a bright and resourceful teenager who, like many African-American males, finds little that interests him in school and is frequently suspended. In his lyrics and his life, Mark flirts with the possibility of joining a gang and finding a group that "cares for him."

—Wayne C. Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins, "Community Literacy"

The purpose of this rap is to tell what really happens in school between students, teachers, and vice principals, and what causes suspension.

—Mark Howard, introduction, "Communication Breakdown"

The point is that there is a gang problem and until people start to accept it there can't be anything done about it. Instead of denying, . . . try to get them together to find out why they feel they have to join and be a member of a gang.

—Mark Howard, "A Usual Day in Wilkinsburg"

### *A Space for Dialogue across Difference*

This is a book about social engagement and personal agency expressed in an experiment in local public rhetoric. It asks, How does one fashion a rhetoric of making a difference within an intercultural community? Paradoxically, this hope of making a difference collaboratively begins in the inescapable dilemma of difference and the desire to bridge that troubled water. America's rhetoric of change and its call to community is rooted in attempts to confront the divisive and unjust effects of social disparity. The premise of community

literacy is that such a rhetoric calls us to speak out *about* and *for* silenced voices. But, in addition, it calls us to talk *with* "others" across gulfs we may not always know how to cross.

Unfortunately, significant talk across cultural difference is considerably more demanding than speaking one's own mind on social issues. And little in our schooling—in rhetoric or composition curricula, in learning to write arguments or to read literature—prepares us to enter such a discourse. There is even less support in our patterns of public life, dominated by the rhetoric of advocacy and interest politics. And in a socially stratified society, superficial or isolated encounters with "others" are not likely to produce significant, change-making conversations. So where does one find the space, and how does one create the kind of "community" that can support a sustained dialogue across difference? The story of community literacy that I have to tell grows out of an experiment in creating such a space and form of literacy within a particular urban community. It began innocently enough by coining a name for its specific focus—*community literacy*. But as we soon discovered, that term was both a source of deeper meanings and a bundle of revealingly contradictory notions.

My inquiry is grounded in the history and practices of Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC). Initiated as a community/university project, it found itself already firmly located in three distinctive kinds of community—one was the historic, racial, spatial network of inner-city "community folk." The second was a network of institutions—neighborhood, social, and academic organizations. The third, referred to as the Greater Pittsburgh metropolitan community, was primarily a projection of a political imagination, an entity held together by mutual interests and warm metaphors. It is important to realize that communities like these are not physical but *symbolic* entities, constructed for a complex mix of reasons around affinities rather than visible borders, which means they are notoriously hard to pin down as an identifiable thing, a stable group, or a discourse with explicit defining features. In fact, the most significant feature of a community is not what or where it is (with its shifting features and overlapping boundaries) but how it *functions*. The meaning of a symbolic community is in how it works and the consequences it produces.

This book is about a fourth community that, just like the urban, civic, and organizational entities with which it rubs shoulders, is a symbolic construction. But unlike them, it is drawn together by the practice of community literacy. The chief function of this imagined collective is to create a distinctive kind of rhetorical community—an intercultural, problem-focused, local public sphere designed for talking with others across difference. So on one

level, I want to start with the obvious question: just what is the "community" of community literacy? But in doing so and looking at an example of community literacy in practice, I want to pose a more fundamental question: How can such a symbolic community and its kind of literacy actually function? And to what end?

### *The "Community" Tour*

We are standing on the steps of the Community House, a historical and neighborhood landmark. Mrs. Baskins is about to take a group of Carnegie Mellon University students, soon to be mentors at the Community Literacy Center, on their introductory van ride around Pittsburgh's Northside. As the youth coordinator and matriarch of the center, she is called "Queen" by Community House friends (in playful reference to the *African Queen*) and "Msz. B." by the black and white teenagers, who seem magnetically attracted to her imposing presence and her humorous warmth. If you look south, just across the Allegheny River, you can see the expensive new North Shore condominiums, the downtown business towers, and the cultural district inhabited by the "suits." Over there, people use the word *community* to refer to a civic body—a metropolitan area bound by common and competing political, economic, and social interests. But over here, a strong Northside pride of place connects blacks and whites in a more local, familial sense of community.

The Community House, a five-story, 1890 brick building and historic settlement house, stands in the middle of what Northsiders call the Flats. Down by the Allegheny River, a few blocks from where we stand, is the church whose tunnel to the riverbank was a stop on the Underground Railway. From the door of the Community House you can look out across a city park and see a cluster of houses still called Deutschtown, where Germans settled a century ago. Across Cedar Avenue is the deeply faded, red sign of Stedfeldts, the place to find old jazz, blues, and gospel as well as hip-hop and headphone music. On the corner are the yin and yang of neighborhood bars. On the left side, the rough-looking JR's bar, which visitors might hesitate to enter. On the right, the cheerful cut-glass door of Park House. (When folks said with a wink after choir practice that they were going to the "chapel," you knew where to meet up). Next door are the newsstand and White Tower restaurant, which never look all that appealing, but when police budgets get cut and drug sales rise, the number of brief visits by white college-age males seems to increase.

Looking north across another piece of the park is the great, imposing institutional presence of Allegheny General Hospital, slowly increasing its spread but still unable to displace the Garden Theatre with its adult movies



(and white suburban clientele). Homeless people use the park to sleep and hold confabs. When the Community House Church has picnics under these big trees, homeless men who tentatively drop by are welcomed. They stay to help carry the folding tables back into the big gymnasium on the second floor.

On other margins of this large urban park, the mentors will ride past the institutions and areas that link the Northside to its metropolitan setting: the large Allegheny Community College, the Aviary, the Stadium, and the Mexican War streets—a semi-gentrified section of brick row houses with fancy doors, knockers, and lampposts, promoted in the 1980s as a great commute to downtown and as a good investment. Its residents live here with a commitment to urban neighborhoods and with the unkempt or boarded-up sister buildings next door and the next block over. A friendly gay bar, dark wood and fancy glass, is three doors away from a storefront BBQ, pumping out smoke that makes a passerby salivate. When Mrs. Baskins was president of the Central Northside Council in the 1970s, the problems of comparable diversity were always on the agenda.

To a visitor, the Flats seems both vibrant and distressed. Its visible history, architectural, and institutional identities and its proud urban sense of self are tied to its political, economic fragmentation, where local leaders are more likely to bicker than organize, and small nonprofits struggle for pieces of the same small pie.

As the van rolls north up Federal Street, between the theater and the hospital, climbing up into the steep, narrow, often-cobbled streets on the hill, you are in the neighborhood. Mrs. B. points out a big-porched Pittsburgh house on her old street. Folks talk about growing up here when every adult was your parent, and if you messed up, you would hear it from a neighbor, and the bad news (for you) would have already reached your folks by the time you got home. Now the streets are a patchwork of safe places and chatters the kids call “bad neighborhoods”—gang territories or hot spots of the underground economy that it is better not to walk down. You just need to know where to go.

Mrs. Baskins rolls down the window—she seems to know half the people on these streets. It is a neighborhood where people give companionable shouts from across the street and lean out of the car to carry on a little business—“How’s your mother? . . . Oh, Ok . . . Did you still want to use the Friendship room on Wednesday for your committee meeting?” And when the teenagers make their first appearance at a literacy project, they get placed by Mrs. B. “Right, you’re from up on Arch street. I know your Gran” or “Oh sure, I knew your Aunt Flo back in the day, when she was in the Community House summer camps”—and with a lowered chuckle, “She was a pistol!” Everybody

seems to be a cousin of somebody you know. Nobody seems to pay much attention to last names that siblings frequently do not share; it is easier to identify teenagers by mother, grandmother, uncle, aunt, or street.

Oliver High School sits at the top of the Federal Street hill. There you are swept into the contrast between the social life carried on its loud jostling halls and the silence, tension, boredom, or restraint of its classrooms. It made the mentors (these usually white, usually suburban college students) begin to feel a little out of their element. Perry Traditional Academy, perched atop an adjoining hill, was the place to go if you want to “do school,” but even there further education was more likely to be something talked up rather than planned for.

The tour redefined the term *mentor*—it told you that you were entering someone else’s dynamic, intact world that did not feel a particular need for you or your gifts. You would not enter as an authority or celebrity but as an outsider. You would be accepted and valued not by your academic, economic, or middle-class status but by your ability to participate in the common life, the common concerns, and the shared struggle as adults and teenagers saw it.

What this tour of an urban community neighborhood didn’t quite prepare you for was the strikingly hybrid community, built around talk, writing, reflection, persuasion, and performance, that would emerge inside the Community House when you and your teenage partner would try to get at the story-behind-the-story of risk, gangs, respect, work, and school in the life of these teenagers. That is, you would enter an inquiry in which most of the expertise lay with your teen. Your expertise would lie in your (still untested) ability to support a process of inquiry, reflection, and argument. Together, you would try to get multiple perspectives on this reality on the table and into words—in a dialogue, a newsletter, a video, a dramatization. These would lay the groundwork for the project’s culminating public Community Conversation.

The Community Literacy projects take over the third floor. Everyone meets at the beginning and end of the session around the big table, and in between scatters to work on sofas, in the kitchen, or at the computers with two chairs that dot the walls. The publications lying around from last year’s projects give a feel for the distinctly intercultural, *rhetorical* community you are entering.<sup>1</sup> One of them, called *Whassup with Suspension? The Real Scoop*, was published by the ARGUE project—a team of mentors and students (with first-hand experience) who wanted to improve the school suspension practices at Oliver High School. Lorraine Higgins, as a literacy leader, PhD student in rhetoric, and later director of the center, designed the ARGUE



projects to turn argument theory into community practice.<sup>2</sup> The twelve-page printed booklet leads off with Mark Howard's rap, "Communication Breakdown," to "tell what really happened."

### MISCOMMUNICATION

The purpose of this rap is to tell what *really* happens in school between students, teachers, and vice principals, and what causes suspension.

#### Communication Breakdown

Mark Howard

It started with two students in the class talking out of place

The boy starts getting rude and got all up in the girls face

The girl didn't like it so she got up and yelled back

The teacher told the girl, *Get up and sit down in the back*

She got up with no problem and then sat in the back chair

He had to be a pest so he started to look and stare

At the girl to test her and try to make her mad

He said, *Respect me girl... and treat me like your dad!*

She stood up and said, *Don't play... my dad got shot last year*

The teacher turned around just as the girl broke out in tears

The teacher kicked her out and said, *Go straight to the VP*

The boy started laughing as the girl said *It wasn't me*

The teacher didn't listen, even harder the girl cried

When she got to the office she found out the teacher lied

She talked and talked and tried to tell him what's going on

The VP wouldn't listen but she kept going on and on

The VP said, *You're lying 'cause that's not what I heard*

*The teacher wouldn't lie so I'm going with the teacher's word*

*The teacher said you tried to start a fight in the classroom*

*She said you threatened her then you said you would leave the room*

*She also said you tried to pick a fight with another kid*

*So don't sit there and lie now, tell me what you really did*

She said, *It's hopeless, every time I tell you you say I lied*

The VP didn't listen and slowly the girl cried

The VP said, *You're going home for about three days*

She shook her head as he said, *You'll learn from your wrong ways*

The point of this story—nobody pays attention  
To a student 'cause they're young, now I may mention

If the teacher would have took one minute and act like she cares  
She would have saved a lot of time and a lot of tears

Teachers prove students right just about every day  
They automatically think their way is the right way

Same for the Vice Principal they don't listen too  
*You're guilty, you're suspended* is the only thing they do

On the other hand the girl was also wrong in her actions  
She didn't have to get up and scream for satisfaction

She could have told the teacher or even the principal  
Instead she's in trouble suspended and sitting out of school

The point of this story is lost communication  
Make sure it's always there or you'll be on a vacation

On the page facing Mark's rap is Shay La Burke's "Commentary: Complications between Students, Teachers and Vice Principals" where she offers to "tell you about the different perspectives of the people in Mark's rap." Her prose tries to untangle the feelings of the teacher (who "wasn't sure of what happened," except that "the girl started to scream at everybody and cause more trouble"), the feelings of the female student (who "didn't get a chance to explain" and "now she has an attitude with the teacher and VP because she's missing out on the work she has in her classes"), and the frustrated VP (who "feels the student and teacher should've talked it out"). Shay La concludes with "Five Suggestions," which suggest what is *not* happening now, including the "radical" recommendations that

- The teacher and VP should try to explain why they are sending the student "out" and that perhaps they could
- Write out some plans on what could work out if the problem occurs and what to do to prevent it from getting worse.

Just to show that multiple voices are invited, the booklet includes a rather bad rap written by an English teacher, alongside a student survey in which 106 Oliver students overwhelmingly (91) recommended suspension for fighting—but not for cutting class (only 35 votes for it) or for teacher abuse (25 votes).

What the booklet cannot bring to life is the project's final Community Conversation, which turned text into dialogue. Downstairs in the Community Houses filled-to-capacity, one-hundred-chair meeting room, Mark performed his rap to cheers and applause. The authors of a scenario "R.E.S.P.E.C.T. That

Is What It Means to Me" dramatized an encounter with a "screaming" teacher thrusting his finger into the face of a student—who responds this time to the all too-familiar gesture with his own style of physicality. Performances are followed by straight talk from teens who not only reveal rival readings of these problematic events and pose hard questions to adults but also offer options for action. These teen-written, teen-moderated Conversations draw an audience of adults from the community, the schools, the university, and civic organizations into a new kind of dialogue. Instead of defining urban teens as "the problem," they allow teens to pose a problem—as they see it—and draw adults into a discussion about their own adult role in creating and solving problems from suspension to risk, respect, and the effect of gangs on the youth of this community.

### *What Is Community Literacy?*

Community literacy is a rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change.<sup>3</sup> Seen in its educational context, it, like other forms of critical literacy, is the heir to John Dewey's vision of progressive education, in which people learn things by a hands-on experiential and strenuously intellectual engagement with the world. We learn, Dewey argued, through active experimentation and reflection—approaching topics from science and technology to language and history as problem posers and problem-solvers. Taking an experimental stance to both received ideas and our own experience, we do not merely acquire knowledge; we make it through the process of inquiry. Dewey's radical call for participatory learning was inseparable from his arguments for participatory democracy, which depends on "communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 87). He championed humanistic education not as a repository of received knowledge but "because of what it *does* in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy" and for its ability to connect "with the common interests of men as men" and "improve the life we live in common" (1916/1966, pp. 230, 191).

This stance, linking learning, liberation, and community, so controversial in Dewey's own time, has supported the even more politically engaged practice of critical literacy since the 1960s. Under the enormous influence of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1962/1985) and his third-world literacy campaigns, critical literacy became associated with dissident politics, bringing our "common interests" with struggling people into college classrooms. At the same time, Freire's liberation theology—his profound respect for the humanity of dehumanized people and his visionary sense of possibility—was helping reshape classroom practice. Like Dewey, he argued that reading and writing should not be used to transmit and "bank" know-

edge but as tools for dialogue and critical inquiry. The notable thing about his dialogic "culture circles" is that the learning is mutual; both teacher and student are questioning, envisioning, acting, and reflecting.

In his essay "What Is Critical Literacy?" Ira Shor's definition is succinct: critical literacy "questions the way things are and imagines alternatives";<sup>4</sup> or to be more precise, it challenges "the unequal status quo" (1999, pp. 24, 7).<sup>4</sup> It's what Patrick J. Finn (1999) calls "literacy with an attitude." However, once one goes beyond this statement, as Shor's essay makes clear, the academically based discourse of "critical literacy" is really a family of quite diverse literate practices. They range from political theorizing about language and education to analyzing the ideology that shapes texts and media, to designing basic writing and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction around critical consciousness, to initiating community-based creative-writing programs, to organizing students and colleagues to take literate action on five issues from supporting free speech and social criticism in schools, to building a working class network in the academy, to lobbying against the exploitation of part-time college instructors. What holds this family together is an acute sense of social inequities resting on patterns of power and domination—plus a counterfaith in the power of language as symbolic action. That is, critical literacy sees literacy as a way to resist power, challenge injustice, and insist on alternative images of social and self-development.

Where the branches of the family begin to diverge is in the priorities and problems they pose to themselves and literate practices they use to respond to those problems. For example, in the tradition inspired by Marxist cultural analysis, to become critically literate is to become conscious of how one's language and identity have been historically and social constructed within its specific power relations. And this leads, as Shor puts it, to the question "How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter? If language helps make us, how can we use and teach oppositional discourse so as to remake ourselves and our culture?" (1999, p. 1). In many college classrooms, versions of this question have shaped the practice of critical literacy into multilayered practices of textual and ideological analysis in which resistance is defined as critique.

But a settlement house (with a 3:00 P.M. group of urban teens just liberated from school) is not a classroom. Moreover, resistance that stopped with the critique of texts probably would not engage the hearts and minds of their community, much less remake the culture of teen life, the neighborhood, or the schools. The urban community Mrs. Baskins showed the mentors back at the beginning of our tour is the soul of "community" literacy, its reason for being, and the voice it seeks to amplify. As a result, this *community* branch

of critical literacy is more closely identified with the tools of rhetoric and the traditions of African American struggle, where literacy gave a public voice to oppressed people and a tool to reinterpret their shared reality in their own words.

That said, we must also recognize the distinctive imprint of the university in this collaboration. Community literacy could be (but is not) another name for what Barton and Hamilton (1998) call "local literacies"—the diverse, daily forms of reading and writing used by working-class people, often overlooked or dismissed in our preoccupation with the elite literacies of school or business. The community literacy described here values but differs from the literacies of urban street corners, front porches, or churches used by community folk. It actively resists the vocationally oriented, acritical, limited literacy taught in urban working-class schools to community children as well as the bureaucratic language of clients, services, and regulations demanded by social service agencies. And it draws on but deliberately departs from the discourse of advocacy found in many grass-roots organizations.<sup>5</sup>

This community/university collaboration also gives community literacy a distinctive place in service-learning. In Tom Deans's three-panel portrait of community-focused classes, some focus on writing *about* the community, drawing on academic practices of research or critique (2000). Others, shaped by the traditions of volunteer service and of teaching students to write to real audiences, bring their skills to writing *for* the community—producing brochures, newsletters, and histories for civic organizations. Community literacy, Deans's exemplar of a third approach, draws on the traditions of rhetoric, pragmatism, and problem-solving to write *with* the community.

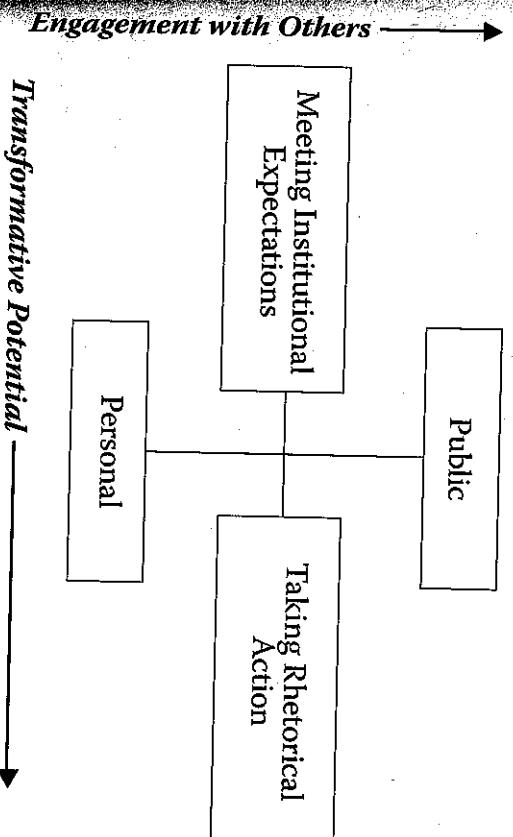
In a revealing comparative analysis of "community literacy studies" more generally, Elenore Long traces common values in these diverse accounts of "ordinary people going public" (in press). However, the theoretical framework she uses to guide this analysis uncovers profound differences (with significant consequences) within five formative elements: (1) the guiding metaphor (e.g., Is the public space imagined as an impromptu theater or a garden, a womb, or an intersection of discourses?); (2) the context that defines a "local" public, shaping what is an effective, even possible performance; (3) the tenor and affective register of the discourse; (4) the literate practices that shape discourse; and, perhaps the most insightful category, (5) the nature of rhetorical invention or the generative process by which people in these accounts respond to exigencies, such as getting around gatekeepers, affirming an identity, or taking a contested agency.

The practice, then, of community literacy (as we named the CLC's community/university experiment in 1990) exists within a network of images

and literate practices. It is not simply the language of urban "others." Nor is it primarily an academic (literate) way of talking about others or a professional effort to speak for them, as needed and significant as these projects can be. The community literacy I am hoping to document is an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle. Community literacy happens at a busy intersection of multiple literacies and diverse discourses. It begins its work when community folk, urban teens, community supporters, college-student mentors, and university faculty start naming and solving problems *together*. It does its work by widening the circle and constructing an even more public dialogue across differences of culture, class, discourse, race, gender, and power shaped by the explicit goals of discovery and change. In short, in this *rhetorical model*, community literacy is a site for personal and public inquiry and, as Higgins, Long, and Flower (2006) argue, a site for rhetorical theory building as well.

John Dewey (1916/1966) reminds us that meaning resides in actions. The comparisons I have been sketching help us see the work of community literacy as a particular kind of literate *action*, defined by what it is trying to do and its alternatives. We can imagine these actions lying along two axes. One is the continuum from personal writing to public writing in which writers become increasingly engaged with others as collaborators, as audiences, as a community (see fig. 1.1). Writing personal narratives typically sits at the personal end of this *engagement* axis. By contrast, projects such as the CLC's STRUGGLE, the Berkeley/Oakland-based DUSTY, and Chicago's *Journal of*

Fig. 1.1 Priorities for engagement and transformation



*Ordinary People* put a high priority on the public end of this continuum. In them, digital storytelling or poetry writing in housing projects is only one step in a process that leads to teen-adult dialogues in response, to neighborhood screenings of teenagers' multimedia stories, or to publication in newsletters and journals. Here personal literate actions draw writers into new levels of engagement with peers, parents, adults, and community.<sup>6</sup>

The second key continuum in figure 1.1 suggests how writers can move from meeting institutional expectations (e.g., writing to learn or fulfill the requirements of school or workplace) to taking rhetorical action (e.g., through community dialogues or community advocacy). This axis helps us think about the *transformative potential* of our literate actions. The stultifying, limited literacies demanded in urban schools, workplace training, and many workplaces (focused only on learning and playing by the rules) clearly pin a writer down on the meeting-institutional-expectations end of this axis with little hope of making a difference in either a personal or public arena. At elite institutions, on the other hand, doing critical analysis lets the writer move down this continuum into thinking about social problems. Yet, the academic work of analysis may still fall short of imagining or taking wider social action through writing or dialogue.

In practice, of course, the ends of these continua are not places to plod down but are descriptions of one's priorities or ends-in-view. As we will see, if community literacy writers are to do their work, they must still understand and negotiate institutional expectations (e.g., write Standard English and respond to authority figures they would persuade)—but not set correctness or compliance as their ultimate goal. And public, collaborative engagement often starts with but does not end with personal inquiry. Community literacy, then, attempts to move writers toward transformative action and collaborative engagement guided by a particular image of public and rhetorical action. These choices can be defined by the ways this symbolic or rhetorical community tries to function.

*Community literacy is a form of literate action that allows:*

- everyday people within the urban community to take agency in their lives and for their community;
- everyday people from places of privilege to participate in this struggle for understanding and social justice.

*Community literacy depends on the social ethic and strategic practice of intercultural rhetoric to:*

- draw out the voices of the silenced and the expertise of marginalized people;

- draw people normally separated by difference into new roles as partners in inquiry;
- recognize and use difference in the service of discovery and change, transforming rather than erasing its conflicts and contradictions.

Community literacy is, in short, a working hypothesis about how we might construct a community that supports dialogue across difference. In the Risk and Respect project (chapter 2), we will look at what these aspirations for literate action might actually mean in practice. But before we leave the more tractable realm of theory, one might ask, Why do we need a new space or a different kind of community for such dialogue? Why does it seem to happen so rarely in the available civic, neighborhood, and institutional communities we have already encountered? One reason that we must continually search out spaces for intercultural inquiry lies, I propose, in how these communities function and in the relationships they create.

**Some Available Versions of Community**

*A Civic Body*

The metropolitan community of Greater Pittsburgh is a construction of Ohio River Valley geography, of political districting, and of ideology. Bound by a strong pride of place (Pittsburghers don't seem to leave even when the jobs do), by passions for icons, such as, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and by deep neighborhood roots (that can create equally deep divisiveness), this symbolic creation functions to say we are indeed a polity, a single social, economic, political body. The unofficial theme song of the Pirates baseball team (and thus Pittsburgh) at this time was Sister Sledge's hit *We Are Family*.

Pittsburgh's three major family foundations (the Howard Heinz Endowments, the R. K. Mellon Foundation, and the Grable Foundation) plus a collective called the Pittsburgh Foundation gave a face and a material force to the idea of a public body with family ties. They funded the major cultural, educational, and redevelopment initiatives in the city in this period, including the CLC. The educational director of the Heinz Foundation, Joseph Dominic, for example, was a valued longtime partner who not only supported but also challenged and shaped the CLC from his city perspective.

*The Work of a Civic Body*

In a democracy, this sense of community is so fundamental and valued it can go unquestioned. But for all its necessary political functions, the metropolitan civic body to which Northside urban teenagers or low-wage workers belong offers slim chances for dialogue. It is structured to do its business

in response to competing interest groups. In assigning the role of citizen and resident to members, it creates relationships based on rights, services, and return on tax dollars. Far from being the solution, it can be part of the problem the other three communities confront.<sup>7</sup>

Politicians and service organizations often call on this political entity and its fictive unity because it not only justifies philanthropy (after all, we are all in this together) but also the exercise of power that lets those who possess power make decisions about and for those who do not. It papers over the savage inequalities that separate the haves from the have-nots, the urban from suburban, the schools with advanced-placement programs from those with metal detectors. Its unified economic development plans do not seem to distinguish between those families who are buffered against shifting economic winds from those who will be buffeted by every gust. It imagines relationships as cooperative and competitive interest groups. Its public forums are rarely a good place for significant talk with others.

However, this civic community, with its mix of ideals, oppressive fictions, and realities, can be a starting point for community action. It is against the fictions of this ideological construction (the community evoked by civic leaders, philanthropists, educational, medical, and social service institutions) that more concrete communities, described later, often draw together.

### *A Symbolic Neighborhood*

When the Community House/Carnegie Mellon team launched its writing projects in 1990, it chose the term *community literacy* to signal a departure—to teenagers, the neighborhood, and the university—from the limited literacies and authoritarian culture of school. Some funders (spokespersons for the wider civic community) disliked the lowbrow connotations that come with “adult literacy.” But the team chose to brandish the name as an argument that we needed to resee literacy as a rhetorical competence that is not based simply on reading and passive reception but on writing, argument, and public dialogue by members of the community—including its youth.

In this setting, the word *community* was loaded with unproblematic meaning for many members of Pittsburgh’s large, primarily black, urban neighborhoods. It is an intimate, insider term the inner city, working-class people often apply to themselves and those in their circle of solidarity. *Community folk* is a term of endearment. The companion term *community organizations* is mostly used for grass-roots, neighborhood nonprofits, churches, and local action groups. It would not reference elite organizations like the opera society (in the way a service-learning center might), but it does include institutions like the eighty-year-old Community House. Its historic brick building with

tall windows and fireplaces framed with dark wood mantels was built as a settlement house in 1916 like Jane Addams’s Hull House in Chicago. It was a place where at different times in its long history, immigrant mothers came for milk, health care, and respite, where mill families could get cheap meals, where kids grew up in its “programs,” where young black men played midnight basketball in the gym, where grass-roots groups met in the Community House rooms, and where blue-haired Presbyterian ladies—old Northsiders, too, and longtime members of the adjoined church—felt connected to the neighborhood across class and cultural differences.

In this context, the “community” stands in sharp relief to the “university” arriving with its vanload of white, middle-class, educated outsiders, short on savvy, long on good intentions, and comfortably invested in their own set of elite, academic, literate practices.

### *The Work of a Symbolic Neighborhood*

Arising at the intersection of place, race, and history, the symbolic black neighborhood of community folk offers a sense of identity and bonding that draws on a shared sense of ill-defined oppression, a vibrant cultural style, and an ongoing cultural project of self-definition. It is in the face of the boisterous, assertive, black presence of teenagers that many mentors suddenly come to see themselves as the other, outsiders to a self-conscious, self-styling circle. In the adult world, white folks can be treated as sort of honorary members of this community, usually through church ties, longtime participation in the struggle, or self-identification. One thing that makes this possible is that the available roles and relationships in this community are variations of family built around the relations of real and fictive kinship, brothers and sisters by blood and by choice.

One has the sense in the work of ethnographers and literacy researchers, such as Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Carol Stack (1974), Ralph Cintron (1997), and Ellen Cushman (1999), that they became at times part of this extended family. This openness was indeed part of the ethos of the Community House and Community House Church. But as I have argued elsewhere, this is not a role that most academic activists, much less students, are likely (or maybe even aspire) to achieve in normal projects or the limited time for contact. In the search for a community in which to talk across difference, this is not the opening readily available to most educators and students.

### *Symbolic Constructions*

If *community* works as a comfortable family of meanings on the Northside, it is a much more problematic term in other quarters. For instance, its con-

notation of warm, happy solidarity has been rightly criticized for masking a habit of silencing minority or dissident voices within its communal grasp. We need to recognize, Jeffrey Grabill argues, that a community is not a physical group of like-minded people but is instead a "symbolic construction" built around affinities that include race, ethnicity, spatiality, or ideas (2001, p. 92). Moreover, he argues, the most interesting thing about communities is that they have to be constructed—and often with some difficulty—around such affinities (p. 101).

As community organizers, such as, Saul D. Alinsky (1989) and John Mecknight (1995), have shown so well, the kind of communities that lead to social change must often be strategically "organized," called into being piece by piece, not only with a vision but with persistent and deliberate social skill. Members of an oppressed Republican "silent majority" or Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) are made, not born. For Grabill, the interesting thing that gets constructed is an institution. His careful study of a state-funded adult literacy program, a United Way project, and a neighborhood nonprofit is a compelling analysis of three artfully constructed organizations—entities aspiring to become established institutions, like the United Way itself.

#### *A Local Institution*

The CLC is an example of this constructive process; however, the organization it produced will differ in revealing ways from the more corporate model of a United Way agency. An institutional analysis of the Community Literacy Center might start with its parent organization, the Community House, a settlement house endowed by Christina Arbuckle in 1916 as a material protest against the missionary agenda of the mainline Presbyterian church—when the poor and immigrant families at home were in need. Over its history, Community House provided meals, education, visiting nurses, a safe place for women and their children, as it morphed into a provider of summer programs, meeting spaces, and midnight basketball.

In this institutional context, the CLC was set up in the 1990s as a self-supporting nonprofit (or 501(c)(3) in community-organizing parlance), which meant it was supported by continual grant writing under the letterheads of its university or community affiliation and under different agendas (depending on the funder). In such proposals, it alternated between being a neighborhood youth project, a recognized innovation in community/university collaboration, a research laboratory, and a working expression of moral visions and commitments. A mixture of personal histories, funding streams, institutional affordances, serendipity, and political climates both allowed and shaped its activity. Unlike the larger United Way and state-funded, state-regulated adult

and workplace literacy programs, the CLC represents a style of community center that operates under the radar of many institutional constraints. A chameleon community, it can change color and shape over time, based on its cumulative body of knowledge and growing network of people. And as an institution, it is a kind of symbolic community that newcomers and mentors can find easiest to enter.

The real working structure of an opportunistic organization like this is for all practical purposes located in the structure of personal relationships and shared goals. It began at the CLC with the magnetic, if yet to be defined vision of Wayne Peck that drew a community figure (Joyce Baskins) and an academic researcher-rhetorician (me) into what would be best described as an experimental journey. Coming back to Pittsburgh from divinity studies at Harvard, Wayne Peck had deliberately chosen to be a minister and community house director in this urban neighborhood. Ten years later, he had used a PhD in rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon University to study the rhetoric of community advocacy, looking at the kinds of arguments that lead to action (1991). And he began to develop a new vision of the Community House as a place for learning, talking, and writing, going beyond its then-standard community-center fare of Saturday lunches for the elderly, summer camp for kids, and youth recreation. Inspired by the progressive politics and the-ology of people like Cornel West, Peck's vision and enthusiasm created an oddly eclectic circle of community, university, and church people, meeting to read Shirley Heath one week and Cornel West the next. It was his infectious sense of possibility that drew me to shift my research agenda from the writing of college and professional writers to the rhetoric of urban adults and teenagers and to a focus on literate problem-solving in a place where it might make a greater difference. And this in turn opened up a sequence of doors to graduate students, who found in the CLC a way to ground their thinking about rhetorical action.<sup>8</sup>

The CLC operated as a formal 501(c)(3) for over a decade. From its beginnings in 1990, the practice of community literacy was in constant flux—from community gardens and landlord-tenant projects to videos on dealing with police to interventions in school policy. Sustainability in collaborations like this is not about the continuation of a given incarnation or project but about the development and traveling power of an idea and of a network of support that lets people travel to new locations, to new places in their lives, and toward new responses to possibility. By 2000, new projects, drawing on an expanded network of people, were growing out of this seedbed. One became the Community House Learning Center, where digital storytelling and multimedia technology let teens and parents talk, and kids initiate discussions about



bullying in middle schools. The same rhetorical tools are now letting members of the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transsexual (GLBT) community take their stories into local churches, attempting to use narrative in public dialogues where other forms of argument have failed. Another incarnation became the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tanks, designed to bring low-wage workers and later urban students with learning disabilities into economic and educational decision making. Further afield, community literacy practices turn up in college programs and research projects, like those described in chapter 9. The history of the CLC, like many other Northside enterprises, is opportunistic and experimental, using and depending on institutions but not really becoming one in the enduring sense of the term. What did persist in these new incarnations was a vision and way of doing things, a set of literate practices, and a loose, expanding network of people who cared about each other and liked to work together.

### *The Work of Organizations and Institutions*

The agenda of a community organization may be dictated by philanthropic impulses like the settlement-house movement, by the deliberate tactics of a pressure group like Alinsky's radical political organizers, or by a manager's persistent efforts to listen and respond to local needs (Grabill, 2001; Goldblatt, 2005). This kind of community functions first of all by developing programs, structures, and organizations—ranging from short-lived, one-issue pressure groups to funded centers and projects, such as the CLC, to sustained and sustaining parent institutions like the Community House itself.

There are, of course, other outcomes, as McKnight notes in his trenchant opposition to the social service industry (1995). Looking at the bureaucracies of welfare and housing, at the downtown managerial business of United Ways, at the professionals who run neighborhood agencies, he asks, "Why do the vast majority of social service dollars go to create jobs for white, middle class service 'providers'?" And not to the people in need of both money and jobs?

The role of institutions in community work is a contested one. Some argue the path to social change lies through institutional structures—through redesigning their practices or priorities (Grabill, 2001, Grabill and Simmons, 1998) or leveraging their power (Goldblatt, 2005). On the other hand, universities, like philanthropies, have a poor track record as reliable partners, entering communities as the "expert" or exiting once their data is collected (Flower and Heath, 2000). So some argue that the path to change lies in a studied avoidance of institutional entanglements. Paula Mathieu's image of the "public turn in English Composition" contrasts the tactics of street journalism and homeless groups with the growing institutionalization of service-learning (2005). Her

exposé-styled argument starts with the top-down style of Campus Compact formed by elite college presidents, as she decries the growth of "outreach" programs in the 1990s. Driven by institutional mandates and public-relations agendas, these administrative offices are charged with finding a ballooning number of student "placements." But they often fail to consider the needs of the community clients, much less monitor the value their outreach projects actually had for the community. Teachers find themselves "assigned" to courses with a community component, just as students are to writing projects. Both may enter these supposed partnerships without a personal interest or expertise in creating reciprocity. And "twice-burned" community organizations learn to avoid the phone calls from the local university.

The alternative that Mathieu models depends on informal relationships, growing out of extended personal involvement with a community organization, divorced from departmental or university agendas, and built not around "problems" (e.g., ongoing issues) but around ad hoc "projects" that grow out of the opportunities presenting themselves in a given semester. Mathieu argues for "tactics" rather than "strategies" (identifying strategic thinking with institutional agendas designed to control others through stable, measurable practices) (p. 16). By contrast, she argues, "Tactical power is real, but it is unreliable, unconstrained, and its effects are often unclear" (p. 54). The "tactical discourse" of Chicago street writers captures this responsive rather than proactive style of civic engagement: "Unable to equal or overturn the powerful strategic systems scripting their lives, the group created projects in various poetic and utopian forms—pot shots, poetry, humor, critique and parody—as tactical responses to systems framing their lives" (p. 45). Translated to a college course, Mathieu's tactical stance has little investment in repeating (institutionalizing) a successful project, preferring a creative, responsive gesture. Despite its limited social or measurable impact, tactically driven engagement avoids the danger of being co-opted by institutional agendas.

The CLC operates somewhere between the formal institutions Grabill (2001) describes and the deliberately ephemeral projects Mathieu values. Each new CLC project tried to build on methods and successes from the last. Without any illusions of controlling its environment, it operated *strategically* in response to its longer ends-in-view, in the rhetorical sense of strategic. It took a fairly systematic problem-solving stance to articulating goals, planning an action, and then reflecting on the outcomes, before leaping once again (with what was learned) back into the stream.

One of the enduring sources of controversy in community engagement (and within groups) 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? But this is not the only problem. Analyses of how organizational discourse actually functions reveal troubling barriers to dialogue across difference. Although committed to the necessity for organizational change, Grabill documents the ways service institutions turn an intentionally (?) deaf ear to everyday people. He makes a powerful case for the need to bring clients into the design of even the established, hierarchical, and state-regulated organizations (2001; Grabill & Simmons, 1998). Meanwhile, Mathieu's tactical discourse responds to institutional self-interest by building a protective moat around community actions—if it's from a university, don't return the call. In its own way, the arcane discourse of contemporary social critique within our discipline often enlarges the gulf between the holders of intellectual power and the oppressed.<sup>9</sup> And the practice of theory, based on unassailable certainties about the centrality of power and domination, never bothers with (and has no technique for) seeking the rival perspectives of those about whom it theorizes. Even the realpolitik of Alinsky's influential "rules for radicals"—the bible of impassioned grass-roots organizers—couldn't always afford the luxury of dialogue (1989). In teaching its corps of leaders how to organize people who think they are powerless and how to disrupt the status quo, organizing can be as manipulative of its constituents (for their own good) as it is of its foes.

If we limit community literacy to the discourse of these organizations, the openings for significant dialogue and inquiry across differences are hard to find. The intercultural relationships they create often position community folk as clients, patients, victims, children, immature, or incompetent. Community members typically exist as *participants* in social projects, not as *partners* with expertise who must be respected as agents in their own right.<sup>10</sup> So to the extent that such partnerships are diminished—and people from mainstream and elite circles become experts, leaders, directors, service providers, and tutors—the possibility of a community for inquiry with others, across difference, evaporates.

Is *community* work then best defined as organizational work? Is its transformational potential best realized within institutions? Referring to an understanding of community literacy (as Peck, Higgins, and I first tried to explain it in 1995), Grabill (2001) notes a revealing contradiction: "This definition fails to deal with its most difficult and important term, 'community' . . . In short, this article, while opening up spaces that make work like mine possible, does not define community in a meaningful way, yet ironically manages to define 'community literacy' within composition" (p. 89).

This ironic outcome—an underdefined yet, for some, defining concept—supports Grabill's own insight: the *community* to which we referred was a

symbolic entity, which was and is still and continually under construction.<sup>11</sup> Others "within composition" may use the term *community literacy* because it reflects their need to talk about this hard-to-nail-down sense of a *rhetorically* constructed community—something that is much more like a local public sphere than an institution, community organization, or social group. But perhaps now, more than ten years later, it will be easier to articulate how this symbolic rhetorical space actually works.<sup>12</sup>

#### *A Local Public Sphere*

A diverse, urban community like Pittsburgh is more than its institutions and symbolic spaces; it is a polity. A polity consists, as Iris Marion Young puts it, of "people who live together, who are stuck with one another" through proximity and economic interdependence (1996, p. 126). Because my pursuits affect what you can do, we have to deliberate in some public way about how we live together. I will argue that the most significant outcome of community literacy was not its creation of an institutional Center, its projects, or its publications but the creation of a local public sphere. That is, it called into being a deliberative community built around discourse, shared concerns, and different perspectives on change. Such a community did not take action as a group but expected its participants (from mentors and teens to families, public officials, and academics) to return to their own spheres enabled to think and act differently in ways appropriate to their situation. I like to imagine this deliberative space as positioned at a crossroads (under the signpost of community literacy) that identified this space with a search for social justice, an ethic of love and solidarity, and a faith in the power of (or at least willingness to take a chance on) intercultural inquiry. However, people come to such a space for different reasons.

The most important thing about community literacy—as it is described here—is not that it convenes a preexisting community but that the community it creates is a deliberative one, a distinctive local public sphere that was unlikely to exist without it. There are, of course, other local public spheres built around social service, political activism, or philanthropy. What is unusual about community literacy is that without positioning itself in an adversarial or advocacy stance, it reverses some critical patterns of authority (though by no means all) and gives pride of place to the expertise and voice of community folk. From its radical perspective on difference, it defines urban problems as *mutual* problems. The remainder of this chapter places this argument and the practices of community literacy in the context of a vigorous theoretical debate around the nature of the public sphere and the requirements of deliberative democracy.

### A Community Called to Intercultural Public Inquiry

#### *The Work of a Public Sphere*

Mass media and opinion polls have taught us to think of the "public" as sets of demographically definable groups of people (homeowners, Republicans, the teen market) that can be surveyed or sold to. But such a public, by definition, simply *has* opinions or buying preferences; because it does not discuss or deliberate, it cannot function as a public sphere (Hauser, 1999). The public or rhetorical theory is a very different animal—it is called into being by an issue or concern; it exists in the process of discussion, persuasion, and deliberation about actions. In contrast to the pseudo-dialogues of media-staged politics, working local publics are more likely to be found in the deliberative meetings of school boards and borough councils, in the planning and budget meetings of civic associations, clubs, or workplace organizations, or in the conversations in hair salons, churches, or coffeehouses, where competing visions of the common good are at stake.<sup>13</sup> The public of rhetorical theory is separate from the state (e.g., legislative bodies that can dictate change), but it has considerable power because sooner or later, that state must be validated and must justify its claims to represent its people. On the other hand, there is considerable debate not only over how this public sphere actually works in a democracy but also over whether the ideals (which have shaped humanistic education) are in fact ideal. The following brief look at this controversy is framed by the question this chapter raises: how do we find or create a place to talk deeply and productively across difference?

Our most powerful images of how the public should work are associated with the liberal political theory of the Enlightenment (e.g., of Thomas Jefferson and John Locke). Not to be confused with contemporary "liberal" or left-leaning politics, this rational, individualistic liberal model of the public sphere developed hand-in-hand with the rise of the mercantile middle class and capitalism. Its most influential modern theorist, Jürgen Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere began to take shape in the form of discussions in eighteenth-century coffeehouses, salons, and newspapers as the rising middle class found its identity and voice (1962/1989). Public life was a theater for debate and deliberation, separated from the workings of the family, the economic market, and the state. It was the middle class's place for shaping and publicizing its ideas about culture, commerce, and politics. And this public sphere became the middle class's tool for influencing the state to support the needs of capital.

The public sphere of liberal, Enlightenment theory is also an ideal of how public discussion and policymaking should be conducted. Its idealization of

universal truth and rational consensus and its deliberate blindness to difference have shaped how we teach humanities and argument writing (Atwill, 1998; Jarratt, 1991b). In this ideal of public discussion (which Patricia Roberts-Miller calls the "traditional-universalist" model), valid arguments are based not on local, particular experience or personal opinion but on universal premises to which all men would agree (as in Jefferson's "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal") (2004, p. 36). This insistence on general principles is tied to a focus on public topics that deal with the general interest or affect the common good.

In practice, this ideal has also had some unhappy consequences. Historically, its public/private split closed off discussion of "private" matters (e.g., domestic violence, child labor, or workplace safety) that it relegated more properly to family life or to economic relations between worker and employer (Fraser, 1990). In recent decades, this same division would define the destructive effects of globalization as purely market-based decisions and would deal with calls for workplace democracy and school reform alike as managerial problems. This narrow version of what is *public* continues to reflect the concerns of a middle-class male business world, shutting out the interests of people marginalized by age, gender, race, class, or status. In the same way, the universal principles or "common sense" on which a public argument should be based tends to reflect the assumptions and traditions of the majority, not the marginalized (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 43). For example, the notorious "dead white guys" who make up the canon of liberal education reflect a particular and rather narrow slice of "universal" human experience.

Mark Howard's rap argued that classroom conflicts, dismissed as "personal" examples of bad behavior, were, in fact, a shared problem that cried out for inquiry and communication. We will see many community literacy writers use the CLC's deliberative process to rename issues—from school and city policy to landlord-tenant conflict to growing up in an inner city—as *personal/public* realities for which people share a common responsibility.

A second, long-unquestioned feature of this liberal Enlightenment tradition is an insistence on objectivity and rationality as the basis for argument and on consensus as its goal. The public sphere connoted an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters. The discussion was to be open and accessible to all; merely private matters were inadmissible; inequalities of status were to be bracketed; and discussants were to deliberate as peers. The result of such discussion would be "public opinion" in the strong sense of a consensus about the common good (Fraser, 1990, p. 59).

These assumptions lie behind composition textbooks in which the "argument" essay is presented as a thesis followed by list of reasons, an optional

swipe at possible opponents, and a reiteration of the thesis. The best reasons are facts; that is, statements that are perceived as objective because they are “non-controversial” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 75). But, of course, what is deemed controversial or not depends on who is admitted into our public. The humanist tradition of rational argument has defined its public as an elite, schooled body that wisely dismisses narrative, personal experience, and impassioned argument (even when outrage at injustice might be the rational response). Of course, it also excludes the majority of people not schooled in its distinctive discourse. Critics of these assumptions do not deny the value of reason and education per se but note how the schooled “genre” of this rational argument locks out people who cannot or will not play by its rules, who argue with the tools of other discourses. Roberts-Miller describes this cozily narrowed public as an enclave—an audience that shares our values—and shows how our current enthusiasm for the collaborative classroom allows students to remain sheltered from difference (2004, p. 42). Just as textbooks urge students to write to a neutral audience (one presumably just waiting to be informed), the collaborative classroom pushes students to arrive at a consensus. The discourse moves of elite rationality, normative objectivity, and consensus work to exclude important sources of difference, dismissing different worldviews and experiences (that might see our “objective” assumptions as actually quite controversial). They discourage dissensus and its arguments for change. We will see community literacy wrestle with this problem by trying to create a hybrid discourse, one that expands the repertoire of both the community and university partners and structures a deliberation around the contributions of difference.

A third feature of the public sphere of liberal political theory, admirable in theory but problematic in practice, is its aspiration to focus on the quality of the arguments and ignore differences in the power or status of the speaker. Its strategy is to “bracket” such differences, to suspend awareness of status and hierarchy, and to deliberate “as if” all discussants were social equals. Historically, the bourgeois public sphere never *was* diverse or blind to difference (Fraser, 1990). Jefferson’s “all men” not only excluded unpropertied men, women, slaves, and the poor (Roberts-Miller, 2004, pp. 47–48), it didn’t extend the rights of free speech to white, propertied loyalists). And even in diverse groups, markers of status rarely pass unnoticed. For example, studies of contemporary, mixed, deliberative bodies studies show that women are more frequently interrupted and their interventions ignored (Fraser, 1990).

Even if the injunction to bracket difference by attempting to ignore it were possible, many people argue that it would produce flawed arguments. Because genuine differences are rarely hidden, speakers who wish to play

the game must assume a stance of dispassionate neutrality and avoid the evidence of personal experience and any appearance of self-interest. But for disenfranchised groups, denying one’s identity as a working-class student, an inner-city African American, or a migrant laborer denies the reality of social difference, of power, and inequality—the very issues these groups want us to see as *public* concerns. When a discourse insists its members suspend, ignore, or neutralize the identities of women, workers, peoples of color, gays, and lesbians, it effectively removes those realities from deliberation.

Students, co-workers, or citizens looking for a space and a way to talk across difference will find their dilemma expressed in Nancy Fraser’s words: “Something like Habermas’ idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice, . . . [but] the specific form in which Habermas [and, I will add, our educational tradition] has elaborated this idea is not wholly satisfactory” (1990, p. 57). From the standpoint of community literacy, the injunctions to universalize, bracket difference, and limit discourse to rational argument geared to consensus have two flaws. One is that these notions have been used to authorize a particular style of discourse—what Fraser calls “protocols of style and decorum” (1990, p. 63)—that often exclude whole groups of speakers, their perspectives, and their ways of representing an issue. Good arguments depend on reasoning—on offering reasons and attempting consistency. But when rationality is defined as the conventions and norms of a formal argument or the practices of an elite discourse, other ways of reasoning are excluded. The expressive narrative associated with “women’s ways of knowing” (Gilligan, 1982/1993), the complexity and indirection of African-American signifying (Gates, 1988), the personal, experiential assertiveness of Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” (Lipcomb, 1995), and even the bold independence and the unflinching descriptions in Ida B. Wells’s *Southern Horrors* (Royster, 1995; Logan, 1999) are deemed not just out of bounds but dismissible. And the scope of public inquiry is radically diminished. The public is reduced to an enclave marked by its elite discourse.

A second flaw in this rational discourse is central to service-learning. If we continue to assume that public talk and writing must fit our norms of an elite, educated discourse, where do students learn to move out of this particular enclave (even if it represents a dominant majority) into discussions with others? How do they develop Fraser’s multicultural literacy that allows communication across lines of cultural difference (1990, p. 69)? Or when our “collaborative” classrooms bracket difference to reduce the uncomfortable possibility of conflict, where then do students learn to respond to the discursive conflict that is part of dealing with difference?<sup>24</sup>

*Alternatives That Engage Difference*

The defenders of the liberal bourgeois public sphere acknowledge that it is a utopian model—something to aspire to even if it rarely worked as planned. But many critics, concerned with its suppression of difference, argue that it is not only an inaccurate description but a flawed ideal. Some of the alternatives they propose help us articulate how community literacy could work as a public that engages difference.

One of the most robust alternatives to emerge in theorizing about the public sphere is the notion of deliberative democracy. It is not only skeptical about certain ideals of the traditional-universalist model (e.g., its universalizing rationality, consensus seeking, and the bracketing of difference); it offers a very different story of how the public sphere in an “actually existing late capitalist democracy” operates (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). Although its advocates do not agree on how to do it, deliberative democracy tackles head-on the problem of a productive engagement with difference (Gutman and Thompson, 2004; I. M. Young, 1996). Moreover, it does so not only in theory but in terms of the rhetorical art or technique and the educational practices that would support it (Roberts-Miller, 2004).

So what would a local public attuned to inquiry, justice, and deliberation across difference have to do or include? The debates around deliberative democracy, liberal education, and the public sphere can help to articulate four critical features of such a public (and in the process suggest why such an ideal is no easy walk).

1. *It is open to discovery.* Some models of public discussion assume that people form a public either because they already have common interests (which can lead to an enclave in which one is only preaching to the choir). Alternatively, people go public because their predefined competing self-interests bring them to debate or the bargaining table. The deliberative model, on the other hand, argues that in discussion and exchange we actually *discover* our interests. This process brings our needs to consciousness, lets us clarify vague or poorly understood problems, uncover new ways to frame issues, and discover shared interests. One-way engagement with newspapers, magazines, radio, or TV is no substitute for this process of reflective deliberation. (Hauser, 1999, pp. 18, 26, 53).

2. *It accepts discursive conflict.* Genuinely diverse points of view are essential to understanding a problem, even though the price of difference is tension and substantive conflict. A community that can accommodate *discursive* conflict—without falling into partisan, self-interest advocacy—not only avoids unjust exclusion but also benefits itself by complicating and reducing

the sort of unquestioned consensus enclaves produce (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 186). This sort of conflict is different from self-interest advocacy (in which I do not need listen to you) and from expressive argument (in which you cannot challenge me because this is “my opinion”). My personal experience and opinion (which may be in conflict with yours) are allowed here, *but they are also* up for argument because they are interpretations and being used as reasons. And as such they are open to discussion and reinterpretation.

Discursive conflict among ideas—a form of agonistic rhetoric based on tolerance and mutual respect of people—lets people explore and test ideas against the strong contenders. It acknowledges that around issues, such as equality, we may enter areas of deep, irreconcilable disagreement. But the response should not be to avoid, bracket, or silence those uncomfortable differences but to put them on the table *in the spirit of inquiry*.

3. *It reaches for resolution, not consensus.* The traditional-universalist model calls for consensus based on rational warranted assent. That is, the best argument wins the day (e.g., the one that withstands refutation by the rules of the discourse). There is little room for continuing negotiation of difference. A deliberative model, on the other hand, assumes that communal decisions are “always necessarily contingent and cannot be seen as ending the process or permanently answering the question” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 201). The members of a public may continue to hold different opinions about a mutual problem, but as interdependent members of their society, they are willing to seek a resolution (and seek to influence it) through discourse (rather than force, bargaining, or voting).

4. *It requires rhetorical competence.* In Habermas’s ideal bourgeois public sphere, public opinion depended on the “critical reflections of a public competent to form its own judgments” (1962/1989, p. 90). Although entry into that competent public was blind to social status (e.g., opening the doors to the middle class), it demanded educated and informed participants who could produce “generalizable arguments that adhere to the norms of ideal speech” (Hauser, 1999, p. 43). In effect, competence could be measured by one’s command of the particular conventions of an elite “rational” discourse.

Deliberative models based on justice, on the other hand, assert the competence of marginalized people to interpret reality, to speak for themselves, and to do so out of alternative discourses. They require reasonableness (the need to support claims with reasons), not a particular form of rational discourse, because the goal of participation is to reach a resolution rather than ascertain a generalizable truth.

The “rules of discourse” in deliberation may be even more demanding than schooled rationality.

In a deliberative situation we treat one another with respect, we care enough to disagree, we listen so well we can articulate our oppositions' arguments in terms to which the opposition will assent, we do not try to offend and we try not to take offense, and we try to make arguments using reasons that people who disagree with us think are valid reasons (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 207)

And if all this were not enough, Roberts-Miller raises the bar of competence with an additional claim (that challenges the hubris of elite discourses): "In deliberative democracy, one must make one's argument understood in the words *others* use" (p. 213). Talking across difference will demand rhetorical empathy, an attempt not only to listen and understand others but to present our own views in words that speak to them. Young sees such rhetorical empathy in narratives and arguments that speak to people in their own situations. This situatedness "also contributes to political argument," she argues, "by the social knowledge it offers of how social segments view one another's actions and what are the likely effects of policies and actions on people in different social locations" (1996, p. 132).

In community literacy, the search for such situated knowledge operates in the service of inquiry. A social cognitive analysis (see chapter 7) suggests that such inquiry is indeed able to create a distinctive form of knowing. And by unpacking the experiential reality behind abstract claims, it also has the potential to transform understanding in a public deliberation. The catch is that situated deliberative talk requires a rhetorical competency that goes beyond empathetic disposition, assertive advocacy, or rational argument. We must not only create a just representation of complex social meanings and outcomes but be understood and be capable of transforming the understanding of others. The problem of community literacy is the problem of drawing its public into this alternative argumentative practice of inquiry.

### *Competing Publics and Counterpublics*

We need to complete this picture of public talk by returning to the identity of the public itself. Despite the bourgeois public's claim that it is the public, Fraser argues that "not only were there always a plurality of competing publics, but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual." Ranging from elite women's associations to peasant movements and working-class networks, these subaltern counterpublics "contested the norms of the bourgeois public" and asserted alternative styles of political action and public speech (Fraser, 1990, p. 61).

Gerard Hauser's work turns Fraser's "plurality" into an animated network of local publics, linked in the 3-D spider web he calls the "reticulate public

sphere" (1999, p. 60). He envisions the members of each local public engaged in the heady rhetorical work of public dialogue, trying to discover their interests, points of difference and convergence, and possibilities for accommodation. Adhering to the standards of tolerance and reasonableness, these publics replace the discourse of rationality with the vernacular language of conversational communication. Then as Hauser's camera zooms back, we see a public sphere made up of all these multiple, nested publics. And we see "a dialogizing rhetorical alternative" to the disilluminating images of a single, hegemonic, bourgeois, media-controlled public (p. 67).

If Hauser's portrait of vernacular voices sets this dialogic web of rhetorical actors abuzz, Michael Warner's accounts of publics and counterpublics describes what goes on in this process and reveals (and reveals in) the subversive work of such talk.

Publics, Warner argues, are not found but called into being by discourse. "Public discourse says not only, 'Let a public exist,' but 'Let it have this character speak this way, see the world this way' . . . Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes. Put on a show and see who shows up" (2005, p. 114). Although we often use the metaphors of conversation or writer-to-reader communication to describe what goes on in a public, the real activity, he asserts, is "circulation"—the movement and transformation of ideas, language, and attitudes in an ongoing discourse that gives the nod to what went before and anticipates a new response (p. 90). Circulation is an intertextual process that sounds like Bakhtin's dialogic speech acts; that is, I cite Warner, you pick up my words, attach them to yours, and this new version comes back to me, Warner, and others in an ongoing discourse.

So where is the potential for transformation in a network of multiple publics with their own often-closed systems of circulation? One answer lies in the disquieting voices of counterpublics and their ability to elbow their way into other publics, circulating more than good arguments. The tradition of "rational-critical" dialogue might lead us to assume that what circulates are merely arguments, that is, supported claims that can be summarized as logical propositions. But public discourse, Warner claims, is also an intensely performative act of "poetic world making" (2005, p. 114). It attempts to realize a vision of the world through address. One critical part of this vision is its model of what it means to *participate in this relationship among strangers* (because it is this address to strangers that distinguishes a public from a mere group or community). Consider the counterpublic style of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Council ("caught in an inescapable network of mutuality") versus the Black Panthers separatist stance, or of the Sierra Club's establishment rationality versus Earth First!

sabotage. The particular performative style of a given public helps organize how people interact—it creates a distinctive “consciousness of stranger so-called” (Warner, 2005, p. 108). What circulates in this discourse is not just arguments but models of public meaning-making, listening, responding, argumentation—models that may revise, challenge, or simply thumb their noses at the rational image of speaker-listener (R. Greene, 2002, p. 438). This opening for difference will be particularly significant for the intercultural local publics of community literacy. Modeled around multivoiced problem-solving, such publics define and organize their participants as collaborative partners empowered to exploit the expressive potential of poetic action and to insist on alternative ways of relating across difference.

The counterpublics of contemporary queer culture, feminism, nineteenth-century African American theater, the *Spectator’s* eighteenth-century reading public, and the black public sphere reveal ways difference has made itself heard.<sup>15</sup> Unlike mainstream discourses, which always seem eager to “stand in for the public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people,” counterpublics see themselves as in conflict with the dominant public (Warner, 2005, p. 117). More than just “subalterns with a reform program,” they not only assert alternative ideas and policy positions but insist, often with some indecorousness, on alternative public ways of speaking, relating to others, and projecting one’s identity. An African American, for example, would be speaking from a counterpublic only if he or she chooses to speak in what is regarded as a racially marked idiom (Warner, 2005, p. 119).

Another set of subalterns—the Chicago gangs studied by Ralph Cintron—add a problematic dimension to this theoretical discussion. On the one hand, their “language tactics” in graffiti and attire reveal what Cintron calls a “shadow system” that appropriates and reinterprets the topoi of the mainstream or “system world” (such as, nationhood, loyalty, and heart) as a way to demand just what the system refuses to grant—recognition and respect for a marginalized identity (1997, p. 176–77). Painting walls and throwing (hand) signs are performative arguments to both the mainstream public and competing gangs. On the other hand, while these identity and rhetorical actions are “at least, partially determined by the same socioeconomic and power differences that give rise to subaltern counterpublics,” they are also linked to a criminality that goes beyond defacing private property to drug dealing and killing. And this, Cintron argues, means that “the public sphere in Angel-stown—Fraser’s ‘actually existing democracy’—is fundamentally closed to gang graffiti writers and street gangs” (Cintron, 1997, p. 186).<sup>16</sup>

So what would it take for gangs to function as a legitimate counterpublic within a deliberative democracy, where the goal of justice must be combined with tolerance and mutual respect? Cintron’s carefully hedged “faint hope”

suggests the same need for rhetorical structure that we will see in community literacy’s Community Conversations and Think Tanks. He would support that hope by “encouraging gang leaders and membership to participate in public forums with majoritarian society, [and] by insisting on careful documentation of the assumptions and beliefs of all parties so that they could later be deconstructed, and by insisting that these forums move toward concrete truces, programs and proposals” (1997, p. 196).

This account of counterpublics let us add two more critical features to our sketch of how the local public called up by community literacy might actually be working.

5. *It builds identities and arguments.* Counterpublics act first as safe houses for withdrawal and regrouping where new representations can be crafted and where identities are formed and transformed. As they expand their network, they can become like the feminist counterpublic that Fraser describes with its “array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies . . . academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places” (1990, p. 67). The discourse that circulates there transforms previously silenced concerns (from domestic violence to women’s liberation) into public concerns by creating new concepts and language and performing new female/feminine/womanly/womanist identities.

6. *It transforms public interaction.* Counterpublics do more than nurture and circulate the in-talk and agreements of enclaves. Addressing a public is a campaign to extend the frontier, to call others to recognize themselves as members in this discourse, implicated in its concerns. Counterpublics engage the dominant public but not in the familiar form of advocacy, that is, as “interest-bearing strategic actors” arguing particular policies within the existing relationships of power. Counterpublics, Warner insists, exist as a modern form of power by asserting new forms of interaction, new norms of “stranger-relationality” (Greene, 2002, p. 438). “In this way, publics and counterpublics are more than spaces of persuasion: they are poetic-expressive forces that imagine particular worlds of stranger sociability” (p. 438). In practice, they change the rules for talking and listening to one another, for acknowledging the other as a worthy interlocutor. Of course, the more these alternative styles of discourse depart from the norms of critical-rational dialogue, through embodied relationships, emotion, or playfulness, the more tension they create (Warner, 2005, p. 122).<sup>17</sup>

### *The Local Counterpublic of Community Literacy*

At their best, the publics called into being by community literacy enact the six features described above of a public attuned to difference. However, these local publics are also of special interest for the ways they differ from larger move-



ments, such as Warner's queer culture counterpublics, Fraser's feminist subaltern counterpublics, or Hauser's vernacular public of Polish resistance.

To begin, the community of community literacy has a different principle of composition. Unlike a counterpublic called around a shared identity (e.g., having been "othered," as a feminist, African American), this local public is designed around internal difference. From its intentionally diverse identity to its explicit strategies and deliberate search for rival interpretations, community literacy creates a friendly space within its community for *discursive* conflict. Its collaboratively supported style of dissensus often starts around the big table when urban teens and college mentors hear their own voices break the silence in a new kind of public. It moves to the larger public of Community Conversations and publications. But unlike organized advocacy or critique, community literacy treats difference, rival hypotheses, and conflicting realities as a resource for inquiry. Discovery starts with the articulation of difference. It leads to a deliberation (unlike agonistic debate) that enjoins all its participants to act as partners in inquiry, to take on the difficult role of collaborative problem-solvers. That is, to be responsible for understanding the images of others in order to build a new negotiated meaning, workable options, and a resolution marked by justice.

This is not a role any of the partners are typically accustomed to take, especially in standard community/university relations or in the expert-to-advocate dialogues between the privileged and the underprivileged. Intercultural inquiry and collaborative problem-solving calls for a hybrid discourse and for rhetorical competencies that are rarely developed in public schools, college composition classes, political debate, or community organizing. So for community literacy, "going public" does not simply mean publicizing positions and arguments but nurturing and structuring a way to become a diverse, deliberative local public.

In this respect, these local publics act much like the larger counterpublics. The safe collaborative space of the CLC nurtured not only subaltern interpretations of school policies but the rhetorical competence to talk about them, and affirmed the identity of inner-city teenagers as worthy contributors to such public issues. In its newsletters and public presentations, this upstart counterpublic combined tools of rational-critical argument with situated knowledge, personal experience, narrative, and performative rhetoric in music, skits, raps, and dialogue with the audience. Its texts often circulated locally and found their way to web sites. However, the second distinguishing feature of such local publics lies in the arguments they build. I will argue that the most important thing this counterpublic put *in circulation* was not its policy statements on school suspension or its insights on gangs but its

model of "stranger sociability"—that is, *its demonstration of a public dialogue that uses difference as a resource for inquiry and decision making*. And I will suggest that its impact is ultimately based on its power to circulate a model of intercultural inquiry.

The test (and, John Dewey would argue, the ultimate meaning) of this claim about community literacy as a local public lies in its outcomes. So it might be helpful to reframe this portrait of a local public as a set of questions focused on visible indicators of impact, of success, or more generally of what actually happened. That is, on the question of outcomes that this book will try to answer. The first (and for many community projects the only) measure of significant action is the safe-house effect. So the first question might be: do students and mentors find value in and grow through this experience? The CLC would add: did they develop more complex interpretations of a shared problem and the ability to test those ideas at the table of rivaling and collaboration? Did they develop a more public expertise in both performative and reasoned argument and the ability to mix the two? Did they see themselves with that counterpublic self-consciousness as creating a new identity as a speaker and writer?

Questions at a second level would ask: what are the indicators that this local public created a widened network of circulation, not just as a media count of one-time spectators but also as an impact on subsequent discussion? How actively did this dialogue (and its style of deliberation) find its way into relations or discussions between teens and peers, parents, teachers? (For example, we will hear from students who report using "rivaling" to get the car keys or avoid a fight; from teachers who suddenly see capabilities in a student like Mark or who criticize the new hubris of CLC boys who now "think they can write"). Does the work of this public find its way into the writing of mentors, graduate students, or scholars? Do its texts and the texts it sponsors circulate? (Indicators of circulation might include *Whassup with Suspension* being used with city school vice principals, *Raising the Curtain on Curfew* being requested by the police academy, scholarly talks being given with the texts, and articles being published, cited, or used in new arguments.)

And on a third level, which I continue to believe is the most significant, we should look at this local counterpublic as a model of public discourse attempting to engage difference. Unlike a community advocacy project targeted on a specific institutional or political change (as necessary as such projects are), the goal of community literacy is to engage its strangers in a public space devoted to foregrounding difference as a resource in inquiry, organized by new norms of discourse that are both modeled and advocated. In its individual projects, Community Conversations, and written documents, community



literacy puts its counterpublic style of listening, talking, and interpreting in the foreground. So some appropriate indicators of outcomes would lead us to look for new patterns of dialogue observed among teens, at teen-led public events, and by teens themselves (see chapter 5), in spin-off neighborhood meetings, in inquiry-based educational software, and in projects with other institutions that adapt this mode of dialogue (e.g., dialogues in a women's clinic, children's hospital, nursing home, and city school) as well as in the publications they produced (see chapters 2, 4, and 8). In short, the meaning of a local public lies in the evidence of what it *does*.

So imagine if you will the mentors left back in the van looking for a place to talk across difference. They have before them four robust symbolic communities, to which I have referred for convenience as a civic body, a symbolic neighborhood, a local institution, and a local public. The latter invites them into a disconcertingly diverse space for inquiry and deliberation where the familiar discourse of academic writing will be challenged by alternatives from teen talk to black preaching to political organizing. This cultural intersection and its hybrid discourse acknowledge the contradictions and conflicts that are part of mutual problems at the same time it calls its participants to be partners in creating this space for public dialogue.

The unique ability of the community organizer, nonprofit director, or local leader is to construct a community organization. This book will argue that it is the special prerogative of writers and rhetoricians to create the multicultural, educative, deliberative local public spheres of community literacy. Creating such a space as teachers, researchers, and students is not easy. At the beginning of a literacy project, the idea of participating in this symbolic rhetorical community is something mentors are likely to see as another academic fiction or are at best willing to take on faith. Their education, Kurt Spellmeyer argues, has not prepared them to seek "common ground of understanding" or to participate in "a revitalized public discourse, a conversation open to every person, and to every discipline, dialect, and tradition. . . . [I]n the absence of any visible public dimension, our students correctly surmise that their primary task is accommodation to the established forms of specialized practice" (1993, pp. 15–18).<sup>18</sup>

As it turned out, the mentors we will follow struggled with their roles as partners in learning for many reasons. The college students in Elenore Long's in-depth study of mentoring came with competing if unexamined assumptions about their contributions (1994). If some saw themselves as editors/experts upholding Standard Written English and academic discourse, and some as champions of free expression, others came as cultural critics and emancipators.<sup>19</sup> Few came prepared for collaborative inquiry.

If university students seem perplexed about their role in a public sphere or rhetorical community, many urban teenagers seemed to consider the notion meaningless if not patently absurd. The assumption that adults would listen, much less that these teens' own ideas and writing would matter and might even provoke serious thought or change, fit little in their experience. It often took the experience of the final, public Community Conversation to suddenly give reality to the power of words that many of us take for granted—an experience that the teens later rated as one of the CLC's "highly valuable" features. So, even if such a community offers our best bet for talking with others, it must be constructed not only in fact but also in people's imaginations. And the capacity to be a genuine partner in inquiry is, it appears, something that we learn with difficulty.<sup>20</sup>

The most interesting thing about symbolic communities is what they do in the material world. So let us look now at how community literacy, in the spirit of "build it and they will come," went about creating public spaces for inquiry, understanding, and action across difference—and the unexpected things people did in these spaces.

up such a hypothesis, you begin to feel the limits of formal definition, of theorizing that aspires to a cleanly drawn, internally self-consistent edifice of words and ideas. So in this chapter, I would like to unpack some of the meanings of community literacy in action, not merely by defining terms but by instantiating them. That is, by exploring a complex instance of literate action for what it can tell us about three themes of community literacy that figure prominently in its definition and by asking:

What does the *rhetorical agency* of everyday people mean? How does it work?

How does a *strategic practice* shape an intercultural rhetoric?

And if *inquiry* is the goal, what are its outcomes?

This instance comes from early in the history of the Community Literacy Center, initiated by a project called Risk and Stress. The story it tells about the meaning of agency, strategic rhetoric, and inquiry is partial and situated as well as biased by the values and questions I bring to the telling. It is also provocative. And precisely because it is a local, situated account of one way in which literacy does work, it challenges us to take on the work of observation-based theory building.<sup>1</sup>

### Risk, Stress, and Respect

The Risk and Stress Project (as it was initially called) was sparked by a conversation with an activist with multiple community identities. Ian Rawson was a gently irreverent deflator of carit and a social visionary with a commitment to service.<sup>2</sup> Despite his academic bent to anthropology, he would have been a great community organizer if he had not already been a vice president for policy at the major tri-state hospital across the park from the Community House. Rawson's outspoken and rather ironic position, given his job as an institutional spokesperson, was that health was not created by hospitals, which only dealt with illness, but by communities.

### Posing the Problem in Theory—The Manifesto

Conversations with Rawson and other health-care providers followed by some homework helped us pose this problem in a first-draft manifesto for inquiry. This text, which became material for mentors and a funding proposal, argued that communities are not only sources of health or stress but are also rhetorical forums for understanding what concepts, such as health and stress, actually mean, in practice, if you are an urban teenager. However, when the pilot project and dialogue with the teens began for real, this conceptualization took a new turn. The initial problem statement of our manifesto, excerpted in the appendix with its hands-on logo, contrasted

## 2 Taking Literate Action

The Community Literacy Center mentors we left in the previous chapter stood poised at the beginning of an experiment in civic engagement. Like them, the CLC itself would need to articulate in principle what it was discovering in practice. Standing in the context of other work in composition, critical literacy, and service-learning, it began to shape itself around a distinctive local public rhetoric with position statements like the one below. Such statements are good for thinking with. They force you to articulate what matters most and how those things are related to each other. They stand as a sort of hypothesis that can be constantly challenged by the reality you are trying to describe, which in turn keeps taking you deeper into the mystery and requiring of you a new naming.

### *Community literacy is a form of literate action that allows:*

- everyday people within the urban community to take rhetorical agency in their lives and for their community;
- everyday people from places of privilege to participate in the struggle for understanding and social justice.

### *Community literacy depends on the social ethic and strategic practice of intercultural rhetoric to:*

- draw out the voices of the silenced and the expertise of marginalized people;
- draw people normally separated by difference into new roles as partners in inquiry;
- recognize and use difference in the service of discovery and change, transforming rather than erasing its conflicts and contradictions.

Definitional statements like these also ask us to unpack their terms of art, which is what this chapter hopes to do. And yet, when you begin to unravel the tangled skein of experiences, meanings, and contradictions that make

the comfortable middle-class assumptions about growing up in a healthy community with the reality we were recognizing in our own urban neighborhoods. Arguing that urban teenagers need to be drawn into community forums as *expert working partners*, the problem statement sketches three principles for creating such intercultural partnerships (see pp. 71-72).

When setting out on an inquiry, it is good to have a plan or sense of the problem, as long as you aren't too attached to it. As the excerpt from that problem statement (found at the end of this chapter) reveals, there are a number of potential contradictions built into our representation of the situation. First, because institutions like the CLC convene such dialogues (they literally provide and own the table), will marginalized partners be able to get their vision of the problem itself "on the table"? Our small manifesto posed a problem as we—that is, the community and literacy leaders, academics, and health care professionals—saw it. But if problems are only problems *for somebody*, is stress, risk, or health something teens are actually trying to manage? Secondly, if teenagers are not automatically prepared to participate as problem solvers, adults are even less ready to listen carefully and collaborate with teens. Can we redirect the impulse to placate anger, the reflex to pet and praise for self-expression and then ignore the substance of what young people say, or the irrepressible urge to give wise advice? Finally, say that some degree of collaboration, reflection, and knowledge-making is achieved; just how does the work of this local rhetorical community make a difference and for whom?

#### *Posing the Problem in Context—The Pilot Project*

The working group seated around the CLC table that first day was an unusual mixture. It included Ian Rawson, who brought two health-care colleagues, a trauma psychiatrist and a nurse practitioner (who often dealt with the aftereffects of a shooting had on schools, families, and kids). They, like the CLC team, had seen plenty of rap sessions and encounter groups designed to "let the teenagers express themselves" and had done those goodwill gigs in which professionals "show up" in the community. What we wanted instead was a working group who could pose this "health" problem as teens actually experienced it and begin to articulate the hidden story of ongoing stress—if teens even felt their experience in this way. The CLC team at this point included Wayne Peck and Joyce Baskins (introduced in chapter 1); Donald Tucker, an African American in his 40s who, like Joyce Baskins, had grown up in the neighborhood; and me. Most of the six teenagers who joined us at the table as the grounded experts were articulate, confident juniors and seniors, known from past projects as strong working partners. Shirley, however, was only a

ninth grader, a slip of a girl, who had been slipped in the group as somebody's cousin to let her have the experience.

That afternoon, Ian launches the inquiry with his surprising assertion: the medical profession, with its hospitals and technology is not the giver of health. Health comes from a community that supplies decent jobs, affordable housing, social support, and a reason for hopeful, health-preserving behavior. His profession needs to learn this. The trauma psychiatrist talks about a similar need but defines the problem as stress. He often deals with stress in its acute form, but he and the nurse practitioner say they feel frustrated when they talk to teachers' groups; they need a way to help teachers see the more hidden but ongoing kinds of stress their students may be facing.

Defining the problem this way, as stress, seems to strike an immediate chord—the six teenagers at the table have a lot to say. They talk about the shock of a drive-by (when shots come crashing through the window as you and your boyfriend watched TV), about how the stigma of poverty produces ailments that allow you to avoid going to school, and about how success itself can place you—in only a month from now—in the intimidating environment of a predominantly white West Virginia college. Shirley, however, seems acutely aware that she is only a ninth grader in this group of assertive, older teens and professionals. She says almost nothing the first hour. At this point, the group breaks out into collaborative planning partnerships: each adult becomes the supporter of a teen writer working to articulate his or her vision of the story behind the story of teen stress in a rough text that we will share at the next session. With the support of her partner, Mrs. Baskins, Shirley's story begins to emerge.

#### *The Racist Cop in My Neighborhood: How I Deal with It*

*By Shirley Lyle*

The purpose of this piece is to let people know how the cops are racist in my neighborhood. I want to also tell you how we teens deal with that racism.

Last summer when I was twelve going on thirteen, I noticed a lot of discrimination in Hershel Field, a playground in my community.

That summer was the most heated summer I can remember. Maybe I began to notice because I was becoming a young adult and starting to go out more.

Here's the story. It was a Friday evening. My sister and I went to Hershel Field. It was getting fun up there, and we couldn't wait to go to watch the guys play basketball. We also went to kinda check the guys out.

We were sitting on the bleachers watching the hoop game. About a half and hour into the game, a black Jeep pulled up into the parking lot. The bass from the Jeep stereo was kickin, playing a favorite Reggae tune. We watched from across the court. Three young, well built guys roll out of the Jeep. One had a forty of Blue Bull and the other was drinking from the Arizona size beer can.

They took a sip and sat the beer down by the bleachers and started to hoop. Out of nowhere these two big white cops came up the steps to the hoop court.

Without asking any questions, they grabbed them up and then asked where they got the beer. They put the guys through all kinds of changes, and when they didn't see any more beer, they came over to me and asked if I knew where there was some.

The one cop said to me, "Hey, yo man. You know where the beer is. You can tell me."

I was so mad because they asked me and because I know that at the other field they didn't do that. Hershel Field is where the blacks and whites go but they separate themselves from each other. Blacks play on one side, whites on the other.

The white kids and adults drink beer, smoke pot, but the cops don't hassle the whites or pay much attention to the bad things they do. They just bother the blacks.

I would be so mad and so would the other black kids. We used to just talk among ourselves about it. That didn't solve anything, it just gave us a chance to say how we felt.

The public, police blotter, and news-stringer version of the event Shirley describes is familiar enough: "Police crack down on drinking in the park." A routine check on youths suspected of being likely to drink and cause trouble. Or an alternative adult version might chalk it up as one more incident of police harassment and racist targeting of African American males. But neither tells the story behind the story for a thirteen-year-old in the midst of a belligerent, apparently racist public force routinely sweeping in on you and your friends, violating your developing sense of justice, and pressuring you to turn on your peers. This is instead a story of stress, anger, and vulnerability coupled with a burning need to respond—to deal with a burden we don't expect thirteen-year-olds to bear. As a working partner in her community's dilemma, Shirley helps us see what another police incident means in the lives of those who watch the adult system of justice work. Her "story behind the story" changes it from a past event to a continuing question in her mind and action.

### Bringing More Voices to the Table

At the next meeting, Shirley's text triggers a hot discussion. The intentionally demeaning, apparently racist behavior of the police is a stressful issue every African American in the room—every teenager and adult—had had to deal with. It raised a volatile, open question: how do you, as an individual or group, respond?

Although teenagers offer an inside perspective, they don't have an inside track on truth or certain knowledge of what should be done. Their ideas must enter the debate with multiple rival hypotheses in which alternatives get tested, explored, and conditionalized. Moreover, because teenagers are accustomed to being marginalized in discussions about themselves, they are likely to bring a rhetoric of complaint and blame to situations that call for responsible contributions aimed at jointly solving a problem. They need to develop strategies for entering a public discussion as partners, not just to vent or state personal opinions. In such a discussion, all the stakeholders—teen and adult—need to explain their perspective, to offer reasons, to give evidence and examples—in short, to build a case that is open to evaluation. However, that is not enough, because *open* questions, the difficult ones that can't be resolved with single answers, call for more than one perspective. The members of this dialogue must also work collaboratively to build a better, more inclusive, more complex understanding.

The discussion that surrounded Shirley's text was shaped by the practice of *rivaling* or rival hypothesis thinking. (The group had talked through an example of this strategy as a prologue to this session.) As people read their drafts and revealed a growing number of stories behind the story, the name of the game was to bring additional perspectives to the table by generating rival hypotheses—alternative interpretations, possible solutions—and to then test those hypothesis by considering possible rivals to them. Rivaling had become a hallmark strategy of CLC projects because it asks writers not only to construct strong rival hypotheses about hard questions but also to rival their *own* ideas.

More than that, rivaling is a strategy for bringing multiple voices to the table. Creating a mixed group of literal voices at a literal table is good but not always good enough. Rivaling also asks people to generate perspectives others might hold, to make that effort of imagination to speak from those positions, to envision possible rivals from those points of view. Rivaling provides a structure for inquiry that seems essential to community building. Although it celebrates debate, it takes down the barricades of opposition in which fire salvos from my personal opinion at yours. In place of opposition and entrenchment, the rivaling strategy asks me to step out of my shoes into

yours, to even challenge my own interpretation, to generate a richer definition of the problem and a more inclusive sense of possibility.

The text below is an abbreviated version of the dialogue that followed Shirley's draft. Although based on verbatim comments from a tape of the session, it is formatted around numbered ideas to highlight the alternative solutions people proposed and some of the rapid-fire responses they elicited as the group rivaled each idea, exploring its implications and consequences. To understand the subtext and tenor of this working partnership, however, imagine laughter, side conversations around the table, and performative talk as both teens and adults seize the floor offering rival responses to Shirley's problem.

LEADER: OK, so what do you think they could do?

IDEA 1: They could go away and talk about it among themselves.

- Yea, but nothing would change.
- Everybody would just get angry.
- Maybe one person doesn't have solution, but together they could come up with something they wouldn't have come up with on our own.

IDEA 2: Listen to my idea. You need to get the older citizens in the neighborhood with gun licenses and have them patrol the neighborhood and carry camcorders. When the cops come, they know someone is watching them.

- I agree with going to the older citizens and the camcorder, but when you have guns and carry guns things happen. I'm talking here in the voice of experience. You create problems for yourself when you have a gun. If you just have a camcorder and get angry, that's it, you're just going to use the camcorder, but if you have a camcorder and a gun, then you're going to use the gun.
- If you got something on tape, they going to take it off of you, that's what I'm saying.
- I'd rather they take the camcorder than risk the chance of killing somebody and being killed because I have a gun.

IDEA 3: If you had a group with camcorders and guns, you'd get some publicity. You'd be talked about.

- Yeah, but what kind? Would it be about these people carrying guns or about people trying to record racism?
- You all know about biased reporting. The issue that started this would be lost in the shuffle.

- Unless there is a spokesperson, like you, Shirley, [who says], "No, I'm gonna tell you what happened."

IDEA 4: OK, now my teacher would say you could talk to the police or write a letter to the police or the mayor.

IDEA 5: I'll tell you how my boys would rival that. They'd say, "I'm gonna confront them right there. I'm just not gonna take it. I'm not taking this stuff."

- Yeah, and they would take you right down to the police station. [laughter]

IDEA 6: Could you talk with—not the confront version—with the police person in a way you would avoid the outcome of getting . . .

- If this is on the street, there's no way you're gonna talk to them. When they pull somebody over, have to do with somebody, the first thing they say is, "Shuutt up." Unless they ask you a question, you're not allowed to talk to them.
- Anything you said will be held against you. [laughter]
- You said a mouthful.

IDEA 7: I think the gun's the most integral part of the operation, because, look, that's what makes the policeman so confident.

- What channel did you watch last night? [laughter]
- OK, say it's me an' you; we're about to fight. I've got a gun, you don't have a gun, you're not going to want to fight me no more. But if we've both got guns, it's the wild wild West. It's even. If they have guns, they're real confident; if you don't have anything, you can't say nothing. Make it fair.
- I'm not saying go out to shoot policemen, but you have to do something to make them a little more hesitant.
- I'm glad you're going away to school. [laughter]
- Yeah, I'm glad you're leaving town.
- All I'm saying is violence begets violence.
- You're right about that.

LEADER: OK, Shirley, read us what happened.

Shirley had posed an open question that elicited strong voices and attitudes of cynical despair—including claims that meeting force with force was the only answer. However, what the group hadn't realized was that this account also had a factual ending, which Msz. B. eventually asked Shirley to read.

One day we decided to go up as a group and watch the cops discriminate—hassle the Blacks and not the whites. The second time they came up to the field frisking blacks for no reason, we stood there and stared at them and kept staring at them until they noticed that we were witnesses to what was happening.

When they noticed that we were looking at them, they looked like they were getting kinda scared, because they stopped frisking the kids and let them go.

Me and my friends felt good because we felt that we had did something and that now they were scared of us—like we had some power. After they left, we started cracking up with laughter because they were scared like the kids they mess with might be.

What if . . .

- What if I didn't go to the park?
- What if I didn't notice what was happening?
- What if we had decided not to take some action?
- What if the cops had messed with us for looking at them?
- What if the cops that came to our neighborhood were African American?

When Shirley finished, the pause was palpable. Her story had given a face and a feeling to racism and its effect on children. And our discussion had given a name and presence to rival hypotheses and alternative points of view—including the view of a mere ninth-grader, which took the day.

#### Meanings as Ideas in Action

Shirley's story offers a situated version of community literacy that lets us ask what some of the features named in that earlier capsule statement might actually mean in action. I want to look at three of those features—rhetorical agency, strategic practice, and inquiry—because they raise both theoretical and practical questions about a rhetorical model of community literacy and the attempt to talk across difference.

#### To Take Agency in Their Lives and Communities

The young men at the CLC table had no postmodern qualms about the possibility or nature of personal agency. They spoke out of a worldview of free will, in which every man has the right to uncontested freedom of action and the uncompromised power to express his inner self. No one worries that the ideas that seem the natural thing to do (e.g., pack some heat of your own; balance the power) might be the product of ideology; assump-

tions foisted on you by media, American mythology, or gangsta rap. You are an intellectual free agent. And when barriers arise, they are merely an invitation for the hero to surmount all obstacles and prove himself. Taking agency in this scheme of things means taking independent action, working your will on the world, and influencing its material conditions and other people. Never mind that the realities of urban Northside life offer little support for this ideology; it is the source of solutions and the ideal against which manhood and agency will be measured. (Chapter 8 returns to some alternative notions of agency.)

Neither Shirley nor her actions fit this profile of taking agency. This is the story of a thirteen-year-old, little black girl with a quiet, shy personal style. There is no adult, no father with connections standing behind her, no power. Her response to power acting oppressively was not a counterassertion of her own will to reorchestrate the situation. Her act of agency was an act of witness in both the legal and moral sense of the word: an unflinching stance of observation that could easily make her a part of the problem group and an unmoving sign, a statement of alternative values. Her actions were not dramatic—merely a refusal to participate in an unjust police action and a mute testimony to solidarity with the boys. Moreover, did they change the situation? Did the power of witness, the stare of a line of little black girls actually intimidate the police, push them to leave? It is hard to know.

When philosopher and ethicist Charles Taylor (1985a) tries to define such agency, he places it in a world of intractable material conditions, in situations that do not give way to the assertiveness of the hero, who may him- or herself be far from a free agent, subject like the rest of us to the unquestioned assumptions of his or her culture. Taylor argues that agency is the act of taking an action (even though few avenues of action may be open) based on a "vocabulary of worth" or value. Agency is neither power nor control but reflective action—a value-driven choice, even if refusal and mute testimony seem to be the only tools for witness.

Shirley's actions reveal a related form of agency—not only at the park but also at the CLC table. Among her peers, it was no small thing to resist the boisterous, good-humored, but clearly dominant male tone of the group and its assumption that dealing with racist police is men's work or at least a black male problem. But her action was not simply mute resistance or self-expressive speaking up. Shirley takes what I will call *rhetorical agency*—a move that lies at the heart of community literacy. Shirley's *interpretive act* essentially redefines the problem in a way that shapes the discussion and sparks the next level of *inquiry*. To begin, she draws us away from speculative vigilante-cowboy stories into a very personalized, grounded examination



of openings for individual action. She poses the sort of problem that has teeth in it—the kind that exists not in the abstract but *for someone*. And her what-if statements guide the discussion to consider the outcomes not only of individual action but institutional change. Are African American cops, for example, really the answer?

In a second sense, Shirley becomes a rhetorical agent by *going public*, starting with the table at the CLC. In the bigger picture, her problem-posing, interpretive agency actually helped map the future of the entire project, sharpening its focus on the stress everyday kids like Shirley confront living in this risky environment. Her contribution became the basis for a series of new projects. One could, of course, argue with the way Shirley poses the problem, could question her reading of the police retreat, or raise new what-if options, and so on. What I see here, however, is a way to understand agency as a rhetorical action in which a young teenager can act in witness to what she values and in a way that poses problems, redefines assumptions, and opens rather than closes down a path for further inquiry.

#### *The Strategic Practice of Intercultural Rhetoric*

The popular notion of how to take agency is pretty uncomplicated: in the face of obstacles, exercise your will, and take action to dominate, control, or alter the situation. The popular notion of how to engage in intercultural dialogue has a similarly self-referential simplicity: in the face of social, economic, racial, and cultural differences, demonstrate your good intentions, concern or desire to help, and develop a person-to-person relationship with the “other” person in order to create empathy and openness. And, indeed, significant intercultural dialogue must be grounded in an ethic of care and solidarity that tries to achieve what Martin Buber called an “I/Thou” rather than an “I/It” relationship between people.

However, in the stories of mentors entering the Community House for a seven-week project, coming armed with goodwill, a friendly smile, and the desire for a personal relationship is often not enough to achieve a genuine dialogue or transformed understanding. What the popular notion of a simple person-to-person encounter fails to see is how such dialogue is already entangled in a history of problematic, one-directional relationships of adult to child, rich to poor, white to black, dominant to oppressed, professional to social service worker, and service provider to client. This history of roles and relationships will not evaporate in the face of goodwill. Nor should it. As Iris Marion Young argues in describing communicative democracy, the goal of communication is not “mutual identification [in which people] have transcended what differentiates and divides them and now have the same

meaning or beliefs or principles” (1996, p. 127). Rather, the goal is to figure out how to use difference as a resource.

Another barrier to dialogue is the assumption that empathy, once achieved, will also open the door to free and honest self-expression. But intercultural dialogue often takes place in a contested space. As community organizers like Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire say, historically silenced and marginalized people may not realize their own expertise, may not have the rhetorical tools to explain and elaborate it, and may not trust the outcome of personal disclosure or speaking out. People of privilege are even more likely to lack the rhetorical skills to listen when expertise comes in unfamiliar discourse packages. Even more to the point, each of us will come to this place of dialogue with a variety of strategies for entering the conversation, presenting our selves, reacting to others, building an argument, and so on. But few of us are really prepared to enter the challenging process of inquiry, much less to be a partner in this literate practice to an “other.”

The desire for dialogue cannot escape the pressure of history, social context, political process, psychology of communication, or discourse skills. For all these reasons, community literacy replaces this popular notion of how to achieve dialogue with the more guided, purposeful, and heuristic stance of rhetoric and intercultural rhetoric. Chapter 5 returns to inquiry as an ethic of empowerment. Here I wish to focus on inquiry as a strategic rhetorical practice and on the four tools we see at work in Risk and Stress: collaborative planning, seeking the story-behind-the-story, rivaling, and exploring options and outcomes.

#### *Collaborative Planning*

Urban residents, especially teenagers, are so often cast in the role of the client, the done-to, and the uninformed that they are not used to taking the role of the partner, doer, and expert. And professionals—in education, social services, health care, and policy—often have trouble abandoning their accustomed seat of authority and relationships based on giving advice rather than seeking knowledge. Collaborative planning is a problem-solving strategy that helps restructure these relations while drawing out the writer’s best work. When Mrs. Baskins, Shirley and the other adult-teen pairs went off to document the meaning of “teen stress,” they took the roles of supporter and planner. As planner and writer, Shirley takes authority and the floor, talking out her plan (and in this case her text) for the story. Her adult partner is not an advisor, guide, or teacher but a supporter whose job is to draw out Shirley’s expertise and best thinking. The supporter does this by engaged listening and encouragement, on the one hand, and on the other, by posing



three questions that challenge and draw writers to more sophisticated and articulate rhetorical thinking: (1) What is your point or purpose? (2) How might your readers respond to this? and (3) What text conventions could you use here to achieve your purpose?

The examples of collaborative planning in action in chapters 5, 6, and 9 show how this strategic rhetorical practice differs from simply talking with a partner—how it tries to reverse the pattern of authority in normal adult/mentor and teen roles, how demanding this change can be for both partners, and how the supporter's strategic prompting (developed from research with expert writers) can draw out significantly new layers of knowledge for the text and self-awareness for the writer.

#### *The Story-behind-the-Story*

Telling the *story-behind-the-story* is a more specific literate strategy that not only calls forth what teenagers know but also acknowledges the significance of their situated, local knowledge. The power of its narrative complements the analytical work of rivaling. In telling the *story-behind-the-story* and revealing the hidden logics and interpretive reasoning behind their actions, marginalized speakers and writers also reveal their own underacknowledged agency. Shirley's attempt to get at the *story-behind-the-story* takes her behind the statistics on stress and racism, the abstract definitions of the youth problem. It counters the media generalizations that wash out human distinctions, that make all youth who live amidst violence violent, that make every black male in baggy pants and a hoodie a threat to civilization. Telling the *story-behind-the-story* not only challenges stereotypes but also replaces abstractions with purposeful individuals, and it conditionalizes overgeneralized claims with situated local knowledge.

These accounts of urban stress also reveal the hidden logic behind why children miss school or avoid teachers, how confrontations escalate into suspension, how poverty and the American dream fuel illegal enterprise. They help explain what is going on when teenagers say X, and others hear Y, and why adult policies and good intentions, out of touch with the street, often fail. They reveal a struggle for respect and strategies for survival. In short, this expert inside knowledge is something teenagers have and adults need.

#### *Seeking Rival Hypotheses*

Complex questions do not have single answers. The rival hypothesis stance valued in science and humanities alike, brings alternative perspectives, interpretations, and claims to the table. It can turn advocacy from fixed positions into inquiry. Intercultural rhetoric depends on what my colleagues and I have

called a "strong" rival hypothesis stance: one that actively seeks out rival readings, across differences and discourses (Flower, Long, & Higgins, 2000, p. 50). It was the teenagers who adopted this strategy as way to speak up and yet avoid the touchy suggestion of confrontation who named it "rivaling."

#### *Examining Options and Outcomes*

Listening empathetically to the logic of others' stories and to the rivals that may challenge our own assumptions and experience is necessary. But it is not enough. Intercultural inquiry tries to weave rival perspectives into a community-constructed plan for action, first by generating multiple, competing, and complementary options. Secondly, it subjects these options to the test of local knowledge—it uses the expertise of young or marginalized people to play out probable outcomes under real conditions. Action plans are then judged, not by good intentions but by predicted consequences. Chapter 6 explores how this focus on outcomes and situated knowledge is rooted in the vision of philosophical and prophetic pragmatism.

#### *Why Be Strategic?*

Jürgen Habermas's influential description of the "public sphere" as a space for democratic social deliberation uses *strategy* as a term of disparagement. He contrasts a "communicative" effort to achieve understanding (that is supposed to lead to consensus) with a "strategic" egocentric calculation to influence an opponent in argument (1981/1984, p. 258). I use the term *strategic* in a different and broader cognitive sense to mean taking a self-conscious, heuristic approach to the process of dialogue itself (rather than to achieving a particular outcome). More important, there are two reasons to question whether the widely cited Habermas model (any more than the empathetic, "just talk" plan) is an adequate tool for community literacy. First, the community of community literacy is not the homogenous, privileged, educated, middle-class (male) set of conversants Habermas (1962/1989) imagines in his public sphere. It is a community defined by strong and potentially divisive differences and a community that is paradoxically attempting to use, rather than set aside, some of those differences in the interest of change.

Secondly, an intercultural inquiry poses a distinctive social and cognitive problem. The social challenge is to somehow realign (or at least unbalance) the deep-seated patterns of power and authoritative discourse that privileged groups bring to the table—as well as the patterns of unproductive resistance and disengagement taken by the marginalized. In this sense, we all already have well-learned if unconscious strategies for engaging with difference, but many of these are unlikely to produce knowledge or change.

Both the Habermas norm of "ideal speech" and the "empathetic, just talk" model ignore this challenge, hoping it will go away. Community literacy by contrast puts difference up on the table as both a resource and an obstacle. If then asks participants to deal with the problem self-consciously and strategically—to play the deeply serious game of an alternative discourse.

In collaborative planning, for instance, the mentor/adult/literacy leader works strategically to support the expertise of the writer/youth/community member. Shirley's story-behind-the-story was one only she could tell. Naming the story-behind-the-story as a strategy (i.e., as a valued language game and a source of insider knowledge) often convinces cautious teens to share their interpretation of an experience. The rival hypothesis stance makes the egalitarian rules of the game even more public. By calling on everyone to explore generative rivals to the "hypothesis on the table"—including to one's own contribution—the strategy undercuts the authority that advocates wrap around themselves to silence others. In practice, we have seen it enfranchise teenagers with a nonadversarial authority to address the media or the mayor. We have seen it formally acknowledge the expertise that minimum-wage nursing aides brought to a dialogue with their supervisors and CEO. And it helped give Shirley a voice and a standing in a men's game of cowboy-vigilante problem solving.

The cognitive challenge of intercultural inquiry is less obvious but no less profound. For instance, you and I may talk about "standing up for yourself" or the need for "respect." It is only after our encounter, if at all, that we realize what you and I meant was worlds apart. We talked in abstractions. Though we used the same words, even as we spoke the meaning of those ideas, embedded in remembered situations and past uses, was playing through our minds—and your scenario is nothing like mine. The meaning of respect, of its denial, or what happens when you try to "stand up for yourself" includes the meaning-in-context embedded in these home videos of the mind. The bid for respect that I am screening in my thoughts is set in the halls of a professional workplace; Shirley, on the other hand, is envisioning a confrontational inner-city playground, young people, and police; and you . . . ? The deep reservoirs of situated knowledge on which you draw may contain options and consequences not dreamed of in my philosophy. And on top of this, I may be blithely imposing my own comfortable middle-class schemas, my it's-a-free-country ideology onto your words or more willfully evading their implications. But even with good intentions, how do I ever know that you and I are envisioning different scripts? How do we give each other access to or at least glimpse of our situated knowledge?

This is not just a matter of interpersonal understanding, although it feels that way when supposed understandings between community and university

partners fall apart. The cognitive challenge of intercultural inquiry is to deal with the fact that we are all working with limited but complexly different and valuable interpretations of reality. The rhetorical challenge is to *use* difference to build a more expansive representation of that reality—including its problems, their meanings, and their possibilities.

Attempting to build a strategic rhetoric for community literacy makes this challenge explicit. Assembling and giving names to a small toolkit of strategies make them public property for use in a shared discovery. You need, on the one hand, strategies that draw out narrative, reflective interpretation and reveal situated knowledge and on the other, ones that do the analytical work of proposing and testing hypotheses and options. You need strategies that writers themselves control—that make sense, that can be taken out the door and be used in different home cultures.

My own research with John R. Hayes and others on writing and problem solving had mapped some of this risky cognitive terrain before. We had seen that experienced writers not only knew more about discourse conventions and contexts; they also gave themselves more complex problems to solve. They struggled with their purpose as it developed in response to writing; they projected possible readers' responses, and when they ran into conflicts—as writers often do—they pushed the problem to awareness and brought their meaning under negotiation. They also had and used a larger suitcase of strategies. Youthful decision makers, for example, rarely considered more than a single option. And when experienced writers couldn't draw a ready-made solution from their bag of tricks and conventions, they began a strategic search for options. As educators, we had seen that when less-experienced writers/rhetors were prompted to act like experts—to take on the wider task and its conflicts (supported by a planning partner or a heuristic), even students who were "nonwriters" often rose to the occasion. Community literacy faced the cognitive challenge of inquiry by developing not only a body of liberate practices but a body of rhetorical problem solvers.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Inquiry as Liberate Action*

Inquiry involves a lot of talk—and the pitfall of never going beyond just talk. Inquiry in community literacy differs from community organizing, direct political action, or instruction in that it does not target a specific outcome. And its participants are typically a rhetorical community, not a professional decision-making body or a political-action group. The teenagers, the community members, the health care people, the college students, and faculty engage in a project, at a community conversation, or over a text and then go their separate ways. The fruits of inquiry go with them rather than converge on the passing of a new measure or changing a particular institution. So what

are the outcomes of inquiry? Is this public form of inquiry really a tool for liberate action? Or is it just talk?

One reading of this question is that until we can see rising test scores, lowered jobless rates, new legislation, or structural institutional change, nothing indeed has happened. A rival hypothesis is that we need finer-grained ways of seeing. I want to look at some outcomes of this pilot project and Shirley's literature act in particular as examples of ways inquiry works. In the place of direct action or clear cause and effect, the process of inquiry started that summer worked first to open up a distinctive new rhetorical space for dialogue devoted to discovery and change. Starting with an unlikely mix of psychologists, social workers, administrators, educators, community members, supporters, advocates, and teens, the process created a local public engaged around the issues of risk and stress. By the metaphor of opening a space, I mean that it proceeded to substantially expand the network of partners included in its dialogue. Secondly, with each new project, community conversation, or publication, it transformed our knowledge. That is, it constructed a growing representation of the problem, an expanded set of options for action, and a more compelling portrait of the agency and expertise of the teenagers and their families. Finally, it launched its counterpublic agenda, drawing new people into its strategic process of intercultural inquiry, nurturing the rhetorical agency, and affirming the expertise of young people like Shirley.<sup>4</sup>

### *Creating a Local Public*

The regular CLC project that Shirley joined in the fall took its lead from the summer's inquiry. The teens working with Carnegie Mellon mentors produced a group document they titled *Listen Up! Teen Stress*. Shirley's contribution to the sixteen-page booklet not only takes us deeper into the personal experience of stress, it asks us to be accountable participants in this inquiry. The text describes how her encounter with police and racism became coupled in her mind with the recent murder of a classmate who found himself "out of his neighborhood" (Lyle, 1994). The images seep into her inner life, fueling her own anxieties and anger. When Shirley finds herself stranded "in the wrong neighborhood," these events come pounding back into her present as flashbacks, shaping her behavior. In this new text, entitled "A Wake Up Call for Adults," printed below, Shirley moves into direct address and eye-to-eye contact with adults at her imagined community table that includes teachers, counselors, parents, and adults reluctant to acknowledge pressures they don't see. Shirley has in effect implicated all her readers in this reality.



### **A Wake Up Call for Adults**

*By Shirley Lyle*

"Hurry up Danette, the bus is leaving." Ten minutes later as I was looking out of the foggy windows, I suddenly realized that we were on the wrong bus. Across the street was a gang of boys sitting on a car beside a corner store. They were smoking weed and very drunk, asking me questions. "Hey girl, where you from? What school you go to?"

#### **FLASHBACK**

An announcement on the news pounds through my head from yesterday: "Last night a young 14-year-old boy was shot 9 times while he was out of his neighborhood. He was a freshman student at Oliver." A conversation with a friend runs through my head from yesterday: "Hey, Shirley, I'm not staying after school. They might do a driveby or shoot someone." These thoughts run through my head, like a tape recorder: "HE WAS SHOT NINE TIMES WHILE OUT OF HIS OWN NEIGHBORHOOD! NINE TIMES! OUT OF HIS NEIGHBORHOOD! SHOT WHILE OUT OF HIS NEIGHBORHOOD! SOMEONE'S GOING TO GET SHOT!"

#### **INNER THOUGHTS**

Here I am standing on this corner wondering what's going to happen to me. If I tell him where I'm from, he might have some beef with my neighborhood and make me a victim of his anger just because I was from the wrong part of town. Some people might say, just ignore them. All you have to do is close your eyes and ears. But he's drunk, so if I don't answer him he may come over and start trouble.

On the other hand, the cops drive around here twenty four seven (all the time), but they probably wouldn't stop for me, because the cops around my neighborhood are racist.

#### **FLASHBACK**

I started to remember what happened last week at the park. The cops threw the boys against the fence, hassling them, asking them "Where's your I.D.? You all shouldn't be up here late at night anyway. What you think you grown, drinking beer?" (They said this even though they had I.D.). But I noticed that they didn't hassle the white kids; they never watched them when they played ball. So should I really call the cops, 'cause it's going to start a whole lot of trouble. All they are going to do is hassle the kids that are asking me questions, throw them against the wall, and frisk them, and make them want to fight back. And when that happens, the kids are going to come back for me. I have to decide soon....

## COMMENTARY

This story was just an example to show you that kids go through a lot of stressful things. Some kids get angry at the world because some cops have a bad image of kids and take it out on the kids, but it also works both ways. Kids go through a lot of deaths and have to watch where they are going for their sake too. Some kids may kick and throw things and take their anger out on people like parents, faculty and staff. Adults, try not to take it personally because that's the only way some kids know how to handle their problems.

Here are some things I can suggest for kids to do. Just relax. Go to your room and listen to music. Take time out for yourself to think about what is going on. It's not bad to cry. Try to get yourself in order and calm down. If that doesn't work for you, take a walk and talk to yourself. Try to get some balance. Think about how things are going right as well as the things going wrong. Try taking a walk in a park. At the park you can say things louder than you could at home. You can scream if you want to there. If you think about it, it's like talking to the world. You can do almost anything at the park, and you can get your feelings out.

Some people may say why don't you talk to a teacher? Well that can cause you even more stress. Like when my friend told a teacher (whom she trusted) about her problems at home and then later heard the teacher talking and laughing about it in the teacher's room. Other people may say, why don't you tell your friends? I feel when you talk to your friends, you just share some of the same anger. It doesn't lead to anything. What you just shared with them may get out, and then everyone knows all your business and problems. Some people may say that you're scared of your own race then make a big joke out of it, saying you're just as bad as the cops—you're a racist too. If you decide to share your problems with someone, share them with yourself so that what you're thinking, saying and feeling will be clear, not only for you but for someone else as well.

In November, Shirley's imagined audience became a literal one. The project group chose her text as one of three to dramatize and discuss as part of their public Community Conversation. The mayor, and that meant the media as well, would be there. In the Community House's packed auditorium, the writing and videos of these teenagers ignited a response. In the midst of open discussion, the normally silent Dion, a CLC teenager, stands up at the back of the room. He talks about how "fast-breaking" sensational news coverage of youth and violence seems to implicate any and all inner-city teens, never pausing to record the grief of families, the pain and anxiety of people living in neighborhoods with violence. During the evening news, the local

TV anchor team screens this clip, then pauses to repeat and muse on Dion's words, "I'd rather see it right at 11:00 than wrong at 6:00."

Since July, Shirley has seen her words become a published text, the foundation for a scripted performance, the catalyst for a public discussion, and a wake-up call to a million potential TV-news viewers. Shirley's literate acts were like a pebble cast in a stream. They created a series of ripples that invited not only an increasingly wider public into her concerns but also led to transformations for Shirley herself as an author and working partner in building a better community.

The process her literate act helped set in motion was often cumulative. The next semester a new group of teens transformed the "Wake-Up" text into the script for the CLC's Hands On video production team. Shirley was the director; the other teens were scriptwriters, actors, and producers. By dramatizing a deeply felt and shared difficulty, the *Shirley's Story* video opened another door for exploring the options for dealing with stress.

That summer, the CLC team began an experiment with another way to bring more people into this conversation. Almost a year from Shirley's first tentative foray into social, literate action, these discoveries became the spark for the production of an interactive training video called *Teamwork: Teenagers Working through Community Problems*. It models the strategies of collaborative inquiry and invites viewers to a virtual table for a community-based, problem-solving dialogue about stress.

This growing body of work also became a springboard for Carnegie Mellon PhD students and for discussion outside the Northside. Julia Deems and Amanda Young created two interactive multimedia computer programs, one dealing with risk and respect, another with health and sexuality, which found their way into high school classrooms, Planned-Parenthood counseling, the free clinic of a major children's hospital, and a research program on pregnancy prevention. Another inquiry, which began in the emergency room of Ian Rawson's hospital, led to a research project by Young on patient-doctor relations and to a literacy project started by Lorraine Higgins on women's health care in a low-income neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

Writing played a central role in this process, as the inquiry moved from talk to text (informal texts, published documents, scripts, and performances) that led back to more talk and further action. However, the text did not exist as an end in itself but as a catalyst for inquiry into people's daily lives. The writing (in text, video, and computer programs) allowed community literacy to create an increasingly articulated problem. And at tables located in Pittsburgh and at conferences on rhetoric, composition, computers, argument,

and health care, it brought a growing network of people into a strategic and collaborative search for more and better options.

For funders, these are the outcomes that matter: numbers of people involved, events and objects produced, dissemination, connections made with other institutions, visible impact on something else. But inquiry has other outcomes that deepen this impact, which unfortunately we have not yet found adequate ways to track and validate. One of these is knowledge transformation.

### *Transforming Understanding*

From July to November, Shirley's witness to the realities of her life had undergone some transformation, just as her network had grown. In "Wake-Up Call," a personal-experience story had metamorphosed into a compelling image of an inner life that cannot be disentangled from destructive social forces. In her strongly focused analysis, stress is now envisioned as a physical, psychological, and spiritual problem. Its presentation in artfully crafted flashbacks and commentary reveals the strong rhetorical purpose of a wake-up call.

This transformation is not limited to Shirley's thinking. The discussion initiated by our broad statement on health and stress had turned into an inquiry that went beneath the statistics to the lived experience of risk. It began to capture the attendant effects a stressful environment has on young people on the street, in school, and in their inner lives. But it also showed what the official version rarely includes—the story of personal agency, of decision making, and rhetorical action the young and socially powerless nevertheless take. The documents that followed had names like *Teen's Stress and Survival: A Report on the Risk and Stress of Growing Up in Pittsburgh's Inner City: Are You Ready? The Real Deal about Growing Up*; and *Force: An Everyday Thing*. Taking the fall project booklet as a whole, the problem itself had also morphed: the teenagers had turned the discussion of risk, stress, and violence (issues the adults named) into a reflection on how these flames were often ignited (from their point of view) by the need for respect.

By the time of the *Teamwork* "training video" the next summer, the most striking transformation of the problem appears in the segment in which teens are demonstrating the rivaling strategy, for here Shirley's problem turns into a community's problem, brought to life in multiple representations. The *Teamwork* video introduces the CLC's new media heroes—the Community Problem-Solving Team. As the drama unfolds on camera, the team is on the case, and Jake is putting the video tape of *Shirley's Story* on the VCR for the team (and us) to see. (The video is, of course, the one recently produced by the spring project team, which was based on the wrong-neighborhood episode and Shirley's flashback in "A Wake Up Call for Adults.") As the team

responds to Shirley's taped plea for help and advice, we, the viewers, watch the team demonstrate the CLC strategies and see a model of community literacy in action. We see the team talk over the story-behind-the-story, work out rival hypotheses, and mull over Shirley's options and possible outcomes. Occasionally, Yvonne, a playfully conspiratorial narrator, turns to us and the camera to point out the strategies the group is using. At each pause, she asks us to turn off our own VCR and try these strategies, first on Shirley's dilemma and later on problems our own group names. In the excerpt below, the team members have just started their analysis of the initial wrong-neighborhood episode in Shirley's video.<sup>6</sup>

### *Teamwork Dialogue*

*Mia:* Aw, c'mon. Shirley doesn't even *have* a problem! In that video when those three guys come rolling out, it just gets her imagining things. Those fools are just wannabes. Hell, one of 'em is white!

*Yvonne:* [turning to the camera] Here comes some rivaling. Some people think it's a gang problem, some people don't.

*Jake:* No way! Look at the way they're dressed, man.

*Shaquon:* Yeah. And the way they come out of nowhere and get right in her face.

*Christy:* You *know* they're threatening her.

*Jake:* Yeah. It's all gang stuff.

*Mia:* Wait a minute. Lemme try this one from the guys' point of view, OK? Look again at Shirley hoppin' along the sidewalk. She's fresh, she's good looking, she's alone. Get it? I mean, she's like Little Red Riding Hood! They're just having fun scaring her a bit. It's like flirting, you know?

*Jake:* Flirting? Look again, sister. Look at all that gangsta graffiti stuff all over the old house where those hood guys were hanging out. And remember the gang graffiti at the beginning? Man, that stuff's no joke! And that house really looks like a crack house. It all adds up.

*Joe:* How about if we put ourselves in a cop's shoes?

[On the video, the teens camp it up with the Wizard of Oz red-shoe trick. Complete with a magical zing, the camera zooms in on paratrooper boots, and Joe is suddenly transformed into a gruff-speaking impersonator in a policeman's cap. Mom, who speaks next with folded arms and her mouth in a tight line, is wearing fluffy slippers; the Counselor with a pencil in her bun is in sensible shoes, and so on.]

*Joe-as-cop:* By the time we get there, the people involved already have ten witnesses saying they're somewhere else. There's just nothing we can do about it.

*Jake:* Sure. What about a *bad* cop's shoes?

*Jake-as-bad-cop:* Hold up, kids, y'all need to get away from there—quit messin' with them nice people. I'm gonna give y'all to "three" to get your punk ass outta there: *three*.

*Mia:* Well, what if Shirley thinks she can't talk to her mom, right? But, putting ourselves in her mom's shoes . . .

*Mia-as-mom:* Shirley, it is your fault you're in this situation. I always tell you to pay attention. You wouldn't be missing your bus if you got out of bed on time.

*Shaquon:* Or maybe a friend could help.

*Christy:* Yeah, standing in her friend's shoes could help a lot.

*Christy-as-friend:* I told you that was a bad neighborhood. We weren't gonna go there unless we were together.

*Mia:* You know, a school counselor would have some ideas.

*Mia-as-counselor:* Shirley's grades have been slipping a lot lately, and I'm afraid stress has been playing a major role in this.

*Joe:* Or what about somebody who saw the boys threatening Shirley, like the storeowner across the street?

*Joe-as-storeowner:* These kids have been hanging around here, causing trouble, harassing people. The police should be patrolling this area more often.

*Shaquon:* I still want to try standing in those three *guys'* shoes.

*Shaquon-as-guy:* She's kinda cute—I could be tryin' to talk to her, instead of tryin' to get her. I don't even know why I'm doing this. It's all good; the boys think I'm hard, you know?

*Jake:* Yeah, we gotta try seeing what was going on in their *minds*.

*Jake-as-guy:* To tell you the truth, I was afraid of *not* being with those guys.

*Yvonne:* [to camera] Go, Problem Team! OK, do you see how these rivaling strategies are working? Come on and help us out. What shoes do you want to step into? Ready? OK, just shut your VCR off now.

Through rivaling, the CLC team transforms Shirley's inner problem into a shared social problem, one that troubles not only Shirley but also the harassing boys, the cops, and the storeowner. As each player shares his or her perspective, the cumulative representation is more than the sum of its parts. There is a structural social issue here that has led to aimless, jobless boys on street corners, hostility among neighbors, police, and storeowners—a structure in which everyone is implicated. There are individuals caught in the net of its situation who need to rethink the part they play. And there is an opening for new options. And equally important, from the point of

view of the video, there is a portrait here of how go about representing such problems—how to intentionally and strategically seek out strong rivals that tell us what this issue means in practice.

And yet, we must be cautious about a claim for knowledge transformation. For many adults this dialogue (its texts and events) was likely to be a source of new knowledge but not necessarily of new understanding. By that, I mean that we do not know if or how this information took root and changed their own representations of the problem or affected their actions. From a cognitive point of view, a change in understanding would mean that this information is no longer someone else's words, images, and ideas but has been integrated into one's own network of knowledge, building new connections between one's ideas, experience, and beliefs expanding and, perhaps, even restructuring a part of that network around new organizing ideas. So it is only in the teenagers' writing that we see actual evidence of this kind of understanding, when they construct a new interpretive framework that connects their own experience, feelings, and those of others.

### *The Promise of a Counterpublic*

From a social point of view, the outcome of this inquiry needs to be a shared understanding. Not because the specific knowledge one can transmit is so crucial but because the process of dialogue—which can affect individual understandings—is. This case study has tracked a series of transformations in talk and text supported by community literacy. At the same time, it keeps posing the question, how does this inquiry produce broader shared understanding, much less change? I end with a note of hope buried in a dilemma. When I piloted Julia Deems's (1996) hypermedia program, "Rivaling about Risk," in an urban school, three young men in braids and Afros, known for frequently missing school, were there for every class, actually leading the rivaling sessions as we looked at the realities of gangs, neighborhood pressures, the necessity to fight. For many students, this was a situation with no real options—you just did what you had to do. (It in fact took the authority of an older student to assert that we really could talk about choices—even within hard constraints.) On the last day, when I taped an interview with the three young men together, I wondered if they thought sustained discussions like this, about the pressures of a gang culture, had any place in school. Two things stand out from that tape. One was my own tone of incredulity after I asked, "This seems so important. Do people talk about these things, outside of school?" and Will replies, "No." "Really?" I ask. Will, with a kind of helpless shrug, just shakes his head "no." Change depends on dialogue—on both the circulation of alternative ideas and the personal understanding that guides



action. But Will and his friends appeared to be charting their course through a vast fog of silence. Shirley's solution also depended on isolation: "Try to get your self in order. . . . When you talk to your friends, you just share the same anger. It doesn't lead to anything." At the same time, these young men had been at every writing session and had been spokespersons in the class. As we were about to turn the tape off, Will and Junius volunteered a second critical insight into how inquiry produces change: it creates a counterpublic.

*Junius:* If everybody do it, not just one person, it might make a difference. A group of kids, a group of adults, you understand, talk about it, it might bring more people to the group.

*Will:* Somebody, probably somebody's girlfriend, sitting there talking about it and she could go back and tell her boyfriend.

What they envisioned was a local counterpublic, an alternative to the code of tough silence. Chapter 6 looks at this knotty problem in more depth. What are the outcomes of inquiry? How does it lead to networks of people in dialogue and to the transformation of understanding that express themselves in action? As a first step in that question, think back to the mentors in chapter 1, and ask, how does their academic experience in rhetoric and composition prepare them to participate in a rhetoric of making a difference?

## *Appendix: Initial Problem Statement for Risk and Stress Project*



### **The Community: A Source of Health, A Site of Stress?**

Growing up in a healthy community is a birthright many Americans take for granted. A child is wrapped in a web of support—provided by family, home, neighborhood, by institutions like the school, church, and clubs, by health care, by city services. This healthy community challenges its young with "believable and attainable expectations and standards" for achievement while providing a backdrop of the support and security that encourages growth. A healthy community creates an ecology of mind, body and spirit.

However, many urban centers, like ours, no longer make good on this promise of community. Young people find themselves forced to cope—often beyond their powers to do so—with the overwhelming, everyday stress of troubled homes, violent streets, and struggling schools. Consider these sobering statistics: [Recent youth data on the increase of abuse, STD's suicide, homicide, and depression follow.]

In the 60's a revolution in medical thinking called the "wellness movement" called for the health profession to treat the whole person, their attitudes, their behavior, their inner resources, not just disease. But in the 90's the leaders of that movement began to see that the community you live in is itself a source of health—or its opposite. In fact, one's community may have more influence on even physical disease than anything technomedicine can do. Consider, for instance, most of the major diseases that affect Americans, from hypertension to asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. Say you wished to predict who and how many would get one of these diseases, and whether they were likely to have complications or to die. Would any single predictor—any test, any screening procedure—let the medical profession predict this range of factors—incidence, frequency, morbidity, and mortality? In fact such a factor does exist and it overshadows any test medical technology has devised; it is an even stronger predictor of long-term threat than whether you already have the disease. That predictor is living in poverty. A young person's SES (social economic status) says a lot about what the future holds for them when there is no health-giving community offering regular health care, affordable housing, safe streets, nutrition—offering an image of hope and a future that justifies preventive behavior. The statistics for future physical health are grim.



But what about the lives of individual teenagers, living in the urban community adults have created? The writers that come to the CLC look healthy, full of energy, dressed in baggy pants and sneakers with logos. Normal. Until you begin to hear individual stories: the brother, the cousin who has been shot; the mom on crack; the school suspension; the uncertain future; the poverty lurking beneath the need to save face. A few live in the projects, most come from old Pittsburgh neighborhoods scattered around the city, many belong to an extended network of cousins, aunts and uncles. The L.A. style gang violence in their neighborhoods has come suddenly. The drive-bys and the point-less shootings; the violence triggered by neighborhood identity (rather than adult drug deals) is relatively new to the city—older teenagers date it from the movie, *Boyz in the Hood*.

What does mean to be 14 years old and have friends and schoolmates who have been shot or killed? To grow up watching your own back as you walk home from school? To recognize the police as a "rival gang" trying to rule by intimidation and brutality? To see the streets a few blocks away become a dangerous neighborhood you don't dare to walk through. Your mom is angry because you won't—don't dare to—wear the red coat she paid for last year. Red is the Bloods color and you live in a Crip (blue) neighborhood, and are bussed to a school dominated by LAW (they wear black). And what are the options for what we used to call "getting out"? Getting out to where? Another high school with its own gangs and sets, where you are unknown and less protected? Out into an economy with little promise and less space for you?

The teenagers who come to the CLC are trying to grow up, to become somebody, to spread some wings. But the health-giving community they need to turn to is sometimes a dangerous place, its institutions ineffectual. Teenagers develop personal strategies for survival, and when they see those strategies fail, they see themselves labeled as the Problem by the mainstream political discourse. In place of a health-giving web of support, they face the unholy trinity—stress, and its backlash, depression, and rage.



**Community: A Collaborative Rhetorical Forum**

Communities are also political units and rhetorical forums. Many urban centers like ours pride themselves on being sites of struggle and intercultural collaboration. They recognize the truth in the African saying, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." However, as cities and schools try to reinvent their outdated youth policy and as communities struggle to

construct better alternatives, teenagers see little place for themselves in this process. Policies in health, education, and social services are often based on models of deficits and disease that turn youth into clients, patients, and problems. They fail to offer teenagers productive roles in the larger community or to position them as responsible agents of change. Moreover, programs that deal with the effects of poverty and crime are seldom informed by teenage perspectives. They ignore the local expertise needed to build a healthier urban community.

Community literacy offers a ground for constructing an alternative forum guided by a model of collaborative problem solving and communication in which urban communities, including their teenagers, work to define themselves as a source of health, wholeness and intercultural shalom.

Community literacy is based on a bold but profoundly simple premise: *Urban teenagers must become working partners in an intercultural collaboration to build healthy communities.*

The success of this collaborative forum is grounded on three principles that change the role of teenagers and adults.

**Three Principles for Working Partnerships**

- *Working Partners solve joint problems.* Institutions must invite teenagers to the table, into the analysis of problems (not as tokens, merely to comment on solutions) and into attempts to explore options and the consequences of decisions that involve youth. Teenagers bring expertise in interpreting the impact of urban stress and in revealing the hidden logic behind those coping behaviors that schools and health providers want to comprehend. In short, teenagers can help generate the new, situated knowledge of the inner city that health professionals and educators are calling for.

- *Working Partners must develop the problem-solving skills that lead to understanding and action.* If teenagers are to participate in this public conversation, they must move beyond the discourse of complaint and blame by learning new strategies for planning, collaboration, rival perspective taking, and argument. We as adults must support them in learning new strategies for goal-directed planning and decision-making that support not only discussion but personal change in their own lives.

• *Working Partners engage in intercultural collaboration and reflection.* Just as mentoring broadens the cultural awareness of college students and teens, adult institutional partners can harness the expertise of urban youth when enter they engage in reflective, intercultural community planning that seeks new knowledge from diversity.



### Teenagers as Expert Working Partners

Community literacy—and its vision of working partners—invites people to step out of some of their normal roles and relationships to focus on a problem none can solve alone. This project will explore what we might call “the hidden stories” of stress and health. Drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, and violence make up the public story of teenage health; but what about the stress of living with these problems everyday, of standing in the eye of the hurricane? What are the hidden health stories of kids caught in a health-threatening community?

# Part 2

## *Theoretical Frameworks and Working Theories*

The next three chapters are about the multiple theoretical frameworks that stand as challenging and shaping voices behind community literacy. These frameworks were evident in the diverse literate practices, the competing ideas, and unspoken assumptions that mentors, literacy leaders, and teens brought to the CLC. The significant distinctions among these frameworks often reside in the images they offer of what it means for the discipline of rhetoric and composition to be engaged in social concerns, what it means to take the role of a mentor or community partner, and what it could mean to empower oneself and others.

The scaffold for these comparisons is the distinction between a rhetoric of speaking up, of speaking against, of speaking with others, and of speaking for something. Although this frame cannot capture the complexity of actual practice, I use it to foreground a central tendency in mainstream paradigms and to help me articulate the more fully rhetorical and dialogic alternative I believe we need to develop.

This section is framed by academic debates. However, the real story emerging in these chapters resides less in abstract theoretical frameworks and more in the operational working theories that were constructed over time within this history. As John Dewey argues, our theories and ideas will remain a fancy unless they are transformed into working ends-in-view by a realistic inquiry into the conditions and consequences of change. These chapters show academics, mentors, and activists working to construct situated working theories of engagement, collaboration, and empowerment.