



RHETORIC OF RESPECT
RECOGNIZING CHANGE
AT A
COMMUNITY WRITING CENTER

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CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xxi

1. Recognizing the SLCC Community Writing Center 1
2. Evolving a Discursive Ecology: A Rhetoric of Respect 24
3. Transforming Energy in Pursuit of Uncertainty 56
4. Shifting Relations, Transforming Expectations 87
5. Engaging Place: Acclimation and Disruption 128

Notes 155

Appendix A 163

Appendix B 165

References 169

Index 179

Author 185

PREFACE

Writers who enter Cooper's web are most often subsumed by it, and ultimately, most often acclimate to it in order to survive. Others, however, may also resist the web, shake it, build new threads, start new webs.

—Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser,
Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition

I HAVE TO SAY, THIS BOOK IS NOT THE ONE I intended to write. As the founding director of a community writing center where the words *reflect* and *revise* are etched two-feet high across the front windows, I look forward to changing my texts and find comfort in my “heavy reviser” writing process. Moreover, I know that when writing for publication, rarely, if ever, does an end product look like what the author initially imagined. So, while I'm not surprised at this book's transformations, I want to draw attention to its unruly story because it echoes the tumultuous evolution of the Community Writing Center (CWC) sponsored by Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) since 2001.

Life does not follow predictable patterns. It surprises and disappoints; it veers and stabilizes—it pushes boundaries and finds stasis. The life of the SLCC Community Writing Center has been no exception. Therefore, instead of trying to draw a neat set of conclusions about what the CWC was,¹ what the CWC's partnerships with more than 5,000 community members meant, or what the CWC's relationships with more than 130 community organizations should mean to the fields of rhetoric, composition, writing centers, and community literacy studies, I want to take you on a path through its uncertainty and malleability. In doing so, I seek not to *define* “change” as it happened at the CWC, but instead to *recognize* it and the possibilities that it opens for literacy learning. But, first, let me tell you about this book. . . .

I started writing this book (if you accept that thinking about writing is writing) in 2006 with the CWC's then-assistant director, Melissa Helquist. We knew that the CWC was an important part of the overlapping stories of rhetoric, composition, writing centers, and community literacy; we also knew that we needed to write it together in order to honor the center's collaborative environment and practices. However, publisher reception to our queries at a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) convention was muted: they believed an audience for a book about a community writing center was thin at best. We returned to Salt Lake with the intention to carry forward in our project, but academic life and love intervened when Helquist moved to Canada a year later for her husband's postdoc appointment. We agreed that we'd try to collaborate long distance, though we both knew the odds of that happening were slim since Helquist would no longer be involved with the CWC's work.

The following year, I was determined to get something substantial about the Community Writing Center into print. I'd written articles for publications such as *Reflections*, the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and the *Writing Center Director's Resource Book* and had presented at dozens of conferences—but still, I thought the SLCC Community Writing Center warranted a book project. It had been growing for seven years and had collaborated with thousands of people; further, I was starting to hear from scholars at academic institutions who wanted advice on starting their own community writing center projects. I appealed to my department chair and my dean for a small bit of time reassigned from teaching so I could focus only on directing the CWC and writing a book. They granted me one year away from my normal teaching load.

Even though I'd be writing the book on my own—without Helquist—I could not imagine filling it with my words only. The discourses that created the Community Writing Center were so varied—academic, nonacademic, communal, personal, activist, reflective, pragmatic—that I wanted to mimic their mosaic-ness in a publication highlighting multiple voices. I imagined a collage of writings that I would coordinate with my own words, imitating

the way I had directed the center. I put out an open call for contributions to community members, partners, volunteers, and current and previous staff. A handful of submissions trickled in: two from Advisory Committee members, three from volunteers, one from a writer, and several from a CWC writing assistant, Chanel Earl. Earl sent me multiple short pieces, one of which was a prose poem about writers at the CWC, with snapshots of one writer, Daryl, woven throughout it:

Daryl #1

Daryl came in during the summer. He smelled like cigarettes and alcohol, and he spoke with a slur. I helped him register as a writer with us, even though our database said he had been in before. He didn't give us a phone number because he didn't have one. He wanted to write a memoir, and he wanted to talk about it. After we talked, I gave him a pad of paper. "This is for you," I said. "Start writing your memoir and when you have a few pages written bring them back in and we can help you with them." He came back the next day with several pages. He had written a sad and dark summary of his early life. It was honest. "Good job," I said. We talked about which stories he could expand on. He came back the next week with more pages. He came back several more times, and then he disappeared.

Daryl #2

Daryl came in during the winter. He smelled like cigarettes and spoke with a slur. Chris helped him register as a writer with us. This time he gave us a phone number. He said he now had a medical bed at the shelter. He had just left the hospital where he had surgery and they told him not to drink anymore. He lost his backpack one night when he had a seizure in the park and was rushed to the hospital without it. He had lost his memoir. Chris gave him a journal to write in, and she offered to keep a copy of all his writing at the center. He began to write. He came back the next day, and the next, and sometimes he fell asleep in one of our comfortable chairs. He came back the next week with pages to copy. He came back several more times, and then disappeared.

Daryl #3

Daryl came in during the spring. He smelled like medicine and soap, and he smiled as he spoke. “I haven’t forgotten you guys,” he said. “I wanted to come by and let you know I am still writing.” He was excited. “And that things are changing at the shelter. People have seen that I am changing and they think, ‘if that guy can go clean, I can.’” He patted himself on the back. “This is for you. Without you guys I don’t know how much of this I would have been able to do.” He didn’t come in again.

Contributions from others—“Adult Literacy,” “On Writing,” “I Write,” “Storytelling”—were each compelling in their own way and depicted the mixture of people and voices at the CWC. It was exciting, though I was starting to doubt my ability to form something cohesive from them. I never had a chance to try, because financial crisis struck (as it did for many during the 2008 national recession) and all efforts had to turn to minimizing damage to the CWC. Frantic and fierce counterarguments to administrative decisions, unprecedented local and national declarations of support, and strategic appeals ended well for the center. Even so, time to write remained elusive during my final year as director, which was filled with an increased teaching load and the responsibility to ready the center for a new director by shoring up the CWC’s stability and making clear its essential value to both Salt Lake Community College and the Salt Lake community.

When I left in May 2010, after twelve years with the Community Writing Center, it was finally time to write this book. With a sabbatical ahead of me, I settled into my on-campus office and got down to it. Through a mixture of nostalgia and anticipation, I realized that I had to be separate from the Community Writing Center in order to reflect on and write about it. Leaning back in my chair, gazing past the parking lot and brick walls of the community college’s urban campus, I could see the Wasatch Mountains that frame the east edge of the Salt Lake valley. Rust and yellow leaves covered them, though that would change into snow, and then again to deep, glowing spring green while I wrote. In this silent solitary

space, I sorted through twelve years of activity, experience, documents, memories, and chaos, trying to make meaning to share with colleagues in rhetoric, composition, writing centers, and community literacy.

Even though the book would now be written by a single author and stand as my interpretation of the CWC (rather than a collage of voices), I was still committed to replicating the center's ideologies in what I wrote; to that end, I focused on accessibility. The decisions I made at the CWC were always grounded in creating and maintaining access—for the community and for the staff members. Likewise, I insisted that what I wrote about the center be accessible to anyone who is or may have been a part of the CWC. Therefore, I would not write a “regular” academic text, as I detailed in an earlier draft:

As I have written this book, I have been continually mindful of readers outside of composition, and even those outside academia, though they may not constitute a significant audience. The purpose of the SLCC Community Writing Center has been to provide access to fluid and respectful learning opportunities for the community; to write in a way that prevents such access would contradict the purpose of the past decade of my working life.

Accordingly, I wrote for an extremely broad, imaginary audience and tried to blend explanations of basic academic concepts (e.g., “disciplines,” “discourse,” “pedagogy”) with theoretical argument. I shared my work with my husband, Chris Lippard (an academic outside of composition), and my mother, Bev Rousculp (a determinedly nonacademic person), to make sure that people outside of my field—and outside the academy—could understand it. They could—and they liked it.

I began submitting queries to publishers once I had completed a full manuscript. By then, community literacy work had cast its net wider and interest was high. Several publications (Goldblatt, *Because*; Flower, *Community*; Parks; Long; Rose and Weiser; and Ackerman and Coogan, *Public Work*, among others) had deepened

scholarship into this amorphous, yet somehow related, field of work that the SLCC Community Writing Center belonged to. Institutions including the University of New Mexico and Auburn University had opened their own community writing centers. Other programs were emerging as well, and I happily talked with them, offering encouragement and support. The timing for an in-depth look at the SLCC Community Writing Center seemed right.

Yet my book wasn't "right." My envisioned audience of academic and nonacademic readers was a fantasy. The only people likely to want to read such a book were compositionists, and as much as I wanted to open access to anyone, I couldn't expect that "anyone" would be interested in it (unless they were members of my family). Further, my attempts to distill so many years into a readable text revealed its inevitable limitations: "It's interesting . . . what's the point?" was sounded from sharp-eyed reviewers. These comments echoed years of conversations with colleagues across the nation regarding the CWC: it was amazing, sure, but it must have been an anomaly, an emergence of good fortune that had little relevancy beyond its local context. Typically, collegial interest waned when I could not provide instructions for, or a model of, how to get a community writing center started in other locales.

I started to ask myself just what message—or messages—did I want to get across with this book. I knew that the SLCC Community Writing Center was an important part of the history of the academic fields it belonged to, but how to articulate this? In a frustrated message to my chair, Stephen Ruffus, I wrote,

There are so many different avenues into this work, it makes the mind swirl. . . . It brings together Freire, Gee, Street, Heath, Brandt, Flower, Shor, Rose, Cushman, Mathieu, Cer-teau, Goldblatt, Parks, and on and on. . . . For me, it boils down to the rhetoric of respect for the "wholeness" of a person or collection of people, [rather than] the way that education and academia in particular seem to view people as "not finished" or "lacking" or "in need."

I didn't know what to do.

Two kind people helped me to find my way out of this mess. First, Ellen Cushman, a reviewer of an earlier draft, provided me with encouragement and insight that directly led to what you are reading now. In her review, she suggested that I might be able to tap into “the thorny question of sustainability,” because “[the CWC] helps us explore the longstanding question of where change takes place.” I took that review to Ruffus, who suggested that I look into the literature of ecocomposition. Though I’d heard of this subfield of composition, I had not given it any thought because my work at the CWC didn’t have anything to do with nature, nor preservation of natural spaces (save the occasional writing workshop we might have done in collaboration with environmental organizations).

Championed by Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser, ecocomposition seeks to further the postprocess movement in composition studies by turning to place/environment as a critical path of inquiry into the production and consumption of written discourse (6). Drawing on the interdisciplinary field of ecology and utilizing its epistemological processes, via method and metaphor, ecocomposition is often associated with environmental politics, yet it is not limited to the “green” movement. Rather, ecocomposition provides a lens into relationships, places, and systems that both affect and are affected by discourse. One focus of ecocomposition examines discursive ecology, which “see[s] writing as an ecological process, [and] explore[s] writing and writing processes as systems of interaction, economy, and interconnectedness” (116). Arguing that “very little of what we do now in composition studies is not ecological” (63), Dobrin, Weisser, and others emphasize the potential of ecocomposition to deepen our understanding of the forces that act on, and are changed by, writers interacting with one another through writing.

When I looked into it, I found that ecocomposition did indeed provide a means for me to examine the Community Writing Center in ways that felt familiar. I found metaphors that I had already been using: organism, environment, relationship, place, and the “retroactively labeled” concept of the “web” in Marilyn Cooper’s “The Ecology of Writing” (Dobrin and Weisser 118).² Moreover,

my own relationship with the CWC had been an organic one; I often thought of it as my “first child” and have gone through stages with the CWC that parallel those of a parent: gestation, labor, birth, nurturing, worrying, trusting, the happiness of seeing other people come to love it, followed by the satisfied—yet bittersweet—knowledge that it was time for me to leave so it could grow in new and different ways without me.³

In addition to the resonance of ecocomposition for me personally, its theories also provided a frame for a concept I’d been trying to build my inquiry around, one that arose from attempts to interpret a micro-change that countless people seemed to experience at the Community Writing Center. This individualized transformation tended to be marked by a specific “look” that crossed over the faces of people entering the CWC for the first time and learning about its programs. Typically accompanied by glancing around the center with what looked like confusion—but wasn’t quite—this “look” became part of CWC lore, with writing assistants tallying how many times they’d witnessed (or provoked) it over the course of a day. While we all recognized it, we didn’t understand what the “look” meant. It wasn’t just about finding a new community resource, which might elicit excited or happy responses. Rather, it seemed to emerge from something found and lost at the same time.

Talking about it one day, Rachel Meads, who had worked at the CWC for nearly three years before entering a PhD program in radical education, introduced me to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s research into *anomalous learning spaces*, which put “inside and outside into relation” with each other (*Places* 37). In such spaces, people encounter learning moments different from those they may move through in educational institutions. In anomalous learning spaces, people may experience their learning selves “in transition and in motion,” sometimes unexpectedly, “towards previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world” (16). Although such spaces may not be identified as educational environments, they “[put] inner thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, desires, and ideas in relation to outside others, events, history, culture, and socially constructed ideas” (37). These spaces, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall or the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in

Japan, move participants through a “pedagogical pivot point,” a moment when the learning self “comes into relation with the outside world and to the other selves who inhabit and create that world with us” (117). This moment of transformation is unmediated by a teacher or professor; instead, it is revealed by the learning self’s sharp awareness of relationship.

Meads offered the insight that the “look” was the expression of moving through such a transition, pivoting through one’s relationship with education and writing. She suggested that people came into the center thinking it was just a “front” for Salt Lake Community College; after a little conversation with a writing assistant, however, they “got to turn a little bit; they adjust how they’ve been interacting with writing.” Encountering a possibility of writing and learning in a nonacademic space may have led to micro-changes of self and the self’s relation to literacy. The relationship-based theories of ecomposition added to the frame I was constructing from Ellsworth’s (*Places*) pivot metaphor in their focus on how organisms (writers) interact with their environments. When people entered the CWC’s discursive space, the relationship between self and writing was often distinctly separate—many people never imagined they could be considered a “writer.” However, the “look” suggested a blurring of this division, an integration of self and writing—perhaps an emergence of a writing self.

Correspondingly, Ellsworth’s description of moving through a pedagogical pivot point brought to mind Marilyn Cooper’s “web.” According to Cooper, an ecological model of writing suggests a web in which “anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole” (370). To use this metaphor to examine change, however, I think we need to look not at the strands but at the connective spaces (the pivot points) where they meet: the intersections and “crossroads” that require change. Each of these points on a web calls forth possibilities: Which direction do I turn? What might happen if I do? What choices do I have? These points require that decisions be made; we cannot stay at an intersection forever.

With decisions come loss, perhaps very small, sometimes great—options that were open close, and perhaps others open. Thus, moving through a web’s intersections is commonly marked

by what Ellsworth describes as a vulnerability that emerges when the “inside” self relates to the world outside it (*Places*). She argues that pivot points are not the experience of comprehending new knowledge necessary to meet educational or professional requirements, such as finally understanding how a particular mathematical concept works or doing well on an exam. These moments of accomplishment are framed by “satisfaction, relief, [or] triumph upon arriving at the end of a process and grasping . . . the ‘right’ answer” (16). Rather, moving through a pedagogical pivot point is often an unexpected transition and looks like “someone who is in the process of losing something of who she thought she was . . . upon encountering something outside herself and her own ways of thinking” (16). Similarly, the points on a web are spaces of transition, of decision, of change—they combine possibility and loss. The “look” that punctuated the Community Writing Center’s space may have been the expression of this moment: the loss of one’s current sense of self and the onset of another.

Lest it appear that I am interested only in the change that community members experienced at the Community Writing Center, let me emphasize that the people who worked there—the staff and I—experienced change as well, as will be apparent in the chapters that follow. For now, however, let me provide a small sample of how my own relationship to the CWC, and to teaching, was in continual motion, and in some ways still is, now three years after leaving the center. Specifically, I’d like to illustrate how intersections inherently precede change, the moments when we must make a decision to follow one strand of the web or another. One particular junction that forever altered how I related to literacy education appeared when I was working with an early CWC writing group. This was only my second experience in facilitating writing partnerships with a nonprofit organization; I was still new at this kind of work. In this particular partnership, I was repeating a curriculum that explored themes of self and community, a curriculum I had used only once before with another organization. In the third of eight scheduled meetings, the participants asked me why I expected them to write about themselves in personal ways yet didn’t offer to write about myself. Their question threw me because I was used to

the safe space that existed for me as a teacher in a college environment. Students usually did what I asked them to; however, this group of “not students” put their pens down and said they wouldn’t write until I agreed to expose myself just as much as I was asking of them. At that moment, I found myself at a crossroads; the way I turned would determine my relationship with these writers and with myself.

I agreed to write with them, and entered into a space I had not experienced before in a teaching situation, even when I’d written along with composition students. In such classroom environments, I knew I could write more sophisticated essays than the students could; therefore, the risk I took in doing so was minimal. When I wrote about myself and my communities, however, and then shared my writing with a public audience, I felt scared and exposed. I had lost the protective (and protected) space of the academy. At the same time, I had discovered something important about how I would try to relate with community partners and individuals, and by extension, how the Community Writing Center would too—I would prioritize *respect* for (though, importantly, not coddle or feel sorry for) human vulnerability and would ask someone to risk only what I was willing to risk myself.

Thus, to corral the past decade of my work with the SLCC Community Writing Center into something meaningful for compositionists, writing center workers, and community literacy activist-scholars, I turn to metaphors in ecocomposition. I want to be clear, however, that I do not see my work as necessarily contributing to ecocomposition theory; rather, I use its discourse to recognize change and how such insights shaped why the SLCC Community Writing Center emerged, how it (and the people involved with it) transformed, and how it was sustained over so many years. This inquiry is not merely local. The CWC has long existed at the intersections (and outermost strands) of rhetoric, composition, writing center, and community literacy studies, and, as such, its work can contribute to recognizing—rather than defining—change within progressive educational practices, and how flexibility and uncertainty can play meaningful roles in building sustainable partnerships. Further, this investigation reveals a way of cultivating

relationships through a rhetoric of respect (which I explicate in the second chapter), a rhetoric that provided the seeds for the SLCC Community Writing Center and subsequently grew it into a thriving, yet disruptive, institution.

To provide a shared understanding of what the center was, in the first chapter, “Recognizing the SLCC Community Writing Center,” I present the CWC as a specific locale and set of programs—its “what,” “who,” and “where”—that existed inside of the larger environment of community writing programs (academic and nonacademic) and within Salt Lake City and Salt Lake Community College. After laying this groundwork, I move into Chapter 2, “Evolving a Discursive Ecology: A Rhetoric of Respect,” which describes the ideological metaphor that grounded the relationships internal to the CWC and in interaction with individuals and organizations. This chapter follows a narrative path from the development of my own understanding of what type of educational environment I wished to participate in through the negotiation of ideology and relationship with others as the Community Writing Center transformed from ideas into an actual project and space. The next chapter, “Transforming Energy in Pursuit of Uncertainty,” looks at how a rhetoric of respect influenced change in the Community Writing Center within the collective groups of students and faculty who worked there. Specifically, I inquire into disruptions of academic notions of expertise that took place in the collaborative environment of the CWC, as well as the contribution that ease with uncertainty made toward the center’s sustainability. In the fourth chapter, “Shifting Relations, Transforming Expectations,” I map external relationships with the CWC to trace how we moved from a “liberatory” sense of the center as a site of empowerment or change-making into a rhetoric of respect for the ability of individuals to exercise agency over their textual production in ways they deemed most appropriate. Finally, in Chapter 5, “Engaging Place: Acclimation and Disruption,” I return to ecocomposition’s assertion of place as a critical path of inquiry and negotiate the tensions of sustainability and disturbance, of institutional power and resistance.

“The case of the SLC Community Writing Center (CWC) provides a glimpse into a unique project that reached Salt Lake City’s populations of adult learners with programming developed by imaginative, energetic teachers of all ages. Tiffany Rousculp writes the story of the SLC CWC from an insider’s perspective with a poet’s eye for details.”

—Ellen Cushman, author of *The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing the People’s Perseverance* (2012)

“Tiffany Rousculp uncovers the CWC’s value for those of us who aren’t involved in community writing or service learning programs. She does this through a focus on *change*, a historic key word in composition studies. She asks us to consider how we provoke, measure, and then sustain change in writers, programs, and ourselves. To sustain change, she argues, the CWC developed—recursively, over time—the rhetoric of respect. She explores this discourse richly throughout the book, seamlessly weaving narrative scenes into her prose.”

—Mary Soliday, San Francisco State University

Drawing from her decade leading Salt Lake Community College’s Community Writing Center (CWC), Tiffany Rousculp advocates cultivating relationships within a “rhetoric of respect” that recognizes the abilities, contributions, and goals of all participants. Rousculp calls for understanding change not as a result or outcome, but as the potential for people to make choices regarding textual production within regulating environments.

The book’s dynamic movement through stories of failure, success, misunderstanding, and discovery is characteristic of the way in which academic–community relationships in transition pivot between disruption and sustainability. By inquiring into the CWC’s history, evolution, internal dynamics, relationships with stakeholders, and interplay between power and resistance, Rousculp situates the CWC not as an anomaly in composition studies but as a pointer to where change can happen and what is possible in academic–community writing partnerships when uncertainty, persistence, and respect converge.

TIFFANY ROUSCULP is associate professor of English at Salt Lake Community College in Utah. She is the founding director of the SLCC Community Writing Center.

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