Activating Activist Literacy: Discovering Dispositions for Civic Identity Development

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I was nervous about doing a community action project because I am sorry to say I am not the type of person who jumps up and wants to be the first one to better my community. It is not that I don't want to, it is just that I'm a quiet type of person who likes to let other people jump out there and better the community.

—Nichole, First-year writing student

This [community action] project actually made me venture outside of my comfort zone that I was building up around myself and experience someplace other than the theaters, restaurants, and malls.

—Josie, First-year writing student

Josie and Nichole were part of a first-year writing class where students used writing to take action in their community. The quotations above suggest that as civic community participants they are confronted with new contexts in which they negotiate new and different roles as adults who are newly allowed to vote, living on their own, and responsible for their own actions. Josie demonstrates how a community action project asked her to think about herself differently by “ventur[ing] outside of my comfort zone,” and Nichole mentions her quiet personality shaping her decision to do work in civic spaces. Service-learning projects prompting action in the community ask students to position themselves differently through writing, to take up a civic identity using the discourses of these spaces to create a public self through literacy and action. Service-learning pedagogy provides the means to get learners into communities and doing actual literacy work. Service-learning activities can play an important role in teaching students how to negotiate their new responsibilities as citizens in society, but as pedagogues we need to prepare students to do this work.

Josie and Nichole participated in a service-learning activity I call the Community Action Project (CAP), a three-part assignment sequence in which students inquire into an issue, use writing to take action, and then reflect on that action. As Christian Weisser notes, “Service-learning approaches to composition attempt to generate situations where writing can be seen as deeply connected to social action and democratic practices” (53, emphasis added). Drawing on research with two first-year writing classes at the
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I consider how service-learning, identity formation, and literacy development intersect; I argue that literacy teachers who use service-learning need to understand the relationship between civic identity formation and what I call “activist literacy.” This research leads me to argue, first of all, that activist service-learning projects promote a particular kind of literacy practice: “activist literacy,” the rhetorical use of literacy for civic participation. Activist literacy is fundamentally action oriented, not just the act in and of itself but the thinking, planning, decision-making, reading, writing, action, and reflection that surrounds the act. For Josie and Nicole this meant not only doing research on their topic, but using that research to change their classmate’s understanding of the homeless, presenting that research in an activist genre for a community food drive, and reflecting on their research and actions to change their own attitudes and assumptions about the homeless. Activist literacy makes room for individual agency and collaborative action, focusing on making change locally in the communities to which a person belongs. Activist literacy includes an ability to critique the connection between power, language, and institutional structures, and it prompts rhetorical and linguistic strategies to challenge socio-cultural structures in the process of meaning making and social justice. Thus, activist literacy is both a practice and a disposition.

As a service-learning teacher, I advocate for both teachers’ understanding of how activist literacy helps students to change as well as students’ understanding of how it helps them to make change. We need to be aware of students’ initial fears and be reminded of the risks they take to engage these projects. Below I analyze how students use activist literacy to reveal the intricate connections between literacy, civic participation, and identity development, a relationship that service-learning pedagogy is only beginning to explore. Additionally, drawing on work by David Coogan, I advocate for a materialist pedagogical approach that promotes historicizing, genre analysis, and activist literacy modeling that can teach the practices and dispositions of activist literacy in service-learning contexts.

**Literacies and Rhetorics for Civic Action**

The service-learning project I analyze below was intended to get students to write with the community: I ask students to take up an activist stance. For example, one student, Lianna, conferenced with me about her project to write a letter to the editor of her hometown newspaper about the youth curfew in her town. As a former employee of the mayor’s office, she was concerned about how her letter about a law the mayor had implemented and enforced might be read. During this conference, I realized I was asking students to position themselves differently in their communities (How will it look if I disagree with people in power? How will the mayor, my parents,
neighbors, and former teachers view me now?) and to take risks with their literacy practices (Will I sound professional? Will others besides teens listen to me?). This example demonstrates a student who felt comfort—if not privilege—in her hometown in certain ways, but she did not feel comfortable positioning herself as an activist in that community. From this experience and others like them, I argue for naming and defining activist literacy in certain types of service learning projects as the rhetorical use of literacy for activist practice. Activist literacy includes [1] an awareness and critique of socio-political power structures, [2] the strategic use and interpretation of language, and [3] collaboration or coalition building. Thus, activist literacy is both a set of practices and a disposition toward socio-political justice and change. To define activist literacy, I start with scholarship on community literacy to consider how activist literacy compares and diverges. Ultimately, I point to the challenge teachers face of preparing students to take up the disposition of activist literacy.

The service projects I assign have the goal of supporting social justice. In particular, Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds in “Reframing Volunteerism As Acts of Dissent” discuss the difference between service and activism: “service addresses people” whereas “activism addresses structures” (231). Key to this argument is the term “activism,” a term many researchers in service-learning avoid in describing multiple kinds of service projects. But service projects take on multiple forms and have multiple purposes. Thomas Deans, in Writing Partnerships, classifies service-learning as writing for, writing with, and writing about communities. Paul Heilker, in “Rhetoric Made Real,” discusses five forms of service-learning: writing about community service, doing community work as research, community service linked to course themes critiquing socio-cultural structures, community service prompting academic writing, and writing for nonprofit agencies. And Betty Smith Franklin, in “Reading and Writing the World,” talks about the difference between “charity,” “civic engagement,” and “social action.” These scholars create neat categories that focus on how students’ actions situate them as doing a particular kind of service. Though my intent was to promote activism (acts of dissent used locally with the goal of making change to larger sociopolitical structures), my students’ work was not entirely contained in the categories mentioned above. For example, while I emphasized using their action to make positive social change by challenging dominant ideas, students approached that work in multiple ways—even within the same project. So, Josie and Nicole, two students in a collaborative group of four, did work about, with, and for the homeless, and their entire project could fit within Heilker’s five categories and had some aspects of each of the Smith’s three categories.

The kinds of service project students do affect the literacy practices they draw on to accomplish their projects. Service-learning scholars use the term “community literacy” to consider the relationship between literacy
and rhetorical action in public spaces. “Community literacy,” according to Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower (quoting Peck, Flower, and Higgins), is “the public act of writing and taking social action.” In “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry,” Higgins, Long, and Flower draw on their years of experience working on a variety of community literacy projects to outline four literate practices of a rhetorical model of community literacy: [1] community literacy users need to assess the rhetorical situation, and [2] create a “local public;” [3] those who manage community literacy projects need to nurture and develop participants’ rhetorical capacities, and [4] taken together these rhetorical literacy practices can “support personal and public transformation through circulation of alternative texts and practices” (11). In her book Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics, Elenore Long historicizes literacy research that prompted the field’s ideas about community literacy to argue for “local publics as an object of inquiry and a site for rhetorical intervention” (25). She argues for five features of what she calls situated, public literacies—literacies that users take up to go public. These literacies are performative, collaborative, inquiry driven, sponsored, and comprise alternative discourses (by which she means the use, understanding, and blending of various community discourses through the collaborative and intercultural process of literate social action) (39-40). In rendering community literacy as both discursive and rhetorical, these scholars point to the importance of rhetorical abilities, methods for taking action, and changes made to thinking and understanding different points of view needed for social change. However, their contexts for constructing and defining these literate and rhetorical practices do not adequately consider the literate dispositions participants need to take up to do this work.

Activist literacy users engage in different—although overlapping—literate practices than the community literacy user, and the difference between these two lies in the theories for how literacy is enacted by citizens in a society to create change. A key difference is that community literacy advocate consensus—or deliberative—models of democracy, whereas activist literacy is a practice that aligns with Chantal Mouffe’s “agonistic model of democracy” (98). This model recognizes the power dynamics in a society and emphasizes the importance of disagreement or agonism. She argues that the goal of consensus without exclusion is impossible and instead argues that “the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions toward democratic designs” (103). Thus, while community literacy focuses on the input of multiple stakeholders in a change event, activist literacy focuses on critically understanding and challenging socio-political power structures. Community literacy prompts the use of language to make visible the multiple perspectives and to then create
a means for addressing that issue collaboratively, whereas activist literacy emphasizes the strategic use and interpretation of language to challenge and shape the reality of self and institution. Finally, both community literacy and activist literacy find value in building coalitions and collaborating with other individuals or groups for the purpose of social justice and change, yet community literacy brings everyone together to make the best change for all, whereas activist literacy challenges dominant attitudes, positions, policies, and laws. For Lianna, a community literacy project would mean bringing together the mayor, teenagers, parents, law enforcement, business owners, and other interested members of the community to help her make change; this can bring about important and useful meaning making and change for all members involved, but it can also lead to a kind of consensus that eliminates difference. Because Lianna's voice is not heard—let alone valued—in discussions about youth curfew, her activist literacy project gave voice to an unpopular and mostly unheard point of view for a public audience.

For Lianna and others, their activist literacy projects start with considering the change they want to make, which prompts analysis, critique, and response to socio-political power structures. Jacquelyn Jones Royster explains this rhetorical practice best in her analysis of Black women's essays in the 19th century. In Traces of a Stream, Royster argues for literacy as a socio-cognitive ability:

> It is the ability to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time. My intent in using the term socio-cognitive here is to push beyond an examination of levels of social awareness and ways of making judgments in order for this concept to encompass also ways of knowing and believing . . . and also ways of doing. . . . (45-46)

For Royster, African American women essayists used literacy rhetorically; that is, they used reading and writing for problem-solving in pursuit of social action and change. Though I don't argue that the students I discuss below are positioned similarly as the women Royster researches, I do argue that the practices she discusses are the same practices I want students to wrestle with and learn: students with the CAP choose an issue that faces their community, research the issue, put it into a larger context, and determine the best ways to act. This requires determining the most effective forms of action, considering how best to accomplish that action in a 16-week semester—or planning to sustain it after the semester—and researching how to get “published” in their communities. Students develop or refine techniques to question the status quo; research, inquire, and historicize social trends, power dynamics, and contexts that influence change making; and reflect on the ways their actions make change (or not). Lianna knew
that teens' voices were not consulted or considered before implementing
the law, and she wanted to express her disappointment that this law actu-
ally positioned teens as criminals and punished all teens for the actions
of a few. As the law had already been implemented, she wanted simply to
educate adults in her community about these potentially invisible effects of
such a law on the majority of teens.

Using literacy for the purpose of researching and planning how to take
action is important, but for Lianna and others it is also important to imple-
ment that action. Thus activist literacy includes the strategic use and inter-
pretation of language. James Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric points to the
importance of this set of literacy and rhetorical practices. In Rhetorics, Poeti-
ics, and Cultures, Berlin argues that social-epistemic rhetoric points to how
language both constructs reality and is the medium for changing reality:

Thus, in composing or in interpreting a text, a person engages in an analysis
of the cultural codes operating in defining his or her subject position, the
positions of the audience, and the constructions of the matter to be consid-
ered. These functions are in dialectical relation to each other, so that the
writer must engage in complex decision making in shaping the text. (90)

For Berlin, social epistemic rhetoric has everything to do with how lan-
guage, meaning, history, and existence are tied. Rhetoric is tied to literacy
because community activists use language to both read and challenge the
construction of knowledges. Students learn how language positions them
in society through laws, policies, media, and institutions. They research
conversations about their topic, read and interpret a variety of opinions,
and find their own position in that conversation. As students learn to write
for audiences outside of the classroom, they develop genre knowledge and
choose their language carefully, knowing that their goal is to enter into and
change the rhetoric of the conversation. In Lianna's case, not only did she
have to research the "letter to the editor" genre, understand the submission
guidelines for her community paper, and consider how to situate her letter
in the newspaper's current conversations, she also had to demonstrate that
she understood why parents and community leaders made their decision
while also explaining to them how their decision unfairly positioned teens
in the community.

Though language is the key to change making, activist literacy also
incorporates processes for change by encouraging collaboration and/or
coalition-building. Linda Flower's notion of "intercultural inquiry" describes
the processes and complexities of this work: "An intercultural rhetoric based
on inquiry is, then, a deliberate meaning-making activity in which difference
is not read as a problem but sought out as a resource for constructing more
grounded and actionable understandings" (40). Flower points to the impor-
tance of working collectively on issues activists care about while learning

36 Composition Studies
the issue from multiple sides. This allows activists to come together for a common, potentially larger, purpose and to address the arguments of others. Students take up activist literacy by evaluating their resources and considering how to use those resources for their project. They have to be able to work with others and be willing to have their initial purpose shifted in relation to what others think is important. They need to ask themselves what they are willing to give and what they are willing learn. They also need to work with others to present their ideas in writing, sort through various ideas to create a final product, and listen and respond to constructive criticism from teachers, peers, or outside agencies they are working with. With her project, Lianna was able to research how other communities addressed her town’s concerns that prompted the curfew so she could then use that information to suggest better solutions than the one her town had implemented.

Activist literacy is more than the practices, definitions, and challenges listed above; it is also a disposition toward the world and what it means to take action as a democratic citizen. An activist literacy stance understands the social and rhetorical contexts where literacy practices can make change and commits to making change long term and ongoing. Activist literacy users know that strategic language use can change a situation, a mind, or a context, and they use these tools, but they also know it is a way of being and of interacting, on a day-to-day basis. Activist literacy users understand the importance of building coalitions politically, as that strengthens an organization, but they also believe in learning from others and being open-minded to what diverse individuals bring. Activist literacy goes beyond the notion of “practice” as an act or an activity and takes up the values, habits of mind, and approaches activists take toward community contexts. Though students were able to take up the practices of activist literacy, they were challenged to take up the disposition—the civic identity—that is a central part of activist literacy. Though my conversations with Lianna emphasized that parents and community leaders would respect an adult who shared her perspective to make a better community, only a few students understood that social action is not a one-time statement of opinion but instead a long-term attitude and commitment to civic participation.

Developing A Civic Identity

The connections between literacy, rhetoric, and civic identity point to the possibilities for students acquiring the disposition of activist literacy and in developing an activist identity. As one of my students, Jamin, notes about the relationship between identity development and activist literacy: “For the very first time, I felt as if I can use my writing as a tool and shed light on some of the important things that I am related to that needs to be fixed. This I achieved in my first project which really made me bold and
confident of my writing. I think about this class as a grooming point where shy writer’s come but leave as courageous.” For Jamin, writing is used to both “fix” problems and make someone “courageous,” to both “shed light on important things” and create boldness and confidence. So how do activist service-learning projects help to develop students’ activist literacy and identity? How can this writing incite change in students’ abilities and identities as writers? Melanie Kill argues that students in the first-year writing classroom develop their identities through being in an unfamiliar academic space. Activist service-learning projects also provide a space for identity development, but teachers of service-learning must learn how identity development functions before we can know how to prompt development. Iris Marion Young’s arguments about social location versus identity set the stage for understanding how an activist service-learning project can lead to students’ civic identity development.

Genres of writing represent the literate values of particular communities; learning new genres represents learning new Discourses which is a process of identity development. In “Acknowledging the Rough Edges of Resistance,” Kill discusses the negotiation of self-presentation that students—and teachers—face in the first-year composition classroom. Genres, she argues, are a means of identifying students’ presentation of identity: “It is by engaging in the generic actions and interactions that are valued in particular communities that we perform and develop identities appropriate to the places and spaces we want to occupy” (217). Kill emphasizes the relational nature of identity formation, suggesting that identity forms in negotiation with other people, other texts, other Discourses. In particular, when students come into the unfamiliar space of the first-year writing classroom, they are confronted with new ways of and purposes for reading and writing. Thus, the genres of the first-year writing classroom ask students to present themselves—to represent their identities—in ways at least slightly unfamiliar.

If genres, texts, and context, then, represent identity development, formation, or negotiation in first-year writing (with all of its specialized reading, writing, and language using practices), then adding a service component to the classroom might make this identity development and negotiation of self even more complex. As many students mentioned in various reflections throughout my course, they thought the community action project was the most different and the most difficult. Aaron writes, “The biggest thing I have learned in this class is that it is okay to branch out and write about things that are hard to write about and that I am not used to writing about. . . . The community action project was particularly tough. I had never had to do anything quite like that project.” Or, as Nick argues, “I think the actual writing projects in this class are much harder [than the class I took during my Freshman year]. For example, they involve interviewing or at least talking to other people to find out information, or writing a letter to a paper
or organization. That seems like a lot of work, especially for a class that is primarily intended for Freshman.” These students point to genres and activities they feel are outside of first-year writing. As students are asked to take up new genres and practices in relation to new contexts, they face challenges and successes with identity negotiation, particularly working in multiple, unfamiliar spaces that then ask them to construct a self that may push them out of their comfort zone. But this discomfort also validates the use of service projects because identity development is a key factor in learning.

“Identity” as a concept is complicated, and in order to understand how identities change, we need to understand how identity functions in relation to other aspects of an individual’s life. In Inclusion and Democracy, Young distinguishes between “identity” and “social positioning” by arguing that social positioning does not construct identity but instead creates the conditions for identity formation. Separating identity and social location means individuals can go beyond their identity markers and primary Discourses but also suggests that these factors do shape where an individual starts and what issues they may have to negotiate. Young writes, “Social groups do indeed position individuals, but a person’s identity is her own, formed in active relation to social positions, among other things, rather than constituted by them. Individual subjects make their own identities but not under conditions they chose” (99). Social position constitutes how an individual is shaped by his or her race, gender, social class, ability, or religion, and it affects the activist literacy practices of a person: what they feel appropriate community action is, who they define as part of their communities, what they consider to be purposeful forms of action, and how they represent themselves to their audience. Paying attention to students’ social position provides a glimpse into the activist literacy students already have and suggests how teachers can teach activist literacy practices.

Social position does not form identity, as Young states above, but it creates the conditions for identity formation. In fact, identity formation—development of new Discourses—occurs through the actions that students take in negotiation with other social positions and rhetorical contexts. Thus, if identity is informed by social location, it is formed through action. According to Young, “A person’s identity is not some sum of her gender, racial, class, and national affinities. She is only her identity, which she herself has made by the way that she deals with and acts in relation to others’ social group positions, among other things” (102). Young describes how citizens form their identities by learning about unfair and unequal situations that face others who are not like them. Bickford and Reynolds say it this way: “Activism argues for relationships based on connections . . . Our activist relationships are based on common desires” (237). Therefore, students develop their identities in relation to their social positioning, new Discourses, the genres of those discourses, and encounters with activism in their communities.
For example, in my classes, some students who have been church volunteers fell back on volunteerism as a kind of “action” for their projects. The group of students who focused their collaborative project on the homeless included some volunteer acts, such as serving food at a soup kitchen and running a food drive at a local market. But the project’s purpose was to inquire into why homelessness existed in the university town they currently resided in (one student, from a small town in the state, had never seen a homeless person before). So the activist part of their project—the place where volunteerism turn into activism and the place where identity developed and was documented—was inviting the head of the soup kitchen to our class to educate us about the culture of homelessness and making a brochure to distribute during their food drive that actually educated the public from the homeless perspective (from what the soup kitchen director taught them and from their experience talking with homeless folks when they volunteered to serve food). Ultimately, their civic identity developed because they saw themselves in the homeless folks they were learning about; they recognized that homeless people have dreams and goals and that there are reasons—beyond individual failure—that folks are homeless. Then they took that understanding back into their material and geographic communities to connect with others through a brochure written to change people’s attitudes. These students had to negotiate what it meant to be an activist, to use writing to take action, and to consider what role to play in the community to make the changes they identified. Their social location informed their projects, but their activist literacy developed their civic identities.

**Contexts for Activist Literacy**

In the courses I design, service-learning in communities is intimately connected to literacy, and the rhetorical use of literacy—activist literacy—develops and revises identity. In my class, students draw on existing literacy practices: they were all fairly accomplished “school” writers, they all knew how to read and respond to an academic text, and most of them knew how to go above and beyond the teacher’s expectations. They were challenged with learning how to use their literacy for activist purposes; therefore, they needed to learn about different audiences, genres, and purposes for their writing, and they needed to put themselves into community spaces by taking action on an issue. The method for inviting civic identity development is the CAP, a three-part assignment sequence that includes an inquiry project, a community action that must include writing, and a reflection. I introduce the three assignments together so students see a clear relationship. An important element to this project is the emphasis on writing to take action in communities, a model, according to Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott that is called “the Stanford model”: “Students mainly wrote as their com-
munity service rather than about it” (4). Focusing on writing in community contexts demonstrates that writing is not just a school discipline but a communication form used in real contexts for real purposes. Through students’ community action projects and analysis of their reflections, I theorize the notion of activist literacy; I use their input to learn about the development of their civic identity, and I then consider some challenges they face using activist literacy to take action.

The term “community” has been critiqued by scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt and Joseph Harris as a term that has no opposite, as a term that promotes consensus and shared values only. While I sympathize with the challenges posed by “community,” the term in current composition and literacy scholarship is rarely if ever discussed as singular and unified. Community—or, more particularly, Discourse Communities—are defined by the practices and values that can represent various social structures; research by Vivian Zamel, for example, recognizes that there are diversities. Used in relation to the term “activist,” I argue that “community” is a metaphor for the variety of groups within a democratic society that represent particular values and ideas. Activists do not respond to individuals; they respond to groups of people who have similar ideas that are located within our social structures. Thus arguing for activist literacy in the “community”—or taking action in the “community”—allows for a broader understanding of the variety of spaces where activism can take place and it helps students recognize that values and ideas of individuals are located within social structures. Thus, students write letters to parents, for example, to ask them to change their minds about particular expectations that students disagree with; for a couple of my students, “parents” represent a group of people who want to ensure their children make good decisions about intimate and marital relationships. But through writing these letters to a “community,” students think about where parents’ arguments come from in order to address them. Thus, I agree with Pratt and Harris in that “community” doesn’t have an opposite, but to me this is a false dichotomy: when I mention “community” I mean multiple “communities” that can overlap and coexist. I have additionally stayed away from the term “public” to talk about students’ writing because of its opposite “private” which, taken together, has a history of emphasizing that “real work” happens in public, while work in “private” does not make change, as discussed by Lorraine Code.

The major theme of my courses focused on writing and representation, introducing students to the relationships between language, writing, culture, and activism. Specifically, we read texts about race and class by authors such as Beverly Tatum, Laurel Johnson Black, Barbara Ehrenreich, Gloria Anzaldua, and June Jordan. We watched films such as Michael Moore’s Roger and Me and a local film about the socialization of college football fans entitled Seeing Red. Students considered many questions: How does our culture shape...
what we know, how we communicate with others, and where we stand on particular issues? What issues facing my communities are important to me? How can I seek out information on those issues and find ways to take action in my community? And how have others done this work? Though the class was clearly focused on particular themes, students chose the foci of their CA, allowing them to determine issues most important to them.

In the first part of the CAP entitled “Inquiry into an Issue,” students write a researched inquiry paper, of about five pages in length, and include some primary and secondary research from interviews, local publications, or the library. Inquiry, in this case, refers to “us[ing] difference to construct a more complex and diversely grounded meaning in the face of an open question” (Flower, Higgins, Long, 5). The purpose is to discover what is being said, why it is being said, and what that means for the writer. The inquiry paper encourages students to think about larger, systemic questions. For example, one student who wrote about university budget cuts found that students didn't really know how they were being affected by the cuts; he called for more education of the students but also wondered if it was in the university’s best interests to keep students uneducated about these issues. Another student started her inquiry with her own problem of traveling between the two university campuses by bus and ended up talking to transportation planners and finding other models the city/university could use to make transportation between campuses more efficient and cost effective. Secondly, I ask students to inquire into an issue that affects a community to which they belong; I define community as both a geographical location (such as their neighborhood, town, or university campus) and as a group of people who share common interests. For part of the assignment, students make arguments for how they are connected to this community; they can be a part of it, support it, challenge it, or be curious about it, but the point is that they are focusing on local issues that they care about rather than the more abstract and common issues sometimes used in more traditional research papers (i.e., abortion, gun control, drinking age). Ultimately, I encourage students to use their inquiry papers as a starting point for the next part of the CAP.

For the second part of the CAP entitled “Community Action,” I ask students to use writing to take action in their communities. In this, I take the lead from Weisser who argues that “public writing is often most meaningful when each student addresses an issue of his or her choice” (114-15). I encourage students to see this part of the project as what Deans would classify as writing “with” the community, which is writing for social action addressing local problems, where academic, community, and hybrid literacies are privileged (17). This part of the project is highly self-directed, sometimes collaborative, and is based on what students find important to them. Finally, students must research and use genres of community activist writing, such as letters, press releases, flyers, brochures, newsletters, etc. The students in my classes
wrote letters to critique the war in Iraq, to challenge the way Muslims were treated because of that war, and to inform students of color about campus networks and groups of support; they created flyers and surveys to try to educate and enforce campus smoking policy or to inform college men and women about the services of Planned Parenthood.

The final part of the CAP is a reflection, an opportunity for students to look back on the community action part of the project. In it, students consider what they learned and how the communities received their activism. The students' reflections are an opportunity to narrate what they learned and how they learned, i.e. an opportunity to consider what they did, what happened, what they took from the project, and how they might do it differently next time. For me, this reflection is a key difference between the CAP and the kinds of assignments that Weisser critiques in *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse*:

Public writing consists of more than expressing your opinions about a current topic; it entails being able to make your voice heard on an issue that directly confronts or influences you. Moreover, such assignments [as writing letters to the editor] have little effect on the world. While students may find these assignments empowering if their letters are published (as they occasionally are), very rarely do their letters result in any change or even any future discussion. Letters to the editor are one way assignments; students put efforts into writing them but get little subsequent response. (94)

Though my students write multiple kinds of letters, to public representatives and university officials in addition to editors, their reflections often reveal their disappointment in the lack of response. But they also emphasize what they learn about who to talk to, how to contact their local representatives, and what they actually did take from those folks who wrote back and provided them with more resources and more information. In this regard, the reflection prompts students to not only consider this one specific moment of action but to also think about how this action can lead to further action. Ultimately, these assignments situated students' identities in activist literacy practices which included [1] developing rhetorical abilities in relation to particular audiences, [2] confronting and positioning themselves within material contexts on issues they found important, [3] reflecting on and revising particular knowledge and perspectives in relation to the processes and outcomes of their actions, and [4] working with and learning from diverse people and contexts.

Students used activist literacy to understand how their audience was situated in relation to a particular issue, and they learned how to use rhetoric to address that issue. Katie came to promote Planned Parenthood to other college students by way of a friend who went to this organization.
and found services she didn’t know about. Katie proposed her idea—to create a flyer specifically for college students—to representatives from Planned Parenthood who helped her consider what information to include in her flyer, how she might present that information, and what the politics of representing another organization meant for her writing. Some students recognized the complex decisions needed to address an audience. In particular, Jennie, who researched the campus/city bus issue, decided to send letters to her mayor and city council requesting more funds for the local bus system. She reflected on the force of her letter, wondering if it would have had more power had she included more specifics, but she didn’t want her letter to drag on, so people would actually read it. Even “failed” attempts at community action taught students about audience and the kind of response they might get from their action. Nick wrote a letter to the editor challenging the dominant media driven ideas about the war in Iraq being a national safety issue, and Jamin wrote to inform the predominantly non-Muslim community about the challenges Muslims faced in his city, particularly within a national context where Muslims were being vilified because of the Iraq war and 9/11. They both speculated about why their letters weren’t published, suggesting that the media didn’t support their opinions. Through these projects, students learned about the rhetorical aspects of taking community action. They needed to know who they were writing to, and how to demonstrate their authority and get their audience interested. But they also needed to learn what language their audience would most respond to, and they learned that in some cases, such as with letters to the editor and flyers for an organization, policy dictates the genre of writing, the information included in writing, and the stance taken toward an audience.

Students also developed their identities through positioning themselves in particular ways in communities. By acting on particular issues, they positioned themselves as people who felt these issues mattered and needed to change. Mike, who distributed information for the American Cancer Society about resources available for quitting smoking, writes, “This was a great way to get my name out into the community to show that I cared about a particular issue.” But it was also an opportunity for some students to come to voice. As a 4-H member, Karlin saw the state fair as a learning opportunity for young children and wrote a letter to the editor calling the state to continue funding the fair at a time when it was about to be cut. In her reflection she explains:

The best thing about the Community Action Project is that I can easily voice my opinion to a huge audience without having to speak in front of a large group of people. I do have well defined opinions and am passionate about many things, but often I am forced into silence by my own self-con-
This class and this project has shown me how to use my voice within my community to talk about issues that I love, yet on which I am normally silent.

Students used activist literacy to be agents in their communities, to take a stand, and to represent themselves as caring citizens. But students represented themselves in different ways. As Karlin mentioned above, she attached her name to the issue she cared about, but she was also able to hide behind her text and plan for the ways she would act. Writing letters to the editor allows a person to stand behind her words, to have her name displayed but not have her body visible in her action. This was not only a good option for Karlin, but also for Nick, as he is a shy person, and for Jamin, because he had been targeted by someone in his community shortly after 9/11, ostensibly because he is a Middle Eastern, Muslim man.

On the other hand, representing issues with one's body and face means that students got immediate reactions from people. For example, Jill and Tanya were sick of walking through smoke every time they entered or exited their dorm, particularly since both had family members affected by smoking. The students created signs that stated the university's tobacco policy and posted them outside of two dorms, drew a line with chalk to mark the smoke free zone, and created a survey to give students outside the dorms to inquire about their policy knowledge and support for further action. Tanya, in her reflection, discussed watching someone take their sign, write profanity on the back, and post that instead, or Jill, in her reflection, mentioned how people came by and made snide remarks about the policy while she and Tanya watched. Similarly, Josie, Jill, Nichole, and Maria wanted to educate their community about what they had learned from the homeless while also collecting resources to help organizations who support the homeless. They all mentioned how people threw their brochures in the trash or down on the street right in front of them, or how people ignored them because they were asking for help for the homeless. Overall, when students position themselves as citizens who care about and work for a particular issue, they learn what the challenges of that issue are, what arguments people for and against make, and they learn how people in their communities view that issue and thus how they view the students as individuals who support that issue.

Students develop their identities through changing their perspectives and developing their knowledges in relation to or as a result of their action. Neither Jill nor Tanya realized that others had similar opinions to theirs about smoke at the dorm entrances. This information reinforced the positive outcome of their action, and it also sparked a desire to continue their action in the future. Abe, a Muslim man raised in a small, all white, Christian town, wrote a letter to his parents explaining why he did not want to be forced to marry a Muslim girl. In writing this letter, he realized his
parents' perspective and why they had that perspective. Amanda was one of three women who felt that cancer survivors should have resources to go to college. In her collaborative work to try to find more funds, she discovered relevant information about the American Cancer Society: "I have learned about the organizations involved in a community action project and now have a knowledge that will be important and beneficial to me as I get older." These students not only learned the Discourses of activism appropriate for these communities but also found that knowing these Discourses might help them in other aspects of their lives. These students represent only some of the ways that students in general develop their knowledge, abilities, and identities through activist literacy.

Students learned to work with diverse people and groups and they needed to find ways to integrate the needs of different groups in relation to their action. As a student of color, Jo recognized how important community building was for her own sense of belonging at the university, so she proposed her idea to people in the admissions office to send a letter to new students of color about student organizations on campus. She had to represent the university as well as the student organizations in both a professional and welcoming manner, so she had to manage feedback from multiple audiences and consider new students' potential experiences coming into a new university context. Brenna, who promoted the benefits of equine therapy to disabled communities, proposed and wrote a newsletter for the therapy organization. As she wanted the newsletter to be useful to clients and potential clients, she had to wait to get information from therapists, and she had to get the approval of her bosses before she could distribute it. But there were some projects that didn't quite accomplish this work. Danielle, Amanda, and Sarah decided to raise scholarship money for cancer survivors before they even spoke to the American Cancer Society; additionally, they started at the main office in another state rather than looking for local contacts that they might have been able to collaborate with. This might be one reason they had trouble with their project. The group of students who went to work for the homeless learned about the circumstances of specific homeless persons, changed some of their own personal, stereotypical beliefs, but still finished the project without fully understanding the complexity of homelessness. However, all students developed strategies to work with others and learned the consequences of that work. They also learned how to account for differences and to put the experiences of others in a broader perspective.

These CAPs demonstrate how students developed activist literacy practices to not only take action on an important issue but also to develop the Discourses they need to do this work. Students who take up the practices of activist literacy have the opportunity to build onto, rethink, and revise their civic identities. Because they take up new critical practices, because they use their literacy in different ways, and because they position themselves
differently in communities, students gain new experiences, knowledges, and practices with literacy that shape their civic identities and prompt reflection on how these identities reposition them in relation to others in their communities. But students are also challenged to take up stances as members of communities. They have to shape and modify their language to address the conversation about their issue, develop new knowledges as a result of their action, and engage with people who have similar and diverse interests and purposes in relation to the projects they chose. Several pedagogical strategies can help students develop activist literacy practices and thus help them learn the Discourses of community action.

**Developing Dispositions for Activist Literacy**

As a teacher who supports activist service-learning, I need to be aware of the literacy practices that support learning new Discourses, particularly activist literacy, and be able to support students in their civic identity development. I need to be a resource for students in helping them develop their identities and also need to start to teach them the activist literacy practices that will help them be successful as citizens working on issues in their communities. That said, one of the challenges I face encouraging students’ activist literacy development focuses on a crucial aspect of activist literacy: developing an activist disposition. Though students took action on issues they cared about, changed their minds through social and cultural analysis, and learned that language and arguments are rhetorical, only a handful of students walked away understanding that activism is a stance and a commitment, a long term way of being in this world. Limited change is made through one letter, one poster, one brochure. I needed to teach students not only the practices but also the disposition of activist literacy. This would include taking up a materialist pedagogical approach that [1] historicizes local activist movements, [2] analyzes the genres and rhetorical contexts for activism, and [3] teaches students the possibilities and implications for activism by sharing experiences as an activist.

One option for teaching students the disposition of activist literacy is to approach the class with a materialist pedagogy focusing on local contexts. David Coogan argues for teaching students Materialist Rhetoric in preparation for community projects and activism: “We need to know how the materiality of discourse intersects with human agency at unique, historical moments and produces changes that communities can really see” (669). Indeed Weisser also argues for “ways in which material forces shape what gets said, who gets heard, and how these forces have structured public discourse throughout history” (98). A materialist pedagogy does not only reveal the historical, material, and discursive relationships of how change is made, it also provides potential methods for making change, particular reasons to make change, and models
of how change is made in communities. I argue for applying this concretely
to my first-year writing classroom through analyzing particular local activist
movements. I advocate focusing on local movements of activism so that stu-
dents can recognize that change can be made in their communities, by regular,
committed folks who do this work, but also that some community change takes
multiple, committed citizens and work lasting months if not years. Additionally,
our coursework would not only focus on the histories, the individuals, and
the processes for making local change, but it would also include analyzing
multiple genres of writing used to make this change. Because, as Kill argues,
if engagement with genres elicits identity development, performing genre
analysis and asking students to write in particular genres in the classroom—
and then for action-oriented purposes in the community—would foster both
activist literacy practices and the disposition of activist literacy.

One activity for enacting this pedagogy is to historicize current movements
in the past and bring some examples of activist literacy texts that demonstrate
a range of genres over time. One example could come from local city efforts
to join other cities across the nation to denounce parts of The USA Patriot Act;
another example could include other activist movements by cities to create
nuclear free or drug free zones. We would not only read about the history but
also analyze the multiple genres and outlets for activism including newspaper
articles, action alerts, brochures, testimonies to the City Council, letters to the
editor, petitions, and so on. Another example would be the process it took for
a particular city to ban cigarette smoking in all public places. We could look
at other local, historical movements such as reducing pollution or eliminat-
ing forest fires, for example. We could analyze and compare the rhetorical
appeals of these movements, locating them in the dominant philosophies of
the time, and then analyze current documents from the Health department or
other government agency, ordinances written by the city council, letters to the
editor, testimony to the City Council, petitions, and so on. These documents
could demonstrate to students the range of possibilities for activist writing
and also show how change takes time, commitment, and coalition-building
across differences.

From historicizing and genre analysis, students could then do a collab-
orative project, researching how change has been or is still being made in a
community. They could search the newspapers, look for laws, find brochures,
web pages, or email action alerts, or research other kinds of activist writ-
ing. Key to this work are interviews with participants involved in activism. I
would encourage students to pay particular attention to, and ask questions
about, these participants' investment and engagement in the change process,
their experiences working with others, and the reading and writing practices
they used to make change. Student groups could then make a presentation
to classmates on their research, to demonstrate the range of activist literacy
processes, practices, and dispositions they found through this work. This

48 Composition Studies
project would challenge students to define community activism in a variety of ways, encourage them to speak with others who have more experience, and support collaborative work between students and between the classroom and the community for students to experience working across differences. Taken together, these projects, analyses, and histories would provide models to students of community-activist dispositions and ask students to take up these dispositions throughout the semester-long class.

Finally, an important element to promote and teach activist literacy is for teachers to be models of the practices and dispositions of activist literacy. As Ellen Cushman argues in “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change,” teachers and scholars need to theorize civic communities and participate within them: “I am asking for a deeper consideration of the civic purpose of our positions in the academy, of what we do with our knowledge, for whom, and by what means.” Cushman calls for academics to locate our work in places that matter to real people doing real work that can feel the effect of our teaching and research. But more importantly, her call suggests teacher-scholars are responsible for helping students navigate activist literacy practices. As an activist in communities myself, I can talk to students about the importance—and possible outcomes—of community action. As a Green party activist, I can share how Greens use writing in the community to make change through newsletters, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, brochures, flyers, signs, press releases, and web pages; I can bring those texts into the classroom to analyze community action genres of writing. Additionally, I can talk to students about how long change takes to make and how disappointing it can be along the way when change doesn’t happen; in this, I can talk about focusing on long-term change while making more short-term goals. Finally, I can share my knowledge about the various community groups available for their participation, as well as some of the local history about activism in the state or the city, so that students can know that activism is accomplished by real people doing real work.

It is not enough for us, then, as educators committed to activist service-learning, to teach students about the Discourses of the classroom without recognizing how we are asking students to take up multiple Discourses through these projects. Students’ identity and literacy are challenged when we ask them to take action in communities. Recognizing this challenge is important for teachers, as we want students to finish this class and these activities, knowing they can do this work, they need to do this work, and their opinions in the civic public matter. I contend that activist service-learning activities in first-year writing classrooms are starting places for students to develop their civic participation, and thus we need to prepare our students for the activist literacy practices they will face in their projects and in the future. Ultimately, these students teach me, as a pedagogue, to be better aware of how the projects I assign challenge students and create conditions for learning through
civic engagement. In addition, by reflecting on students' identity development I can better understand when to push and when to hold back, what activist literacy practices to teach and what practices students bring that I can build on, and how to promote the dispositions as well as the practices of activist literacy; this can make the CAP a challenging and rewarding experience that might actually get students to see the necessity—the responsibility—of civic engagement and action.4

Notes

1. Students excerpted in this essay filled out consent forms allowing me to use their writing. Their names are changed based on how students filled out the consent form.

2. When I use the term “Discourse” (with a capital “D”), I am referring to James Paul Gee’s definition: ‘A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network,’ to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role,’ or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion” (161).

3. Though I recognize many ways to take action in a community—through art, song, dance, theater, to name a few, I felt my responsibility in this course was to teach students about writing. When I first started doing the community action projects in my classes, I did let students generally do whatever project they could think up, and students turned in wonderfully creative things such as videos or they signed up to be a Big Brother or run laps for cancer research. But I realized in those moments that students were learning about activism, but they were not learning about writing. As there is a long tradition of activist writing, I felt it was best for students to have exposure to this — to learn about both activism and writing in a writing course.

4. I would like to thank the students who allowed me to use their work and tell their stories in this essay. I would also like to thank Rochelle Harris and Maria Montaperto for their multiple responses, suggestions, and ideas for revising this piece. I would finally like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their help with revising this piece.

Works Cited


50 Composition Studies


