Review Essay

The Prospects for Engaged Writing in 21st-Century Academe

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Making Writing Matter: Composition in the Engaged University
Ann Feldman

Nearly twenty years ago, Ernest Boyer (1991) encapsulated his dream of the engaged university in an article called “Creating the New American College.” Boyer envisioned an interdisciplinary movement of scholars working with one another, their students, and community partners to produce socially relevant knowledge that would, more than anything, create a better world for all of us. Who is better able, he wondered, to create and convey knowledge for the public good than a university, with its central location of various resources: the latest technologies; infinite fountains of intellectual energy; and its continually self-renewing populations of eager, ambitious young people? He sought the gradual demise of what might be called the disengaged university, in which individual faculty retain allegiance to, and produce esoteric knowledge within, sharply distinguished discipline-silos with indifferent relationships to the public good. Essentially, Boyer and like-minded scholars imagined creating universities whose central missions would be to build the beloved community. In the ensuing years, terms such as “civic engagement,” “service-learning,” and “engaged scholarship” have found an enduring place within academic discourses, and perhaps an increasing number of people have come to accept David Maurrasse’s (2001) argument that “the fate of communities is the fate of higher education” (p. 5). Yet, it is reasonable to ask how much closer, in practical terms, academe has actually moved toward reinventing itself as the New American College, and what it will take to get us the rest of the way. Will engaged scholarship ever receive full institutional support throughout the academic establishment, encompassing the ranges of two to four-year schools, rural to urban, and liberal arts to research-one universities, or will it remain a relatively marginalized practice of a relatively devoted few? For the true believers, the value of engagement is self-evident: they perceive students learning more and better, in cooperation with community partners. Supporters of engagement also perceive surrounding communities benefitting from the work of the university, and vice versa, when both sides create knowledge together, rather than maintaining an uneasy coexistence of mutual apathy or, in some cases, the outright antagonism engendered by gentrification and raucous fraternity parties. But what about the engagement skeptics? What must be done to convince them that engagement is the proper way forward for the academy?

Questions such as these lie at the heart of Ann Feldman’s book, Making Writing Matter: Composition in the Engaged University, the product of a scholar who has worked pragmatically to overcome many of the institutional hurdles that represent the gap between today’s American College and Boyer’s New American College. For these reasons, engaged teachers in general, but teachers of engaged writing in particular, will find this book both inspiring and sobering. A faculty member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) for more than twenty-five years, Feldman is fighting the good fight to promote engagement, and her successes include the development of the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program (CCLCP), a course sequence within UIC’s writing program that allows students to experience writing as a situated practice in participation with community partners. One hopes that CCLCP can become one of many models that influences college presidents and chancellors who are coming around to the notion that engaged scholarship merits institutional support.

Rather than extrapolating from experiences teaching individual service-learning courses to offer the same old quixotic list of prescriptions for how to transform an individual scholar’s passions into a broad institutional commitment (lists that generally include phrases such as: “faculty need to get credit for service,” “interdisciplinarity needs to be encouraged,” “tenure and promotion guidelines must
include non-traditional research,” etc.), Feldman has actually followed through by building institutional support for her writing program, and she has much to offer Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) who wish to follow her lead. Significant details related to developing the program—once it had been approved—are recounted here, including the processes of recruiting students and community agencies, developing a curriculum, putting together an assessment matrix, and providing mentorship to graduate students.

On the other hand, Feldman elides important aspects of how the program actually obtained institutional approval in the first place. For example, Feldman states that the Great Cities Institute grant that would eventually become CCLCP initially created much “anger” in administrative offices because it sought to nurture students’ moral maturity rather than transform them into situated writers. One infers that trying to morph this problematic grant into a certificate program that “would provide opportunities for students to apply their academic learning in public settings through writing projects” (p. 96) must have been difficult, exciting, frustrating, and rewarding, yet we learn virtually nothing of this process. An explanation of how administrators’ concerns and fears were ultimately allayed would have gone a long way toward convincing other skeptics, including ones who might be encountered by readers of this book, about the promise of engagement.

Indeed, in the introduction Feldman states that for years UIC has “struggled to define its institutional identity” (p. 7), vacillating from its original purpose of being a “presence” in Chicago toward becoming a Carnegie Research I institution and “putting aside its founding mission to serve the surrounding city” (p. 8). She was part of a “group of administrators and faculty members” who “responded to the lingering concern for the ‘urban mission’ that UIC had ignored,” and who “imagined a way to resuscitate its legacy as part of a land-grant college system” (p. 8). CCLCP ultimately emerged from this institutional rededication to UIC’s urban mission. Many readers will come to this book from similar institutional circumstances, and they would profit from understanding better the circumstances that made CCLCP’s institutionalization possible. To what extent was this program the product of an administrative mandate, and to what extent was it the result of faculty convincing (perhaps intrigued but skeptical) administrators that engagement can produce students who are both civically engaged and better writers? Feldman explains that at the time this program was originally conceived, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences was Stanley Fish, who has consistently and outspokenly rejected the idea of the engaged un-

versity. One wonders, how did she negotiate administrative obstacles such as these?

However, as pressing as questions such as these might be for someone who wishes to follow in Feldman’s footsteps, one must also realize that, in asking her to provide more of these narrative details, one may be subverting the author’s intentions for the book. And that is because, taking her cue from post-modern arguments that cast doubt upon the unified authorial self, Feldman quite emphatically does not conceive of the book’s narrative portions as “reflecting” in unmediated fashion, her “true” experiences establishing the program. Rather, the term “reflection” is a charged one for Feldman, because she believes that audiences too often perceive reflection as a genre representing a “naturalistic or factual rendering of [an] experience” (p. 134), whereas she wants us always to perceive writing, even memoir, as a “rhetorical activity” that pushes forward a specific argument in a specific context. Therefore, the book’s narratives serve as a “petition” for the key arguments of the book (p. 96), among the most important of which is the idea that genre analysis should be central to a pedagogy of engaged writing. For Feldman and other scholars of genre theory, genre analysis “provides a tool for thinking about the relationship between institutions’ habitual ways of knowing and the use of writing to accommodate and to revise patterns of knowledge production” (p. 5), so that in imagining the shape a particular piece of writing takes,” students “do no less than ask themselves how their writing will reshape their world.” In this way, genre becomes much more than a “container for particular images and texts” (p. 48); it becomes a means for promoting “social action” (p. 52).

To reinforce this point, Feldman offers an absorbing and compelling chapter that ostensibly recreates her fight to prevent administrative termination of the second-semester section of UIC’s first-year writing requirement, but she repeatedly emphasizes that this narrative is a faux diary with a rhetorical purpose. The chapter thus parallels the essays CCLCP students compose to “prove” that learning has taken place in their courses (and thus that the students merit high grades). Rather than perfunctory reflections about how service-learning has changed their attitudes about the “true” meaning of civic engagement, Feldman contends that these student essays constitute carefully crafted arguments about the outcomes of situated writing practices.

Considering Feldman’s injunctions, I understand that in adhering stubbornly to the genre of narrative as a source of reflective insights (with a potentially pedagogical purpose), a reader risks falling into the same trap that ensnares scholars and journalists when they perceive genres, especially memoir, as frozen
containers of authentic experiences. However, numerous scholars of rhetoric and composition have already contributed a variety of compelling arguments for engaged writing, and so an engagement-believer (such as myself, along with, I would imagine, most of the readers of this Journal) will not come to this book looking to be persuaded about the existence of engaged writing programs and universities. Rather, they will be much more interested in pragmatic issues about the nuts and bolts of enacting Boyer’s vision of the New American College.

Having made this point, I do not mean to quibble with Feldman’s core argument that genre can promote social action, and especially her concerns about the genre of the service-learning reflective essay. I accept her view that the conventional reflective essay can too easily lead to bland statements, unsupported by specific evidence, about how a student’s service experience has helped her overcome stereotypes, kicked her off the pedestal of noblesse oblige, or otherwise enhanced her moral development, without helping her understand how writing is a participatory process that requires effective and purposeful rhetorical decision making, as well as carefully crafted and grammatically correct prose, to shape, rather than merely reflect, reality. I do not question the decision of Feldman and her colleagues to dismiss reflective essays from their curriculum. Nevertheless, Feldman’s extended argument that genre analysis should be at the core of engaged writing is probably the least compelling part of her book. And yet, perhaps my saying this has less to do with a specific flaw in her reasoning than with the fact that I am already a true believer; pragmatically speaking, convincing skeptics is probably more urgent than convincing believers at this point, and I am unsure whether her arguments about genre really advance the important work of other rhetoric and composition scholars who have pushed forward the agenda of engagement in recent years.

Whereas some earlier proponents of service-learning may indeed have emphasized moral development over enhancing students’ writing, more recent arguments have become increasingly sophisticated and compelling; rhetoric and composition scholars have taken to heart Edward Zlotkowski’s (1995) admonition from the mid-90s that if service-learning would have a long-term future in the academy, faculty would have to spearhead the movement, and they would only succeed by demonstrating how engagement advances their disciplinary work, both in terms of scholarship and pedagogy, rather than (merely) transforming students into better human beings. Unfortunately, Feldman only briefly reviews this growing body of literature, and neither participates in the ongoing disciplinary conversation about the promise and dangers of engagement nor explains how her arguments about genre fit into this discourse. In fact, her idea of writing as a “situated practice” echoes a variety of arguments put forward in recent years, and thus it is curious that she pushes past this work so quickly. David Coogan (2006), for example, has written about the need for teaching a “materialist rhetoric” that emphasizes the material histories of the communities with whom students partner, and that “challenges students, teachers, and community partners to write for social change and define change concretely, in terms of institutional practices or policies that they wish to influence” (p. 667). Coogan’s conceptualization seems very similar to Feldman’s notion of situated writing, in which students “learn about the important roles played by written and spoken discourse in public settings, the historical uses of language for social action, the imagination necessary to see how social contexts might change, and how patterns of circulation and delivery impact writing projects” (p. 4).

Furthermore, Eli Goldblatt’s (2005) concept of “knowledge activism” calls to mind the engaged literacy projects described by Feldman as part of CCLCP’s curriculum; Ellen Cushman’s (1999; 2003) concept of “public intellectualism,” in which a scholar combines the traditional academic missions of research, teaching, and service at the site of engagement, also invokes similar ideas, as does the term “community literacy,” first used in association with Linda Flower, Wayne Peck, and their colleagues (1995; 2000) at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh. This term, in many ways, has come to define the “public turn” in rhetoric and composition in recent decades. All of these arguments are compelling, and virtually all envision engaged scholarship as a process of reciprocal, egalitarian, and collaborative knowledge making between community and university partners. If Feldman perceives her own praxis as so radically distinct from these others, to the point that their work merits only a two-page skimming in her introduction, she should be more explicit about how and why.

In particular, she does not address the potentially harmful effects of institutionalizing university-community partnerships, a concern raised eloquently by Paula Mathieu (2005) in her book Tactics of Hope. Mathieu is skeptical about institutionalization because it can create a dynamic in which the university dominates the space of engagement, circumstances that usually produce specific, concrete benefits for the university, but ambiguous (or no) benefits for community partners. Mathieu is herself an alumna of UIC, and Feldman briefly mentions Tactics of Hope in the introduction, but she chooses not to respond to Mathieu’s apprehensions. This is a missed opportunity to participate in a disciplinary dialogue about the practical advantages and disadvantages of
institutional support for engagement, and one that must be addressed with greater intensity if the New American College will ever come to be.

Nevertheless, in the sections where Feldman does tackle the mechanics of establishing CCLCP, the book is extremely useful. Particularly insightful is her explanation of how she and her colleagues developed an “assessment matrix” for the program. In an environment where calls for accountability have become loud and overbearing, it is important for WPAs to address the accountability issue directly, as emphasized by Linda Adler-Kassner (2008) in her recent book The Activist WPA. Feldman does so here with gusto. First, she raises the issue of how assessment “in recent years has taken on the character of an educational audit—with the threat of punitive taxes—in national attempts to improve education through George W. Bush’s highly controversial ‘No Child Left Behind’ initiative” (p. 148). Rather than merely “levying a tax,” Feldman explains, the creators of CCLCP sought to make assessment another knowledge-producing activity (p. 150). This process led to the creation of a detailed matrix split into the key learning objectives of the program: “Rhetoric and Academics,” “Community-Based Writing and Research,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Leadership.” For each pedagogical goal, the team devised a set of core concepts for students to learn, a list of key indicators to determine whether this learning was taking place, and a variety of methods for measuring these indicators.

Feldman explains that these conversations about assessment became “transformative,” so that the “design for teaching shaped assessment, but the reverse was also true” (p. 151). Indeed, these sections reminisce Brian Huot’s (2002) powerful argument in Rearticulating Writing Assessment that, when practiced in a thoughtful, dedicated manner, assessment can become a pedagogical practice itself, rather than simply an audit of learning. In this chapter, Feldman bravely takes on one of the hot-button educational issues of our time as she seeks to demonstrate the pedagogical promise of engaged writing in regard to the kinds of questions often lobbed by engagement-skeptics, such as: How exactly does engagement enhance learning over classroom-based teaching?, and how can this learning be measured? Such questions must be answered conclusively before the engaged university can be fully realized. However, while this chapter is gripping and thought-provoking, at least for engagement-believers, her arguments about the complexities of assessment may raise concerns for more skeptical audiences.

Feldman argues that writing assessment, just like writing itself, constitutes a rhetorical exercise. When practiced well, it can offer more than an often bogusly “transparent window on reality” (p. 150). For CCLCP’s creators, then, the challenge of assessment has been to make it create knowledge rather than, as discussed above, levy a learning-tax. Yet, she points out that “if others use externally generated, inappropriate calculations to evaluate CCLCP, perhaps through a decontextualized, skill-based test of CCLCP students’ knowledge of grammar, we risk losing the opportunity of assessing the kind of learning and writing skills the program was designed to foster” (p. 150). In other words, the assessment tools that have become dominant in the world of No Child Left Behind, tools that are standardized, skill-based, and designed to maximize efficiency, may not correlate with CCLCP’s rubrics. The substantive learning accomplished when writing and learning are viewed as situated, participatory activities do not necessarily register well on “audit”-style measurements.

But here is another situation where ideals butt up against practical reality. Clearly, the culture of assessment has tipped heavily to the side of decontextualized, skills-based testing, rather than to the kinds of thoughtful, sophisticated, time-consuming, and pedagogically-relevant practices internal to CCLCP. So, one must wonder, who among the assessment powers that be will accept an argument that basically says, “If our students do not perform well on your tests, the problem is not with our students but with your tests”? Won’t these powers see such arguments as cop-outs, as attempts to evade accountability for the failure to teach writing (when writing is viewed in the traditional default manner, as mostly a matter of stylistic concerns like correct grammar, punctuation, and syntax)? Until the larger discourse of assessment shifts toward practices advocated by scholars like Ann Feldman and Brian Huot (2002), proponents of engaged writing may have significant difficulty selling their visions to a broader audience.

Many readers have probably faced engagement-skeptics’ default argument that service-learning is a distraction from the real work of writing courses—i.e., writing. This maneuver is a rhetorically effective way to shoot down people of lesser rank, even if the argument itself is inaccurate. The best defense against this argument is to provide overwhelming evidence that engaged writing leads to more effective writing, both in terms of the rubrics that matter to engaged writing scholars and those that matter to more general audiences, including administrators, politicians, and the general public. But this is a long-term process, and at least in this book, with the program still in its infancy, Feldman cannot muster such overpowering evidence. The limited data offered in the book, most of which emerges from student surveys, would certainly convince a believer that engaged writing classrooms do enhance learning, but a skeptic might question the method of assessment measures that rely on students
self-reporting their learning (even when those results are compared to the “control” sections of regular, non-CCLCP affiliated first-year writing courses), or jump on the fact that the numbers were not statistically significant, or that grammar was one issue where participants in the program indicated less improvement than the “control” students. In the cases of both engagement-believers and skeptics, people will likely perceive such limited data in ways that confirm their pre-established assumptions. The question of the engaged university is, in the end, about what values different people possess about which practices and knowledge-making (and conveying) activities should constitute the core academic mission, and as we know with values, it can be awfully difficult to move people from entrenched positions. Hopefully, in the years to come, CCLCP and other writing programs of its ilk will produce an increasingly compelling body of evidence that engaged writing means enhanced writing, evidence so overwhelming that even the most ardent skeptics cannot deny their import.

In the meantime, the pursuit of the New American College as described by Boyer twenty years ago remains a difficult struggle with forward and backward steps. Believers will continue finding ways to pursue this work, whether on a small scale through their own classes and research, or on a larger scale with committed institutional support, and whether openly in supportive contexts or under the academic radar in hostile ones. That is, some teachers will find increasing aid for the praxis of engagement, while others will continue to pursue what Herbert Kohl (1995) calls “creative maladjustment,” a means for teachers entrenched within unjust systems to practice their beliefs without tipping off the establishment. But it is clear that the key battles for the New American College are being waged in writing classrooms, centers, and programs like CCLCP, and the soldiers are scholars like Ann Feldman, who is campaigning to move engagement from the margins to the center of academic life. How can engaged writing teachers inspire, cajole, convince, or otherwise motivate the institutions’ movers and shakers to join their side? What are the levers that must be pushed to enact these long-term goals? In response to these key questions, Ann Feldman gives us some important insights about what, from the perspective of a WPA, can and must be done. I hope she will continue to offer such insights in the years to come.

Notes

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2. Feldman makes an important point that the assessment process is ongoing, and that more data will accumulate over the years.

References


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Paul Feigenbaum is an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition at Florida International University in Miami. His research interests include the promotion of strong relationships between higher education and its surrounding communities, community literacy, college access among urban populations, and the use of rhetoric to increase civic engagement among young people. He is currently working to promote community-university partnerships around literacy issues in the Miami-Dade area.