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The Ethics of Students' Community Writing as Public Text

Amy Goodburn

This chapter examines some of the ethical dilemmas I have faced when students make public their writing about community projects. Like many other compositionists (Bacon 1997; Herzberg 1994; Minter et al. 1995; Peck et al. 1995), I value community projects/service learning as a way for students to connect their academic learning with contexts beyond the classroom, and I view students' writing about their learning in these contexts as critical for helping them make sense of oftentimes confusing and contradictory experiences. One way that I value this writing in the classroom is by incorporating it as a public text, asking students to share their writing with other class members and placing students' writing in dialogue with assigned class texts. Thus, students' representations of their experiences become public texts that circulate in the classroom. It is this public nature of their writing that I discuss in this chapter. In particular, I focus on two ethical issues that have been raised for me with respect to the "public" nature of students' writing in these courses.

First, I am increasingly conscious of how student writing about community inquiry impacts fellow classmates and, by extension, the community members about whom they are writing, particularly when these representations are often unchallenged by class members and unmediated by the community members themselves. Second, I have been challenged in responding to and assessing the writing that students create for their community projects, particularly in terms of the tensions that "public" writing raises in relation to my "academic" expectations for what these texts should be. By focusing on one of my student's writing and experiences with community inquiry, I hope to show how distinctions between "public" and "private" texts are often collapsed when students do community inquiry, and that this collapse has implications for how composition teachers might more productively conceptualize and understand writing within such contexts.

To illustrate, I refer to a class that I taught in the fall of 1997, titled "Literacy and Community Issues." It was a mixed undergraduate and graduate student seminar that focused on theories of literacy and their relationship to community contexts. In addition to reading from texts such as *Toxic Literacies*; *Many Families, Many Literacies*; *Eating on the Street*; *Possible Lives*; and the collection *Perspectives on Literacy*, students participated in weekly community projects related to literacy, which they either designed on their own or selected from a list of ongoing community programs. The thirteen students participated in a variety of projects, predominantly tutoring partnerships (with women refugees, ESL high school students, at-risk fifth-graders, an adult working for a GED), but also writing documents for organizations, such as a pediatric clinic and a local literacy organization. Throughout the semester, students kept journals in which they described their experiences about their projects and which they shared in small groups and in full-class discussions. Half of each three-hour class was devoted to discussing issues that students were negotiating in their projects. As the semester progressed, then, students began to construct their writing as public texts, as writing that others would read and learn from and that provided them with opportunities to be authorities about their community sites.

From this class, I have chosen to focus on John, a white senior undergraduate Education major who worked in an Americorps-funded tutoring program for elementary-age students at the city's African American Community Center, for two reasons. First, throughout the semester, John's experiences at the Center—as represented through his writing and his oral contributions to discussions—became a primary public text with which the rest of the class engaged. Second, John's writing challenged me as a teacher to reconsider my pedagogical assumptions about what constitutes "reflection" and "analysis" in writing about community inquiry, particularly when this writing is made public to audiences beyond the teacher.

Representations of Community

The first issue I wish to discuss is John's representations of the community at the Center and the resulting impact of these representations on class members when his writing publicly circulated within the classroom. To do so, I begin with one of his earliest journals, which describes the connections he made between the class's reading of David Schaafsma's *Eating on the Street* and his tutoring experiences at the Center. Schaafsma's book describes a summer writing program for Detroit children and the ways that one incident—children eating food on the street while walking to a school program—raised tensions between and among black and white teachers about their expectations and actions toward black students in this program. While most of the black teachers felt that black students should be taught not to "eat on the street" (for fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes), most of the white teachers

saw nothing wrong with the children's actions. Schaafsma uses this incident as a springboard for exploring differences in the teachers' views toward culture, identity, and writing pedagogy. John's journal, written the week after the class had begun reading *Eating on the Street*, recounts a conversation he initiated with the Director of the Center about the book:

I wanted to know his thoughts on eating on the street in a literal sense. I didn't want to ask him point blank, so I put him into a scenario and asked him how he would react. I told him that we were walking down the street, and we were heading to the park to eat lunch with the children. One of the children opened their lunch pails (sic) and began eating a sandwich. I asked him what he would do in this situation. He told me that he would send this person home for disrespecting himself. I knew why, but I wanted to hear him say it. He said that eating on the street is disrespectful and something that all children should know especially black children.

I think that I couldn't have chosen a better internship than the ... Center. I now can see what some of the elementary school teachers in *Eating on the Street* can see. I can make a judgment and see which students are going to make it and which cannot. I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing. However, it would enable me as a teacher to decipher between the students who are doing alright and those who need special attention. ... It is really amazing to read some of the things in the book. and then live some things out in my internship. (Journal 10-28-1997)

This journal is an example of the type of writing that circulated publicly in my classroom. John's journal illustrates his individual satisfaction with his community project and shows the connections he is making with the academic content of the course (Schaafsma's book) and his community project. His journal also suggests that he is trying to engage the Director of the Center with his academic knowledge. Asking the director about his beliefs on "eating on the street" and then sharing Schaafsma's book with him reflects John's attempt to bring the class material into his community site in productive ways. As an individual "record" of his experiences, I was glad that John was satisfied with his project. In considering how John's text functioned as a public text in my class, though, I was a little less sanguine. I was concerned about the impact his journal might have for how class members might read the people at the Center.

Although student writing made public usually involves representations of others, when the writing is about community projects the stakes seem higher to me, especially when students are forced to rely upon their classmates' representations as the primary basis for their perceptions about these communities. In this case, John's journal represents the Director of the Center. Because only two other students also volunteered at this site, the rest of the class members were forced to rely on John's interpretations. While this journal represents the Director in a positive manner—receptive to John's suggestions and his questions—John's later representations of community members at the Center were not so positive,

and thus the public nature of John's representations became more troubling for me. In particular, I became concerned with how John, a white student, framed his representations of the predominantly African American population at the Center to a class of all-white students within a town where African Americans comprise less than three percent of the total population.

Despite John's initial glowing account about tutoring at the Center, as the semester progressed he began to express frustration. In one class discussion, John, along with the other two students who tutored at the Center, described his feeling of being viewed as an outsider and criticized "other" Center volunteers who he felt were responsible for creating his outsider status. John's and the other students' complaints focused on two issues: (1) the Center's lack of organization for the tutoring program, with no orientation and few guidelines, and (2) tension between the "regular" volunteers (who were predominantly African American and working long-term at the Center) and volunteers like John, who were predominantly white and viewed as "drop-in university tourists" who did not care as much about the welfare of the children.

This public discourse of complaint made me uneasy because John's and the other two students' writing was viewed in terms of unmediated "truth" about their experiences rather than as motivated representations shaped by their own investments, interests, and privilege. Lu and Homer (1998) describe the tension teachers face in helping students understand their experiences as discursively constructed without "overwriting the students' experience" in ways that privilege the teachers' knowing. They argue that teachers need "to make productive use of, rather than dismiss, the challenges students' lived experience poses for the teachers' discursive understanding of that experience... [and] explore as well how to use the teachers' own and others' lived experience to problematize the teachers' knowledge" (267). Yet, as Lu and Homer suggest, problematizing the teachers' discursive understanding can be difficult, particularly when teachers become caught "between the desire to teach a particular understanding of literacy and the desire to learn about literacy from the students' lived experience, between the desire to change students' literacy experiences and the desire to grasp their existing experience" (273). I felt this tension when I read and responded to John's journals and when class discussions about his experiences led his classmates to sympathize solely with his analysis. My discomfort about such representations surfaced again at the end of the semester when I was forced to assess and evaluate John's final project about his community experiences.

Assessing Public Texts

The parameters for students' final projects were broad: They were asked to synthesize their learning in the course either via a paper or some other type of project. In a conference with me, John and Sara, another student who tutored at the

Center, proposed writing a memo to the Center's Director to make suggestions for how to improve the experiences of volunteers. In addition to focusing on the need for regular volunteer times and an orientation session, John and Sara reiterated their perceptions that their work wasn't as valued because they were white university students, and they discussed ways that such tensions could be addressed. I was enthusiastic about their project because I saw it as an opportunity for the students to problem-solve about their experiences, to synthesize their learning about the politics of race and literacy work, and to reciprocally "give back" to the Center. Moreover, I was happy that these students selected the Center as the audience for their memo rather than me or their classmates.

Two weeks later, Sara and John presented their memo to the class. They described their final project as an attempt to improve the tutoring program for future volunteers. However, they then stated that they had shifted the audience of their text from the Director of the Center to me. In other words, they had eliminated the public audience they had originally conceived for the memo. As I listened to them read, I was conscious of how the text of their memo was devoid of the analysis that we had discussed two weeks before in their conference. Indeed, their analysis of their positions as university volunteers versus the full-term volunteers was absent. The following excerpts from their memo illustrate John and Sara's representation of the Center and their experiences in it:

The Center is a place where the children in the neighborhood go to work and play with their friends. The Center is also a place where children can get love, support, and guidance from the people in their neighborhood who want them to succeed.

The Director at the Center is ... a great role model for the kids that go there and we truly believe he has a sincere interest in the children, their grades and the lives they lead. He is always telling the children to get good grades and to respect their teachers and others who try to help them. He has the respect of the kids at the Center and is always trying to teach them something.

Since we began volunteering at the Center we have noticed some problems. ... We would like to discuss these problems with you and suggest solutions to them that would make the program a more successful one at the Center (emphasis mine).

Within these first three paragraphs, John and Sara seem to be writing for two competing audiences—the Center's Director, whom they had originally named as the audience, and me, the teacher. Despite their decision not to send the memo to the Director, the first two paragraphs seemed directly geared toward him—beginning with the positive description of the Center's role in the community and then focusing specifically on the Director as a "great role model" for the children. It isn't until the third paragraph that their changing notion of audience is reflected—with the statement that they want to discuss the problems with me, their primary

audience, so that they can suggest solutions to "them," presumably those who work at the Center. These opening paragraphs suggest that while Sara and John want to make public their suggestions for improving the Center's tutoring program, they do not feel comfortable publicly discussing the problems that necessitate such suggestions. In a way, their memo functions to "test out" their ideas with me and their classmates in the public space of the classroom before moving to the public audience of the Center. The memo then identifies the problems that Sara and John see at the Center:

We believe that part-time volunteers are not welcome at the center... Even though it was never actually stated to us, it is clear to see that two distinct groups of volunteers exist at the center. There are many volunteers which appear to be part time. These volunteers are mostly students, *like us*, who are from UNL or other schools in Lincoln. These volunteers are probably there one or two hours a week and are volunteering to fill a requirement for a class.

The other group of volunteers seem to make a full time commitment to the center. Most of *these people* appear to be part of the community. We have speculated that these volunteers are there because they want to help out the children in the community. They could be friends, family, or neighbors, but we feel that they have a demographic tie to the Center which leaves them with a sense of ownership.

We believe that we are made to feel unwelcome at the Center because of the full-time volunteers. From the first day we arrived at the Center the full-time volunteers have not been helpful or friendly. Many of the volunteers have been rude and seem to resent us for being there. For example, we have asked questions and introduced ourselves to full-time volunteers only to be ignored and brushed off (emphasis mine).

Upon hearing these paragraphs, I was struck by the oppositional language of "us" and "them" and the ways that the memo does not address race as part of the writers' analysis. I was particularly surprised because during our conference John and Sara had theorized that most of the conflict between the volunteers was rooted in the fact that all of the university volunteers were white while the regular volunteers were African American. Yet, in this memo, race is not mentioned. There is no representation of why the full-time volunteers might resent their presence, nor is there any discussion about how differences in race might have had an impact on the children being tutored. There are a few coded references to race, such as the statement that the regular volunteers are part of the community that the Center serves and that they have a "demographic tie" to this community, but it is never explicitly stated what these demographics are. Such a context-free analysis allows John and Sara to interpret their experiences solely in terms of personality conflicts rather than in terms of racial tensions. In a sense, the issues of white privilege for which the university students were critiqued by the full-time volunteers became replicated in the text of John and Sara's memo.

The memo then concludes with an analysis of how the Center's tutoring program could be improved: A solution to both of these problems is very simple—an orientation program. If the Center were to hold an orientation program at the beginning of each semester, everyone would have a chance to get to know each other a little bit and know where each other is coming from.

After their presentation, students asked Sara and John why they chose not to write the memo to the Center's Director. They said that they planned to talk with the director face to face instead, because they felt that the memo would seem too formal in the environment of the Center and that they didn't want to be read as "big-time college students." In assessing this memo, I struggled with how it functioned as a quasi-public text and my relation to it as an audience. Because Sara and John had stated that I was the primary audience, my two-page response focused on the discourse that they had (and hadn't) used to interpret their experiences:

One aspect of your paper I find interesting is that almost all mention of race is erased from your final project, even though in class discussions its relevance to understanding why you might not have been as welcomed by the full-time volunteers seemed to be central.... Given that we've talked all semester about relationships between literacy, community, and race, I was surprised that there is no mention of race as an issue within this paper, nor are there any explicit connections made between your experiences at the Center and many of the course readings that talk about these specific issues—such as the Smitherman essay, the Delpit essay, Denny Taylor's books, etc. Integrating what we've talked about in our class discussions regarding these issues with your experiences at the Center might have provided both of you with a broader lens to interpret and understand your experiences as tutors.

At the time, my response to John and Sara's memo made sense to me. But now, in reflecting more fully upon the public nature of their text, I wonder if John and Sara's memo illustrates more conscious rhetorical strategizing than I had originally given them credit for. I think my response failed to appreciate the ways in which these students might have been conscious of issues of power and representation with respect to the public nature of their memo.

As a public text, the memo's absence of discussion about race makes sense, particularly in terms of the concerns that these students had for being labeled *racist*. While John and Sara said in class that they changed the audience for their memo because they didn't want to appear like "big-time college students," they also might have feared that their memo would be misinterpreted by the Director of the Center, who is African American. My response to John and Sara didn't take into account how their memo could have had a negative impact on how the Director viewed them. Indeed, the original conception of their text as a public document for the Director can account for the memo's absent discussion of race. The fact that the students had originally conceived of the Director as the audience is reflected in

the paragraph that praises his efforts at the Center and the respect he has earned from the children (and, by extension, John and Sara as well). This paragraph serves to distinguish between the Director and other community members at the Center and alleviates some of the critique that is then rendered on the full-time volunteers who made them feel unwanted. Their decision to speak with the Director face to face about their suggestions shows their sensitivity to the community's rhetorical space in which they were operating. Perhaps Sara and John learned more about the relationship between public texts and community literacy practices than I had given them credit for. Rather than considering how these multiple audiences complicated the public nature of their text, though, my response focused mainly on what I would have preferred to see in the memo as the main audience—an integration of course material, more analysis and critical reflection, and so on, which probably wouldn't have been viewed as valuable by readers at the Center. Despite the fact that this course was designed to have students work in public contexts and to imagine writing as public texts beyond the sole teacher-as-audience, it was difficult to suppress my "teacher expectations" for what constitutes reflective and critical writing in this case.

As a teacher who intends to continue assigning community projects, I am led to consider how John's texts and experiences contribute to, revise, and complicate my pedagogical goals for how students "go public" with writing about community projects. Chris Anson (1997) suggests that teachers, like students, often go through developmental stages when incorporating service learning/ community inquiry into their classrooms. He argues that teachers "need to approach our service learning courses with a critically reflective stance that models for students the kind of discursive explorations they should take in their journals and reflection logs" (177). While I agree that providing models of discursive exploration would be helpful for students, I also think that teachers need to question what such discursive exploration should look like and to consider how the public nature of texts can influence, shape, and even contradict the more academic genres of reflection that we ask our students to do.

While a teacher may desire students to analyze and synthesize course readings in a way that provides a critical interpretative framework for understanding community experiences, the student's own reflections about that experience don't necessarily need to be represented textually in such genres. Students might be hesitant to critique or analyze their community experiences, particularly when they feel allied with the community members and want to protect them from the sometimes harsh gaze of academic analysis. The public nature of their texts, even if circulated solely within the academic classroom, might pose ethical questions for them as they seek to fully and fairly represent others they have come to care about. Or, as Sara and John's memo illustrates, the process of reflection in which they engaged in conceptualizing the memo might not be reflected as critical reflection in the memo itself.

As Nora Bacon (1997) reminds us, teachers are often ill equipped to judge the communicative outcomes of texts that students write for community organizations. I believe this disclaimer extends as well to the texts that students write about community inquiry that are intended for teachers and classmates. My own experiences suggest that the binary often constructed between public and private audiences/texts becomes collapsed into distinctions of different types of publicness in students' texts. While I remain committed to creating community projects for students in my writing classrooms, I am much more aware of the politics of how texts function publicly, in my classroom and beyond.

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