

MAKING WRITING MATTER

Composition in the
Engaged University



Ann M. Feldman

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Ann M. Feldman

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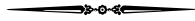
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For my parents,
Florence Feldman and Morton Feldman (of blessed memory) and
For my husband and partner, Robert Jay Meyerhoff

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Introduction



Making Writing Matter

In this book, I argue that scholarship at metropolitan, engaged universities is changing and these changes offer an opportunity to redesign first-year writing in ways that make students better writers. First, you may ask, what precisely is an “engaged university,” and what new opportunities does it provide for scholarship? Second, how can first-year writing programs benefit from the emergence of engaged scholarship? I offer brief answers to these questions in this introduction, and I elaborate on them throughout the book. Most simply, this book should be taken as a proposal for a new sort of relationship between faculty members, students, and the community based on a mutual interest in writing.

When I speak of making students better writers, I invoke a much broader definition than is usually attached to academic writing. A better writer is a situated writer, who is motivated by the particular context in which a piece of writing is imagined, designed, executed, and delivered. Writing, in this book, is taken to be a performance that emerges out of a consequential situation. When faculty members see writing as a situated performance, they can consider how writing, conceived of as a rhetorical activity, makes a difference in their research, whether traditional scholarship or engaged research conducted in partnership with others. When students see writing as a situated performance, they see themselves as agents called to action; writing becomes something other than a means to demonstrate to the teacher that the student has learned something. Students, along with faculty, will see how writing matters by developing new knowledge that contributes to material change. My goal is that writing be seen as a core intellectual activity of undergraduate education in the engaged university. First-year writing classes should provide university students with a set of footprints, the first of many, marking a path that makes writing matter wherever they go and whatever they do.

What Is Engaged Scholarship?

Though I argue that scholarship at engaged universities is changing, I admit that the term engagement is itself problematic. Engagement is frequently used to replace the more traditional term service, which has come to signify a sort of noblesse oblige. Service, in this sense, means an attempt to do good works for the communities surrounding the university in a way that identified the served as deficient in some way. Sometimes, engagement still means a traditional form of outreach or public service in which the university provides information and services to its community. Or, it might mean an effort to provide remedial education to neighborhood students, or to establish recreational opportunities for surrounding communities. Frequently, the university considers engagement to mean the development of service-learning programs in which undergraduates add a community-based experience to university classes. Each of these efforts might be referred to as engagement, making it hard to know what the term means. At the very least, the term signals a university's intent to be more socially useful than it has been in the past, creating a closer link between academic work and the community. Engagement, as the term is used today, aims for a more reciprocal relationship than had been possible before, a new way for the university and its surrounding communities to improve the social fabric. Even so, efforts to define that new relationship are often confused and fraught with contradiction. Thus, I'm resigned to use the term while defining it carefully for my purposes.

Engagement, as I use the term here, is more ambitious: it means that a university makes a commitment as part of its core intellectual agenda to a relationship with its context that depends on the mutual creation of knowledge. Engaged scholarship represents a reconception of traditional faculty members' work, one in which faculty members consider how their scholarship impacts public contexts. Faculty members find themselves establishing reciprocal and collaborative relationships with partners who may not be university faculty, and the research itself proceeds with new criteria and different goals. These changes will have an impact on the way that faculty see relationships both in and outside of the university; they will expand the faculty members' options for writing; and they will change the faculty members' view of what constitutes the production of knowledge. The institution, too, will have to reconsider and broaden the way it evaluates faculty research for promotion and tenure.

Imagine, for instance, a historian who now applies traditional, disciplinary scholarship on landmark buildings to a new community-based project. This scholar has decided to work with a local community group to study the role of historic buildings in plans for community development. Understanding how particular buildings have functioned historically in this community may suggest new ways to shape current proposals for economic or cultural development. Engaged research in this case means that the knowledge created in collaboration

with others will result in community-based consequences as well as traditional scholarly publication. The historian now finds him or herself embedded in a community outside the university, which leads to new opportunities for writing and communication. The historian might contribute to a newsletter, co-author proposals and reports with community partners, or offer workshops for other communities interested in how historical knowledge of landmark buildings can contribute to emerging agendas for community development. These activities broaden traditional notions of scholarly work, scholarly writing, and the production of knowledge.

Admittedly, this view of how scholarship should change may be more proposal than fact; it may bear only slight resemblance to life as we know it in many departments and on many campuses. Not all faculty members are interested in the possibilities of engaged scholarship, nor need they be. Further, this book is not as much about faculty as it is about students. Yet change is in the air and universities are considering what this change might mean; this potential for change holds promise for the ways that universities view writing programs.

Faculty scholarship that used to be conducted as purely discipline-based research is now increasingly reconceived as a principled, reciprocal interaction with a variety of stakeholders in communities surrounding the university. Such an approach to scholarship aims to close the gap between scholarship and advocacy, which, of course, opens the door to an entirely new set of complications. Conducting research in an engaged university requires faculty members to carefully consider how they see themselves embedded in their particular situations and how they collaborate with others to define research partnerships. Such considerations always concern the language and discourse used to represent the realities and relationships under study.

Making Writing Matter for First-Year Students

This emerging, institution-wide change in faculty scholarship provides a promising new direction for redesigning writing classes. When faculty members find that research in these new, more public situations changes their habitual approaches to writing, new sorts of conversation with students become possible. Faculty who work in reciprocal partnerships with colleagues outside the university to study literacy, public transportation, economic development, architecture, gentrification, public art, asthma in low-income communities, or the impact of poverty on high school graduation rates naturally become concerned with how to write or speak effectively in new situations and thus in new genres. Expanding research interests such as these do not in any way exclude the humanities, as one might think; rather they provide a new agenda for rich cross-disciplinary conversations.

The possibility of a renewed focus on language use as an important feature of engaged research opens doors for reconceptualizing student writing. For one thing, it allows freshman writing classes to draw on the intellectual resources of a broad range of faculty research rather than only on the scholarly questions raised by English departments. As engaged research gathers momentum on college campuses, we can design student writing projects that emphasize how specific situations—real or simulated—shape the use of language in those settings. The increasing interest in engaged research, I argue, offers an important opportunity for faculty to connect to students about writing as an intellectual activity rather than either a remedial one or a hurdle students must get over.

It's true that many university faculty do not think about first-year writing as an intellectual activity. "Just teach students the basics," they say, "so that their papers show me they've learned my course material." Or, faculty plead, "Please, teach my students to put together a decent sentence." For many faculty members student writing serves as no more than a conduit that delivers the learned material to the teacher. Even with the steady scholarship produced by the writing in the disciplines movement that emphasizes how situation and genre contribute to disciplinary scholarship, faculty still largely see their own writing activities as unconnected to their students' writing. The thrust of my proposal asks faculty to rethink their writing activity as they rethink traditional approaches to the production of knowledge.

What will it take to design instruction that positions students as rhetors, sophisticated shapers of language and discourse, who craft sentences and shape genres to make a material difference in a situation? Most important, entering students should understand that what is being asked of them grows out of an institutional mission for engagement and that this mission raises the bar for learning to write. Students should understand that they are being asked to write as part of a broader intellectual and political agenda that involves faculty members, students, and community partners. Perhaps, in some cases, this far-reaching goal will ask for more than can reasonably be achieved given the current economic dilemmas encountered by most first-year writing programs. Even so, I sketch my proposal to imagine what is possible.

As part of this university-wide agenda, first-year writing classes will teach students to imagine themselves as participants embedded in specific situations that give rise to writing. This means paying special attention to two features of writing that are usually ignored in the self-contained writing class. To understand writing as a situated performance, students must 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. The unfortunate assumption that the teacher, as the imagined audience, can stand-in as the sole recipient of student writing

eliminates rich possibilities for inquiring into the conversations, histories, laws, experiences, traditions, and assumptions that surround any particular situation that may give rise to writing.

Perhaps most important, students must understand that because engaged research often creates new situations for writing, genre takes on heightened importance in student writing. Genre cannot be seen as a container that packages content for delivery to a solitary instructor. However, even with the exciting work on genre theory by Charles Bazerman, Carolyn Miller, Anis Bawarshi, Aviva Freedman, David Russell, Tom Deans and others, conventional writing instruction often means selecting new or alternative genres for students to analyze or experiment with. This is not enough. Students need to understand genre as a way to enact social motives. 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 (Bawarshi 2003; Miller 1984, 1994). In imagining the shape a particular piece of writing takes, students must do no less than ask themselves how their writing will reshape their world. Genre, then, when linked to a specific situation, provides a portal for identifying and employing all of the other writing practices important to that project.

Writing for Civic Engagement

I am not alone in suggesting that writing plays an important role in connecting civic engagement to undergraduate education. Although it would take another book to review these efforts adequately, I offer a sampling of projects that have incorporated writing instruction into community-based learning. Most recently, David Coogan argued that the role of rhetorical education should enable "student-citizens to write for social change," which, for him, means investigating the "historical and material conditions that have made some arguments more viable than others" (2006, 667–668). In *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Paula Mathieu (2005) breaks new ground in examining the pitfalls and possibilities for university-community partnerships. Mathieu documents, in stunningly direct narrative, her own experiences with street newspapers and her misadventures with service learning. Her notion of tactics offers a powerful corrective to arguments for engagement (such as mine) and encourages "accepting the contingent and vexed nature of our actions" (xv). In the mid-1990s, Linda Flower and a group of colleagues launched a community literacy project that identified a particular sort of inquiry as the driving force behind university-community collaborations (Flower 1997). Flower's practice of inquiry, rivaling, creates an intersection between divergent situations for making meaning among students on campus

and among urban youth off-campus. The analysis of varied perspectives and conflicting evidence by students, researchers, and community members acknowledges the agency of a wide variety of stakeholders (Flower, Long, & Higgins 2000). Ellen Cushman has, for years, grappled with the challenges of engagement between unwieldy institutions, individuals, and groups who frequently end up on the unsavory side of server-served equations (1996, 2002).

Much of the early work on service learning in composition and rhetoric appeared in a landmark volume titled *Writing the Community: Concepts and Model for Service-learning in Composition* that was part of an ambitious, discipline-specific series edited by service learning scholar Edward Zlotkowski (Adler-Kassner, et al. 1997). Nearly a decade later, we will be able to chart the trajectory of service learning or civic engagement approaches through an agenda-setting, bibliographic survey funded by the National Council of Teachers of English (Bacon, et al. 2005). This survey, based on over 370 sources, lauds the broad learning outcomes available through service learning, but notes that we still do not know whether service learning improves student writing (however, see Feldman, et al. 2006). The group who conducted this survey, all service-learning practitioners, noted a shift toward “local publics,” and inquiries about how rhetoric can inform participation in the social sphere (Bacon, et al. 2005, 3). The project I introduce below and develop more fully in the second half of this book responds to this public turn in composition and rhetoric.

At the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), we have developed a civic engagement program for undergraduates that aims to embed students in consequential writing situations that entail scholarly lessons. This program, the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program (CCLCP), expands on principles already in place in the conventional first-year writing classes. The examples below illustrate how our students began to see themselves as participants in particular situations that gave rise to writing projects. As part of a community-based first-year writing course, Tiffany France designed and produced a fact sheet for Gads Hill, a community organization modeled after the Jane Addams Hull House. In her first-year writing course, Tiffany studied rhetoric, visual design, and argument; at the community organization, she worked with Janet Beals, the director of development and a newly hired grant writer to learn how to craft a fact sheet for the organization. At a fundraiser, Janet Beals used the fact sheet to introduce Gads Hill to Club Couture, a group of women who design couture fashion and donate their proceeds. Club Couture responded to the presentation by donating the entire \$3,500 from their recent fund-raiser to Gads Hill for their community-based programs.

Universities’ agendas for engaged scholarship aim to strengthen communities; so when Janet Beals e-mailed us to tell us about her recent funding success with Club Couture we were very excited. But we also realized that this sort of immediate consequence to a piece of writing makes it look as though we

view writing as entirely practical and utilitarian—a well-written piece can bring in the money. In fact, our point is to make writing more intellectual and scholarly, to help students understand more fully how writing works in rhetorical situations such as the one Gads Hill found itself in. Tiffany learned from this project how to draw on a rich set of resources to represent Gad's Hill's activities, strengths, and needs. The fund-raising coup was an unexpected bonus.

In CCLCP's second required writing course on academic inquiry, Jee Eun Nam studied health care for undocumented immigrants and wrote a position paper that not only fulfilled the course's requirements for a research paper, but also provided useful material for Latinos United, the not-for-profit she had been working with, who used the research to support its expanding agenda. The next year, in an urban planning class, several students worked with a faculty member in urban planning, composition instructors, and a nonprofit agency, Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), to conduct research on the impact of transportation costs on housing affordability. Students conducted site inspections of transportation availability and cost in particular neighborhoods with varied housing costs. They applied and tested an algorithm developed by CNT called the "affordability index," developed a presentation, and wrote a paper based on their findings. Their research was included in a larger report CNT produced for the funders of their project which will guide several cities' development efforts. Here, too, students were able to work jointly with a community-based agency and university faculty to produce knowledge that once disseminated and used by potential home buyers, would have a tangible impact on the lives of Chicago residents. These writing projects and ones like them produced around the country emphasize the ways in which participation in civic contexts can make writing matter.

How I Came to Write This Book

I feel uniquely qualified to pursue this project, having been at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) over the past twenty-five years, a period in which it has struggled to redefine itself as an engaged institution. During my years at UIC, I directed our Writing Center, published composition textbooks, taught graduate courses in composition and language theory, and as Director of First-Year Writing taught new graduate students how to design first-year writing courses. Along the way, I was fortunate to have two fellowships at UIC's Great Cities Institute that allowed time to contemplate how I could connect the work of first-year writing with the university's broader notions of engagement. And most recently, a group of colleagues and I received a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to launch the service-learning project discussed above.

Throughout my time at UIC, the university has struggled to define its institutional identity. UIC is one of a few college campuses built from scratch and

intended to be a presence in the “inner city” (Muthesius 2000, 200). This fact continues to raise questions about UIC’s relationship with Chicago. Its brutalist architecture, starkly modern and concrete, was designed by Walter Netsch. This wholly new campus, built in 1965, was in part a response to urban renewal intended to provide higher education to the mixed-race, low-income population that surrounded it. However, this hoped-for legacy is tainted by the memory of a vigorously fought battle by local residents for their homes and neighborhood. From another perspective, the campus that rose on the grounds of that local battle reflected the hubris of the *uber* architect who operated in a space beyond local neighborhoods. According to an editorial published in *Architectural Forum*, UIC embodied the “design of the ideal while the refuse of the real accumulates around us” (Oscar Newman 1966, quoted in Muthesius 2000, 196.) This complicated beginning influences everything that UIC is and does.

In the early 1980s, after merging with the University of Illinois Medical School, which resulted in the Carnegie Research I designation, the university continued to build its profile as a research university, putting aside its founding mission to serve the surrounding city. Eventually, a group of administrators and faculty members responded to the lingering concern for the “urban mission” that UIC had ignored and now imagined a way to resuscitate its legacy as part of a land-grant college system. Rethinking how the university could develop a more symbiotic relationship with its metropolitan surroundings led to the development of the Great Cities Institute (GCI) and to designate itself, in the new parlance, an engaged university. Included under the GCI’s umbrella are: two urban policy research centers, community partnerships with two adjacent neighborhoods, a year-long, campus-wide faculty scholar program, a campus-wide seed grant program, research programs conducted by institute fellows, and a professional education initiative. In short, then, the university developed a new infrastructure to house its Great Cities Initiative, but more important than that, it had launched an institutional agenda that could offer faculty members an opportunity to reframe their research as engaged scholarship.

I became involved at GCI from its earliest days by applying for and receiving seed grants and faculty fellowships. GCI turned out to be an incubator for the ideas I propose in this book. I participated in campus-wide discussions about the meaning of engaged scholarship and I interacted with a wide range of faculty who were struggling to define what it meant to conduct research collaboratively with partners based in the city at not-for-profits or government offices. This brief historical review explains in part why my project focuses so intently on “the urban.” Understanding universities as producers of knowledge depends on understanding the historical, economical, and political roles universities have played in cities (Perry 2004; Perry and Wiewel 2005, 3; see also Weber, Theodore, and Hoch 2005). This book offers a tightly focused discussion of how engagement plays out in metropolitan, or urban, settings. Similar

issues are also at work in rural settings and the fact that this case study focuses on urban settings should not suggest that its ideas are not applicable to a wide variety of institutional settings including rural areas.

The Great Cities Institute provided a home outside the English department that broadened my perspective and informed my continual redesign of the first-year writing program. Further, the institute's continual efforts to encourage and support faculty in what they call "engaged research" has radically changed the way the university values such research as well as the way the city interacts with the university. While many faculty members continue to conduct traditional, discipline-centered work, the growing group of Great Cities faculty scholars has carved out a respected place for engaged scholarship. Thus, this institutional trajectory toward engaged scholarship made it possible for me to contemplate how first-year writing classes might be redesigned to take up engaged scholarship as well.

The Organization of This Book

Part 1: The Place of Writing in the University

Chapter 1. "Engaged Scholarship at the University" explores how embeddedness and participation contribute to producing the agile student writer we desire. Historian Thomas Bender proposes that universities and cities each contribute differing forms of knowledge: the university produces discipline-based scholarly knowledge while the city produces descriptive, pragmatic knowledge. Engaged scholarship offers the possibility of moving beyond such binaries and repatterning knowledge production based on the intersection of these different cultural trajectories. This chapter first offers a definition of engaged scholarship for faculty members and then illustrates how student writing can meet them on the ground of engagement.

Chapter 2. "Writing as Participation" begins with two historical scenarios in which a text that might be taken as a diary turns out to function differently in its particular social context. An examination of genre, specifically the art of portraiture, illustrates how a contemporary painter used genre as a discursive opportunity rather than as a limiting form. The chapter then turns to student writing and the instructional tensions between writing about what others have written and writing experienced as participation in lived space.

Chapter 3. "Telling Tales Out of School" offers a narrative interlude that challenges our preconceptions about genre. With its diary-like entries in narrative form, the chapter looks like a diary but it is not. The chapter's *faux* diary entries afford the reader a view of the underbelly, so to speak, of the author's lived

experience while writing this book. The purpose of the chapter, however, is not to reflect on the author's circumstances; rather, it aims to extend her argument that rethinking first-year writing requires hard-won institutional change.

Part II: Designing Instruction to Make Writing Matter

Chapter 4. "Rethinking Reflection in Community-Based Writing" does two things. It describes the development of the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program (CCLCP), an undergraduate program that integrates writing instruction with community-based learning. To explain the importance of genre in the CCLCP curriculum, the chapter also tells the story of Vivian Gornick's memoir, *Fierce Attachments*, and her reception by a group of angry reporters who contested the factuality of her memoir. The Gornick tale illustrates the complex relationship between genre and experience, which suggests the importance of performative and consequential features of writing for classroom writing. The cautionary tale about Gornick's memoir informed the curriculum design for CCLCP and, in particular the decision not to include literacy narratives or reflective essays as key writing assignments. Instead, the curriculum focused on the ways that analyzing particular writing situations gave rise to careful consideration of the participatory nature of writing.

Chapter 5. "Assessing Writing and Learning in Community-Based Courses" calls attention to how CCLCP writing projects are rhetorically crafted for particular situations. We point out that assessment in this context is particularly difficult because designing, conducting, and reporting on assessment is, itself, a rhetorically motivated writing activity. This chapter illustrates the development of an assessment matrix that articulates what we wanted students to learn. Next, the chapter reports on two pilot projects. The first uses a survey to ask students whether specific aspects of writing became easier over the semester. The second relies on discourse analysis to learn how students characterize leadership. (This chapter was co-authored with Candice Rai and Megan Marie.)

Chapter 6. "Teaching the Teachers" describes a seminar that prepares new graduate teaching assistants to design courses that engage students in the approach to writing recommended in this book. Preparing graduate students to plan and teach such writing classes requires that they recognize how their own embeddedness in literary studies shapes their expectations for the first-year writing class. This chapter also responds to the recent debates about whether writing courses should be required during the first year of university studies. Included here are examples of writing projects designed by graduate students that emphasize students' participation in a social scene. The chapter concludes with a graduate student's poetic manifesto for first-year writing.

Part One



The Place of Writing in the University

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Chapter 1



Engaged Scholarship at the University

The complex relationship between the university and the city provides the context for this chapter, which explores not only the changing nature of scholarship in the metropolitan research university, but also how its changing intellectual climate should, in turn, change our conception of writing instruction for students who attend college in the city. Historian Thomas Bender argues for “a university *of*, not simply *in*, the city” (1998, 18). Each entity, the university and the city, has a particular intellectual or cultural trajectory. Their needs are different but each provides a measure of balance. Bender describes the preferred modality of each:

The university is best at producing abstract, highly focused, rigorous and internally consistent forms of knowledge, while the city is more likely to produce descriptive, concrete, but also less tightly focused and more immediately useful knowledge, whether this is generated by businessmen, journalists, or professional practitioners. The academy risks scholasticism, but the culture of the city is vulnerable to the charge of superficiality and crude pragmatism. (19)

Even as Bender sets up this series of binaries, he cautions against solidifying this set of differences into monolithic, self-contained institutional entities. Outside of universities, Bender finds examples of exciting opportunities to reconnect research and advocacy, such as Lower Manhattan’s Silicon Alley, an “incredibly dense interdisciplinary world of writers, artists, and computer freaks, making multimedia CD’s and other interactive media creations, some commercial products, [and] some art . . .” Rather than promoting a hardening of the two camps, Bender wishes