

LOUISIANA COUNCIL OF  
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## Blending Boundaries

### Works By

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Le Forrest  
David Johnson  
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Ella Nesanovich  
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Teaching "The Lady of Shalott"  
Writing for Social Change

# Louisiana ENGLISH JOURNAL





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## Writing For Social Change: Connecting Composition, Cooking, and Community

by  
Risa P. Gorelick

Many societies have strict gender-specific guidelines dividing household chores. Women, by and large, are assigned to the domains of the home: cleaning, child rearing, cooking, etc. However, in the Acadiana region of Louisiana, many men take on the responsibility of cooking. When I relocated to this region in August 1994, I became fascinated with the importance of food in this region and the number of men who take part in the food preparation. This initial fascination inspired me to further explore connections—and their connotations—associated with cooking in this region and various attributes that can be related to them.

I teach composition at an open admissions undergraduate university where my students are by and large underprepared for college; therefore, I try to teach writing in a “real world” context so students can see relevance to writing in their lives. As a Yankee living in southwestern Louisiana, I listened to my students indoctrinate me into their Cajun culture and paid particular attention to what they told me about the food of this region. For those who came into class a few minutes early, our conversations centered around the food: “Have you tried alligator yet? What about crawfish? Ever been to a Boucherie?” Intrigued by my students’ questions on my Cajun culinary experiences I had had thus far, I began to see a connection emerging: why not have my students write about their culinary creations?

Since the state of Louisiana—where the illiteracy rate is the quite high—requires college freshman English courses to assign a library component, I had my students write research papers on something they take very seriously: their family recipes. Home of hot, spicy, sizzling, blackened dishes where gumbo flows like water when the temperature drops below 65 degrees, my students were eager to share their culture and their food with their Yankee teacher. It was apparent to me that they wanted to experience in the “process of sharing” until their culinary cuisine became “a common possession” to me (Dewey 11).

In exploring connections between responsible citizenship and classroom learning, John Dewey’s work done nearly a century ago creates the foundation for such collaboration. He “emphasized participation as the point at which democracy and learning meet in the classroom” to assist students, by practical means, in gaining knowledge and developing as citizens (Shor 18). One of the fundamental basics of Dewey’s theories stresses the importance of active, rather than passive, learning to aid students in becoming critical thinkers. “‘Acquiring information can never develop the power of judgement,’ Dewey assert[s]. ‘Development of judgement is in spite of, not because of, methods of instruction that emphasize simple learning’” (qtd. in Shor 177). To encourage my students to strive to become active, critical thinkers, I required them to conduct library research on their family recipes. By incorporating what Shor calls a “participatory pedagogy,” which combines “cooperative exercises, critical thought, student experience, and negotiated authority in class,” students become empowered (Shor 21). This empowerment “can help students feel they are in sufficient command of the learning process” which encourages them “to perform at their peak” (Shor 21). After all, one of our goals of teaching writing should be to have students performing “at their peak.” Their research took them in a number of directions: the type of cooking (Cajun, Creole, Southern, etc.), the ingredients in their recipes, the nutritional breakdown of their dishes, the industries involved in producing the ingredients in their dishes, etc. In addition to their library research, I required them to conduct interviews with family members who prepare and/or indulge in their recipe. They were asked to find the following information

from their interviews: locate where the recipes came from; explain who makes the recipe and why; ask interviewees to discuss memories associated with the recipe (*e.g.*, is it not Christmas without this dish? is this something eaten as a “comfort food?”); determine how long has the recipe been in the family, what has been changed over the years, and why has it been changed. This personalized component added a human dimension absent from many research papers. From their interviews, my students participated in family folklore stories—some of which my students never would have learned if not for this project. By asking them to open the lines of communication in their families, many students who are themselves first-generation college students, learned an important lesson: not all education takes place in a classroom. From their interviews, students found out how their ancestors’ lives were influenced by history: how Jim Crow laws affected their families; which hurricanes, frosts, fires, and other natural disasters damaged family farms; why foods deemed “inedible” for other regions were prepared by their families due to economic and environmental struggles.

Some students gained self-esteem in their academic talents by this writing project. In a course evaluation, one student responded, “I enjoyed doing our research paper because I knew a lot about what I was supposed to write about. I know this class has helped me bridge the gap between high school and college writing.” Another student wrote, “I met a girl who has never eaten some of the Cajun dishes that we eat. It was fun to tell her some of the stories of how we kill our food.” This student not only researched his recipe but the rules of hunting seasons in Louisiana for this assignment. “This semester English has been my favorite class,” another student wrote, “I was able to write papers that had a meaning to me.”

As they researched their favorite dishes, I decided it would be beneficial to publish their recipes and brief abstracts so they could see writing in a “real world” context. While other instructors in the department had problems of apathy in their classrooms, my students enthusiastically embraced their research projects and were motivated to write because their work would be published in a class cookbook.

But the project did not end here. During a discussion one day on homelessness, I asked students if they would like to raise money for a charity by selling their class cookbook; their motivation simmered like a creamy crawfish etouffee. Researchers Schniedewind and Davidson have found that community service projects “give students an opportunity to cooperate in the creation of change in their community” (qtd. in Shor 180). Since I was new to the area, I asked my students for suggestions on different charitable organizations because over 90% of my students are from southwestern Louisiana. The classes voted and unanimously chose to raise money for St. Joseph’s Diner, a local soup kitchen, tying the connection of a cookbook with the need to feed the hungry.

As a final writing assignment, I broke students into peer groups consisting of three to four students and asked them to reflect on the community service project by writing an introduction to the class cookbook. Ira Shor believes this post-production step where students examined and reflect on the process they experienced while doing the project is extremely important (180). This “collective summary” acts by replacing “the teacher’s traditional monopoly of the last word. By sharing the summation, the teacher encourages critical reflection and researching attitudes in students” (Shor 181). One student summed it up best: “In most classes, we spend all this time writing papers only to hand them in, look at a grade, stuff them in our notebooks (or throw them in the trash) and begin the next assignment. But, in writing a cookbook, *we had a reason for writing*” (my emphasis). By creating a platform which gave writing assignments a purpose to my students, all of those involved benefit.

As I watched the required research assignment turn into a successful community service project for all evolved, I began to see a missing link from many composition classes: a connection to the outside community. I believe that by tying composition projects to the community we help student writers in a number of ways. First, we create a sense of audience for our writers. Second, we bring an ethical component into our writing. Third, we show how writing crosses boundaries. Very few researchers are exploring composition and community service connections and, thus, are excluding an important link from which our students can benefit.<sup>1</sup> My paper will explore contemporary theorists who have made

literacy connections to writing outside of the classroom audience and discuss ways to incorporate community service projects in composition classrooms. While Bruce Herzberg states the community service “connection to composition is by no means obvious,” I will argue that this connection is an important one that composition teachers should not overlook (309). Building on the call to work within communities that some theorists are suggesting belongs in the classroom, I will explore how adding a community outreach component to the classroom can enrich the lives of instructors, their students, and those whom the project aims to help.

### **Building a Community**

As teachers of composition, Joseph Harris points out that,

the idea of *community* . . . [is] somehow central to our work . . . . We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong. (Harris 11–12)

However, first-year students rarely feel as if they belong to the university community—especially students who are underprepared for the rigors of college. In his widely-cited essay on “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae begins by stating,

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as well do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define *the discourse of our community*. (Bartholomae 134, my emphasis)

Harris suggests that “[t]he university becomes ‘our community,’” but while it may in fact be the educators’ community, many of our underprepared students have a difficult time making the transition into academic discourse which creates a dichotomy in their minds as to whether or not they belong at the university in the first place (Harris 13).

The idea of community has “extraordinary rhetorical power” (Harris 13). Once a nurturing, social setting is established in the classroom, instructors must immerse their students into the academic discourse so that as they “invent the university” they may become a part of it. “Kenneth Burke once compared education to joining a conversation” (McCracken 119). However, in order to join a conversation, one must speak the language—talk the talk. As writers begin “to write their way into a new community,” Bartholomae believes, “to some degree, however, all of them can be said to be unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse” (156–7). A problem arises when,

To speak with authority [our students] have to speak not only in another’s voice but through another’s code; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say. (Bartholomae 156)

Bartholomae’s observation is indeed a real problem. In order to move beyond this problem, instructors

can create writing assignment where the students write about something on which they already have a lot of information at their disposal. When assignments which rely on students' pools of knowledge are incorporated into the curriculum, students then have something to say and *share* with the larger classroom community.

Kenneth Bruffee believes taking a social constructionist view of the writing classroom can facilitate such a community. In defining his social constructionist position, he sees it as assuming

entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by the communities of like-minded peers. Social construction understands . . . [these constructs] as community-generated and community-maintained entities—or more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or “constitute” the communities that generate them. (Bruffee 774)

In his widely cited essay, “Social Construction, Language, and Knowledge,” Bruffee believes this paradigm has “the potential to lead English teachers to seriously rethink many of our disciplinary and professional interests, values, goals, and practices” (775).<sup>2</sup>

In composition classes, social constructionist work follows the underlying assumption that “writing is primarily a social act” (Bruffee 784). While most composition instructors would not define their scholarship and research in their classrooms as “social affairs,” Bruffee believes, under this paradigm, “we generate knowledge by justifying [our] beliefs socially,” and, thus, add the aspect of “social affairs” to our work (775, 777). To explain this position further, Bruffee states, “A writer’s language originates with the community to which he or she belongs. We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to” (784). Through the use of language, community members engage in conversations to facilitate communication between themselves.

Under the Burkian idea of joining the educational conversation, “social construction assumes . . . that thinking is an internalized version of conversation. Anything we say about the way thinking works is conversation about another conversation: talk about talk” (Bruffee 777). While we introduce students to academic discourse, a problem arises when “words like . . . community . . . [become] so soaked with nostalgia and utopianism that they are nearly useless as guides to the real possibility of civic solidarity” (Michael Ignatieff qtd. in Bruffee 782). By incorporating collaborative group work and community service projects, socially constructed composition classrooms can make an important “impact on our thinking about undergraduate education” which Bruffee calls for in his essay (787). My research assignment on family recipes draws on this theory where writers write more competently and more confidently on areas where they are experts then apply their writing to service-learning projects.

### **Responsible Citizenship**

Once a sense of community is established, composition instructors can make the transition into incorporating “a renewed focus on the development of responsible citizenship” (Delve, *et al.* 1). The composition classroom creates an opportunity to encourage our students to experience the importance of helping others less fortunate than themselves. Under the current economic situation, a college education is a privilege that not every American can or will receive. College students should be encouraged to give something back to the society.

Now that the so-called “Generation X” is in college, community service components in classes can help eliminate the stigma attached to the generation whom the media claims does not care about social issues. In a 1988 study of first-year students published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found “only 22 percent believed that ‘participating in a community-action program’ was very important” (qtd. in Delve, *et al.* 2). Most people will agree, the above statistic is indeed a sad reflection of this generation.

By adding a “service learning” component to composition classrooms; however, the “process of integrating academic instruction with public service” can benefit all involved (Delve, *et al.* 3). Delve, *et al.* describe the concept of “service learning” as

a collaborative effort whereby students apply their classroom learning to inform and understand an individual or community being served: In turn, students are informed by the individual or community about their needs, concerns, history, and culture. Reciprocal learning results when the server (the student) is educated and develops a deeper sense of civic responsibility and the served (individual or community) is empowered. (3)

Actively engaging students in the outside community through service learning exposes students to life outside of the Ivory Tower. Additionally, students develop “a better understanding of the needs and realities of the world around them . . .” (Delve, *et al.* 7).

Delve, *et al.* list three cognitive developmental theories of morality authors who place “value-oriented paradigms” at the center of their work: William Perry, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan (8). For my purposes, I will rely on Gilligan’s model of moral development of women’s moral judgment presented in her 1982 pivotal book, *In A Different Voice*, because a connection to an ethic of care is explored in her work. This ethic of care continues to build in Gilligan’s work where a connection can be made to community service projects which encourage service learning to aid in students’ intellectual and moral development.

Gilligan states early in her text “how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men’s eyes” (6). Researchers such as Kohlberg see male moral development as “rationalistic and individualistic,” whereas Gilligan finds female moral development embedded within relationships (Delve, *et al.* 9). Belenky, *et al.* praise Gilligan’s work for including the women’s voices “in the study of human development, [so] women’s lives and qualities are revealed and we can observe the unfolding of these qualities in the lives of men as well” (7).

Gilligan’s study examines how girls and women respond to “serious moral dilemmas in their lives”; her findings vastly contradict Piaget’s (1965) and Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) studies where they evaluate boy’s and men’s moral reasoning (Belenky 8). Acting on “blind justice,” “abstract laws and universal principles,” Gilligan finds males solve their moral disputes and conflicts “impersonally, impartially, and fairly” (Belenky 8). Females, however, cannot act blindly and impartially, but instead they operate “within a morality of responsibility and care” (Belenky 8). Women, according to Gilligan, take into account the individuals involved in a moral situation

claiming that the needs of individuals cannot always be deduced from general rules and principles and that moral choice must also be determined inductively from the particular experiences each participant brings to the situation. (Belenky 8)

From Gilligan’s study, “it is clear that many more women than men define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections to others,” however, “when men define themselves in terms of connection, they also frame their moral judgments in terms of responsibility rather than rights” (Belenky 8).

When faced with a moral crisis, Gilligan finds women react differently than men. The changes described in women’s thinking about responsibility and relationships suggest that the capacity for responsibility and care evolves through a coherent sequence of feelings and thoughts. . . . The truths of relationship, however, return in the rediscovery of connection, in the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships. (Gilligan 127)



The core of many community service organizations is in response to crisis situations: feeding the hungry; housing the homeless; providing care for the ill, elderly, and abused, etc. An ethic of care, on which Gilligan and others base their theories, is the foundation upon which such organizations model their credo: to help those in need.

According to Nancy Mellin McCracken, incorporating gender research from Gilligan and her contemporaries into composition classrooms assists students in "discover[ing] a way to make their contribution to the academic conversation *useful beyond the classroom*" (120, her emphasis). If Gilligan's findings are correct and

most girls and women and many boys and men as well, are primarily motivated by care, concern, and connection, then it makes sense to provide writing projects that will engage students' sense of care and concern, projects that have the potential to alleviate suffering, to provide needed care, and projects that invite connection to the life of the writer. (McCracken 120)

Based on these theorists' suggestions, there is ample opportunities which await composition courses to incorporate community service elements into their curricula.

My experience in having my students write about their family recipes transcends the boundaries of the ordinary research paper. Students are empowered to share their culinary heritage with others, learn more about the world in which they live, take pride in giving something back to their communities, and gain a positive experience in writing the much dreaded research paper. Of all the assignments I have given, this recipe-based research paper has been the overall favorite of the majority of my students. Since fall of 1994, I have used this assignment in my English 101 courses. My students have produced two cookbooks (Fall '94 & Spring '95). I have recipes from my summer and fall '95 classes but have had difficulties finding a printer who will donate printing services (the first two books were donated to us). I am hoping to have my students this semester produce a large cookbook using all of the yet-unpublished recipes. Additionally, this semester my English 101 class will focus all writing assignments on "writing for social change" as will my English 360 course (Advanced Composition). My goal for these courses is to transcend academia into the communities in which we live and to have us write about the experiences. If I can continue to empower my students as I have in the past, I know my goals will be achieved.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Linda Flower and her colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA have created a link between community literacy programs and composition studies where college students tutor inner city youth who have difficulty reading and writing. Other universities may have similar programs.

<sup>2</sup> Bruffee's article sparked much debate on whether how good an idea it is to use social constructionist models in the composition classroom. For a sampling of the dialogue stemming from this debate, please see "Comment and Response" rebuttals in *College English* 49 (September 1987) and 49 (October 1987).

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